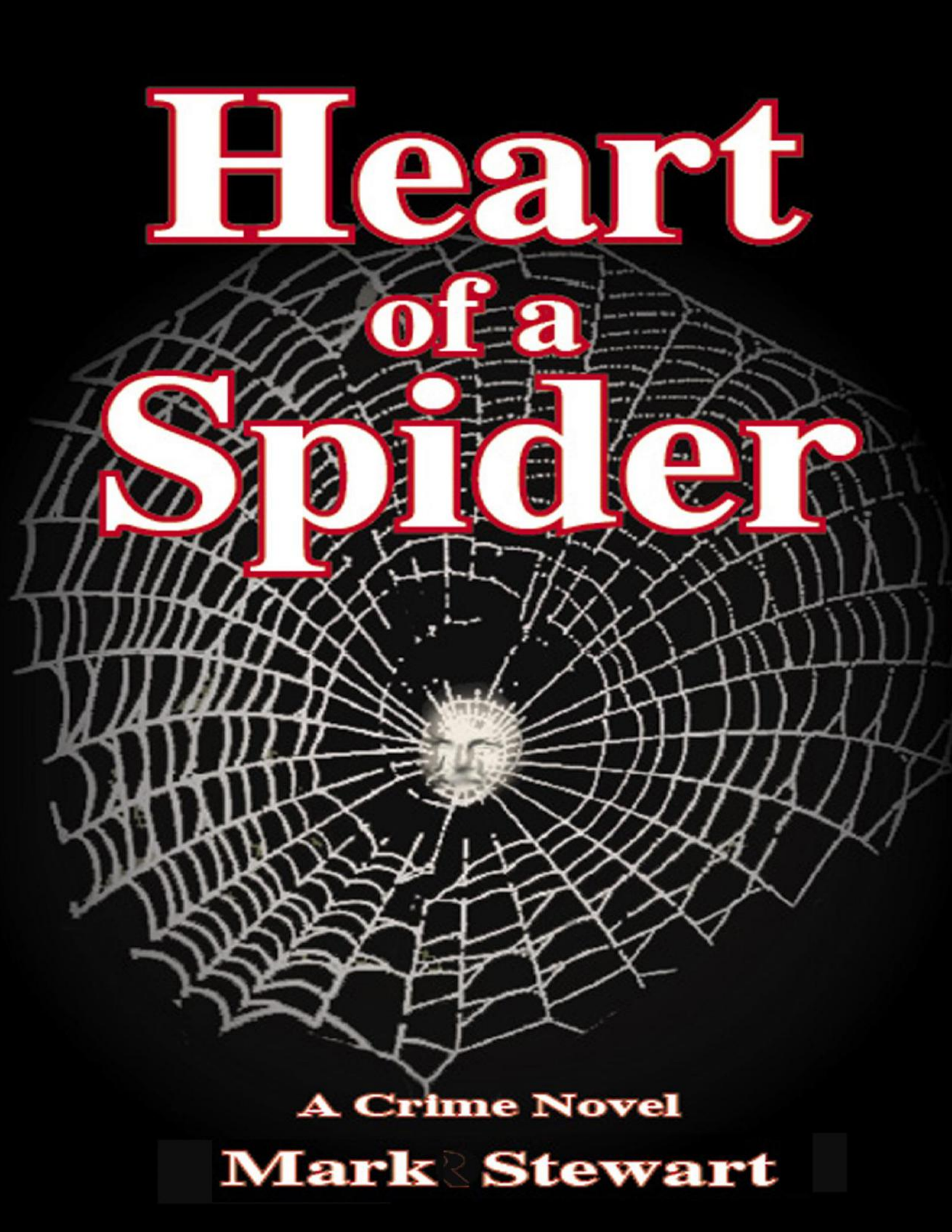




Heart of a Spider

A Crime Novel

Mark Stewart

Kendal chronicles book two

Heart of a Spider

Mark Stewart

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‘What you sow is what you reap’
Galatians six verse seven

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Mark Stewart's novels are based on the Australian culture.

By Mark Stewart

Don't tell my secret

201May Street

Emerald hill

Kiss on the bridge

Kiss on the bridge two

Kiss on the bridge three

Legendary blue diamond

Legendary blue diamond two

Legendary blue diamond three

The perfect gift

The Blood Red Rose

Blood red rose two

Blood red rose three

Grandma's Magical Elephant.

Little Blue Turns Red.

Planet X91 the beginning

The new home

The underwater cave.

The storm

The drought

In this series of The Kendal Chronicles.

Fire Games.

Heart of a spider.

I know Your Secret.

The Copycat murders

PROLOG

“GUILTY.”

THE JUDGE brought the gavel down. His evil laugh echoed off the walls of the large derelict Courthouse. The terrified human kneeling before him cowered away.

The temperature plummeted. The doors shook. The glass in the windows rattled. The scales of life tilted sharply downwards. A ruckus erupted from the thousands of charcoal coloured demons, darker than the midnight hour. They were jostling each other, waiting to pounce on the trembling man. Each one wore the same smug expression.

The Judge, dressed in black, leaned forward in his chair staring at the offender as if he was transparent.

“Do you wish to say something in your defense before I pass on to the court your sentence?”

His voice sounded strong, convincing, accusing and full of hatred. He lifted his hand to silence the onlookers.

A hush descended in the court. The eyes of the demons bore into the man waiting to hear any feeble excuse.

“Look around, your torment is at hand,” boomed the Judge, taunting the man into saying something.

The man gave the black figures a cursory glance before lowering his gaze again to his feet.

“Look at me,” jeered the Judge. “The last four words must be spoken whilst you are staring into my eyes.”

The legion of demons watched the mortal squirm. The wretched man’s Adam’s apple bobbed sharply up and down. For a last desperate bid for clemency the man slowly lifted his gaze and stared directly into the black figure’s hellish eyes. The worthless man looked half out of his mind. The mortal man’s trembling intensified. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded no stronger than a weak croak.

“I need a chance to redeem myself.” The second he finished talking he lowered his eyes to the floor as if surrendering his soul.

“Not possible,” boomed the Judge. Raising the gavel to full height over his head, his grin widened. His eyes looked hungry for another soul.

“I beg you to reconsider. You have the power.” The man needed to yell over the ruckus from the balconies. “Surely there’s a way to halt my eternal torment?”

The Judge slowly lowered the gavel, placing it gently on the bench. He raised his hand to silence the crowd. He pushed back in his chair. In the long pause, he sat wearing a proud look.

The mortal stood half bent in the uncomfortable silence.

“I’ve considered your request. Very well, you have one chance. Time is not your friend. The final four words, ‘You belong to me,’ can wait for when you return.”

CHAPTER ONE

12:33am

“John, John.”

DETECTIVE SERGEANT Alan James Kendal opened his eyes. He stared intently at the digital clock on his bedside table. What woke him? Could it have been the bright flashing green liquid-crystal digits on the alarm clock, or could it have been either of his daughters, Tegan or Tani, twelve and eight respectively, calling out? He focused on the last two digits on the clock. They were flashing methodically. Both were the number ‘3.’ Why weren’t the first two digits flashing? What did it mean? He pondered the two questions as he prepared to sit on the edge of the bed.

“John, John.”

The voice sounded dead flat, monotonous. Kendal sat bolt upright, running his fingers through his jet-black hair. He reached for his shoulder holster and extracted the police issue, Smith and Wesson. When his index finger constricted on the trigger he glanced over his shoulder at his sleeping wife, Marg. For a few seconds, he watched her sleeping. Her breathing sounded deep and even.

“John, John.”

Quieter than a cat stalking a bird, Kendal walked down the hall towards the stairs. For a heartbeat, he paused at both his daughter’s closed bedroom door. Satisfied they were safe and asleep he moved on. Snoring coming from behind the third door brought his silent walk to a halt. He felt grateful his mother-in-law didn’t hear the voice. He grinned at his memories of the previous week.

Patrick, the psychotic arsonist burnt her house to the stumps. The fire nearly ended his life and those of his family. He wasn’t totally happy to have the old woman living in his home, but his family members were more than delighted. The old woman’s constant grumbling and ice-cold stares were a complete turn-off. Fortunately, Patrick has been dethroned. The fire games he’d been playing were extinguished for good.

“John, John.”

Kendal looked down the stairs. Raising his gun to eye level, he slowly descended. At the bottom step, he squatted to scour the ink coloured room. Filtered light from the crescent moon failed to break free from under the hem of the curtains. The newly broken street lamp fifty metres down the court failed to shed light on the origin of the voice. An intruder could easily walk around undetected in the dead of night. Surely Patrick hasn't escaped the mental institution where he was awaiting his trial. Kendal felt positive in eight weeks he'd be found guilty and incarcerated for years.

“John, John.”

The voice came from his study. Kendal marched across the floor and cautiously opened the door a tad to steal a glimpse from inside the room. A figure of a man stood at the window staring outside. His unwrinkled suit radiated a-grey-aura. Kendal aimed his gun at the intruder's chest before announcing his presence by pushing the door fully open.

“Place your hands on your head and face me.”

The man's head swiveled, then his torso. He squared himself to Kendal, pointing directly at him. He spoke in a ghostly whisper.

“John, John.”

“I'm Detective Kendal. Who are you?”

“Who I am isn't important.”

“What is it you want?”

“It's imperative I clear the air. The kid who ransacked my home was a girl.”

“Can you explain further?”

“I don't have much time. Remember, John, John.”

The pause between each of the two words sounded the same from the onset at 12:33am.

Kendal's eyes glanced at the clock on the desk. ‘11:59 pm’ the clock and the one in his bedroom didn't correspond. They were nearly half an hour out of synchronization.

The figure again faced the window. Pointing outside he disappeared.

The study window rattled. The house shook from a deep rumble. Everything in the room moved. Several books sitting in a bookcase fell onto the carpet. A door appeared next to the window and slowly opened. A grey mist poured into the room. Laughter could be heard coming from the park when the hall clock struck midnight.

On the twelfth strike of the pendulum, Kendal heard a gunshot. He dived for the floor, trying to look out on the fog-shrouded park. The trees resembled tall giants. Each wooden arm seemed to be reaching out for their next victim.

Kendal walked through the doorway where the wall should have been, entered the park and crept down the pea stone path. He took shelter behind a large Elm tree.

“I'm laughing at you,” called a voice from somewhere deep in the park.

A small garden seat came into view. Kendal spied the figure of a woman coiled in a fetal position under the two person seat. He sprinted over. Squatting, he felt for a pulse.

She was dead.

He draped his long black coat over the blood-stained corpse before looking up to survey the area through hazel eyes.

The fog concealed the perimeter of the park. His eyes followed the jogger's path. Twenty feet along the path it came to an abrupt end where the fog swallowed it. The murderer was somewhere beyond his visual range. Small droplets of moisture covered his duffel coat. Trees in the park tormented his eyes as they twisted into ghostly shapes.

Laughter came through the fog. It sounded close. His blood chilled, sending a shiver up and back down his spine. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Kendal jumped, but his finger remained riveted to the trigger of his gun. The snub nose Beretta digging into his ankle which saved his life more than once felt uncomfortable. He bumped it using his left shoe to place it in a more comfortable position.

Kendal stood half bent behind the garden seat. Making no noise he ran across the path towards a brick garden shed. He glanced back over his shoulder at the corpse. Her long blonde hair looked blood stained and knotted. He felt grieved her life had abruptly ended.

Holding his gun at arm's length he completed a squat run to the nearest tree. He heard the crunch of pea stones and the distinct sound of a child's swing as it squeaked when someone pushed the seat back and forth. He aimed his gun at the noise.

"Police, freeze sucker," Kendal yelled.

The sound of footsteps running towards him dislodged leaves from a tree ten metres dead ahead. A cool breeze brushed his face. The murderous laugh intensified. Footsteps circled him.

Then silence.

Kendal's gaze darted about looking for the person. One of several park lanterns dotted about the park for security flickered and brightened. Leaves fell from the tree he'd chosen to hide behind. Unseen footsteps crunched the path as they closed in on the posse. Kendal squatted, scanning the area waiting for another sign.

"I'm here," yelled the murderer, to Kendal's left. "I'm here," the voice called again, but this time to his right. "I'm now standing over you," hinted the voice.

Kendal felt a hand grip his shoulder.

"Excuse me, Sir, are you detective Kendal?"

"I was asleep young fella. I'm in the middle of a forty-eight hour rest period."

"Sorry to wake you. There's an urgent phone call from Police Headquarters."

Kendal ran stubby fingers through his thick black hair, stretched then peeled his two-metre frame out of the deck chair. He stared at the tall rake handle built young constable wearing an un-wrinkled police uniform.

"Sir, the phone," insisted the rookie cop.

"Sugar, give the young rookie a break. He's already shaking in his boots, and that was before I made him wake you. He's only following orders."

Kendal moved his stare from the young cop to the voice. He studied the athletic frame of a smiling woman wearing black leather pants and a pink T-shirt. Her long black curly hair protruded from under her French cap.

"I'm only following orders," echoed the inexperienced rookie cop, timidly, holding the phone at arm's length.

Kendal grabbed the phone. Lifting it to his ear, he growled. "I'm on a break."

"I don't give a flying crap. Get your arse off the seat you're in and get it to Image Street Altona; number 33. It's not far from Claire's apartment block. Some old dear needs your help."

"Get the boys in blue on it," insisted Kendal.

"They'll take too long. You should be there in two minutes."

"I'm on my way Captain Hughes, Sir." Kendal grunted and handed back the mobile phone. "You have one second to wipe the grin off your face before I shoot it off."

The rookie's smile immediately fell.

Claire craned her neck, whispering in the rookie's ear.

"Are you sure he's got no backbone? He looks meaner than a custom dog sniffing out drugs."

Kendal slapped the young cop on the shoulder. "Lucky for you I'm in a good mood. Now follow me. As for you, partner, Detective Sergeant Claire Ambroso, you're coming too."

"No, I'm not."

Kendal winked at his wife, Margaret and his two daughters giggling in the doorway. "Yes, you are. It's time to start the next case."

CHAPTER TWO

THE MORNING air felt moist and cold. There wasn't enough of a breeze to enter a windsock at the Melbourne airport. Smoke from a blue sedan parked in the drive of a modern two storey brick veneer home vanished long ago. The meals on wheels lady snorted before checking her watch again. She commenced tapping her foot on the verandah.

"Oh dear," she whispered. "Mr. Brown knows I arrive promptly at 8:00am. It's now 8:31am. I have a horrid feeling something terrible has happened. I wonder where the police are."

She gave the entire street a cursory glance before stepping closer to the nearest window. Cupping her hands around her eyes, she looked through the glass.

A paperboy whistled a sharp bone chilling shrill. The old woman staggered backwards, falling over her own feet. The cane basket she carried crashed onto the verandah step. Muffins rolled away. Milk spilled over the slate tiles. For nearly a minute she sat trembling, her head in her hands. Gathering her composure, she clawed her way up the side railing of the metal balcony frame so she could face the laughing boy. She raised her bloody fist.

“You young whipper snapper, you made me drop Mr. Brown’s breakfast. His wife arrives home tonight. She went to go visit a sick friend. I told her I’d be here to give Ernest Brown his breakfast.”

“I don’t care,” the boy called sarcastically, shrugging a shoulder.

“If you help me, I will give you two dollars.”

The boy rode his pushbike in circles several times, each circle tighter than the last. He stopped at the end of the drive.

“I’ve considered your request. Make the offer four dollars and I’ll accept the proposal,” he called, leaning on the green painted picket fence.

“I will give you the last clean muffin and the two dollars if you climb up to the second-floor window to see if Mr. Brown is awake?”

The lad looked up at the window, grinning. “It’ll cost you five dollars and the muffin.”

The woman shook her head in disgust. “The price is too high. You will not even help an old woman in her moment of need.”

“No.” The boy gave a short grunt. “The cost is now ten dollars and a muffin.”

“May God have pity on your soul?”

As the lad rode off he heard the woman’s feverish knocks and her desperate calls. He hesitated only briefly to laugh at her from the end of the street.

A man parked his car behind the old dear’s two-door electric blue sedan. The moment the engine fell silent the driver stepped down and walked to the verandah steps. A thin woman and a tall police constable shadowed him.

“Are you okay?” the driver asked.

“No, I’m not,” croaked the old woman. “Mr. Brown knows I will be coming this morning. He has yet to answer my persistent knocking. I’m starting to have a panic attack. I’m so worried I’m beside myself. I know I shouldn’t have, but I’ve looked through the lounge room window. The room is awash. Clothes, papers, and glass fragments litter the floor. The TV is on its side and is smashed to pieces. I need the police. I believe Ernest Brown has been murdered.”

“I’m sure there’s no need to panic. I’m Detective Sergeant Alan Kendal. You are?”

“Gladys Waddington. I come here three times each week promptly at 8:00 in the morning. I have to confess I was ten minutes late this morning. The milkman slept in. I do believe in punctuality. I’ve been knocking on the front door for ages.”

“I’m sure there’s a simple explanation,” mentioned Kendal.

“How can you be so calm? There’s been a murder.”

“Maybe Mr. Brown went for an early morning walk? I’m sure everything’s fine,” soothed Kendal.

“I’ve a feeling it’s not.” Gladys pointed at the cars. “I thought I saw Mr. Brown standing in the driveway right where you parked your car when you arrived.”

Kendal glanced over his shoulder before looking into the woman’s old green eyes. He said gently. “Other than you, me, my partner Detective Sergeant Claire Ambroso and our rookie friend there’s no one else here.”

“I’m not senile, Detective. I’m telling you I saw Mr. Brown standing over there in a dull grey suit.”

Kendal’s eyes narrowed to slits. He’d seen the same figure in his dream.

“Did he speak?”

“No. I could sense he wanted to. Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I know a mind is a powerful tool when under stress.”

“You didn’t answer my question, Detective.”

“I’ve an open mind.”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

Kendal shrugged.

“Have you seen Mr. Brown?” asked Gladys.

“I’d rather stay neutral in my assumptions.”

“I sense you have.”

“I’ll take a look inside.” Kendal flashed the woman a steady smile before walking to the front door. Swiveling his head he glanced at his partner. “Are you coming, Sergeant Ambroso?”

“Excuse me, Detective, I don’t mean to stick my nose into where it doesn’t belong, I can’t see how you can enter the house. The front door is locked.”

There was a faint click. Gladys watched the handsome 35-year-old detective reach out his right hand to turn the doorknob.

The door opened easily.

Kendal stowed his illegal toolkit back in his top pocket. The one his dearly departed friend, Mike, gave him.

“Constable, stay and console the good lady. Detective Ambroso, let’s go.”

Both detectives strolled into the house. Three feet in they stopped to study a painting of an unknown artist before moving further into the lounge.

“Mr. Brown, are you awake?” called Claire.

Hearing nothing, the two detectives moved silently about the house. Kitchen, lounge, and the hallway were in disarray. Papers littered the floor. Cupboard doors were left wide open. Kitchen draws were tossed; their contents scattered across the floor.

Kendal closed the fridge door before walking down the hall. He stood at the foot of the stairs, looking up.

“Mr. Brown, are you awake? Is everything okay?”

He frowned and signaled to Claire. Together they ascended the stairs. At the halfway point they stopped to listen. Kendal pulled his police issue Smith and Wesson from his shoulder holster, switching the safety off. Claire mimicked his idea.

The first room they looked into was a mess. The bed linen and the mattress were turned upside down. The second and third rooms hadn’t escaped unscathed either. They looked to be a mirror image of the first room. The whole house resembled a war zone. Kendal carefully stepped over glass fragments from a picture frame littering the narrow hall. He slowly walked towards the fourth bedroom door. Pushing his shoulders against the wall, Kendal stood outside the closed door

waiting for his partner to catch up. They nodded at the same time.

Claire used her foot to push the door open.

A rotting stench filled the air. The smell grew stronger the wider the door opened. Kendal was familiar with the smell. He frowned at the vomit rising in his throat, swallowed and housed his Smith and Wesson, reassuring himself they were alone. Alone, except for the two half eaten chicken sandwiches on the carpet.

Kendal simultaneously searched the room and tapped ten numbers on his mobile phone pad. "Erving, cancel your field trip to thirty-three Image Street Altona, this scene is only another burgled house."

"We're already on our way. See you in three. I'll decide if I'm needed or not when I arrive."

Kendal dropped his mobile phone back into his pocket.

"Claire, when you were staking out the house three streets from here, the burglar we've been chasing has struck again."

"How do you figure?"

"It's the same MO. I've also inside information which will stay a secret for now."

Claire glared at her partner and replaced her gun in her shoulder holster.

"Don't ask. Our friendly rookie must've called the crime scene in. He's a little premature. There's no murder here. Forensic will be here in three minutes."

Kendal pushed his hand into his coat pocket pulling out a pair of thin cream coloured gloves which he quickly slipped over his hands. He didn't hesitate in starting a preliminary search. He could hear Gladys Waddington's persistent calls from the front door. Kendal squatted so he could study the ripped picture behind the broken glass frame of Mr. Brown and his wife.

"Why would someone want to rip a picture of an old married couple? Looking at the photo they seem quite happy."

"An old flame perhaps?" hinted Claire.

"The park in the background looks familiar. I'm sure it isn't far from my place. Partner, slip into another room. A quick cursory search is all the time we have left. I'll meet you back here in one minute."

Kendal walked to a small pedal rubbish bin next to caramel coloured drapes. They were shut to block out the morning light. He placed one foot on the pedal and pushed down. The bin lid flew up revealing its contents. A small plastic bag lined the bin and two pairs of neatly folded black socks were at the bottom. Reaching in, he picked up the socks. Underneath the socks, he found a small brass key. The moment he heard voices downstairs Kendal buried the key deep in a side pocket of his duffel coat. He replaced the socks and watched the bin lid fall back into place before stepping towards a dark stained wooden chest of draws. The shiny antique brass handles on each draw matched all the other handles in the house. He pulled open the top draw, studied its contents, moved some undergarments and socks, and closed the draw. He repeated the procedure on the other three draws. The bottom draw opened easily. He stared at its emptiness.

"I'm sure this draw should have something in it," Kendal mumbled, pulling it out till it tilted down, touching the pale green carpet. "An empty draw is not possible for any woman. They have

to fill it.” He grinned at the thought of his wife, Margaret, looking at an empty draw. “My eyes spy something beginning with--.”

“Are you mumbling in your sleep or are you going off your brain?” questioned a voice from the doorway.

“It’s about time you finished your search. Did you find anything?”

“Seeing how you weren’t looking at the doorway how did you know I’d returned?”

“Claire, you’re too noisy.”

Kendal started to grin while he pushed his hand deep inside the draw.

“You have too good a hearing.”

“I like to hear what you call me behind my back.”

“I’ve never been so insulted.” Claire pushed the back of her hand against her forehead, grinning.

“Welcome to the room in the house of mystery.” Kendal beckoned Claire closer. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“There’s no such thing.” Claire’s expression changed to serious. “What’s the Goss on the ghost thing?”

“I’m only thinking out loud.”

“Has it got anything to do with the so-called secret you’re hiding?”

“Maybe,” replied Kendal. “Time’s short, Erving has arrived.”

“This room matches the rest of the house,” reported Claire. “What a mess.”

Kendal nodded, continuing his search.

“Did you notice someone set the alarm clock for 6:00am?” questioned Claire.

“Yes.”

She placed both hands on her hips and huffed. “Not much else to go on.”

“I’d have to disagree.”

“Do tell, teacher, I’m all ears. This ought to be good.”

Kendal wagged his index finger at Claire’s face.

“If you don’t retract the tone in your voice I’ll keep the wisdom to myself and send you to the school principal.”

“Okay, if you must speak your wisdom?” Claire giggled at her partner’s pouting lip. “I’m teasing.”

Kendal stopped searching the room to look his partner in the eyes “I’m teasing you too. The burglar was a kid. A female, any questions?”

“Yes, I’ve got a few.”

Puffing out his chest, Kendal leaned back against the chest of draws “I thought you might speak.”

Claire marched up to her partner and stood almost nose to nose. “Okay wise arse, why don’t you think this house isn’t part of a murder scene as reported? Just because there’s no blood, weapon, or body, you can’t rule out the possibility. There are still two outstanding facts. One: two missing people. Two: You can’t dispose of the fact the house is a mess.”

"I've inside information." Kendal uncoiled his fingers. "I found this."

"You found one plain old silver earring and you think you've solved the case?"

"Not yet. This, as you put it, plain old silver earring, has a mother of pearl in it. Mrs. Brown, first name Daisy, has silver earrings in her ears in the picture hanging on the wall. This one and the one in the photo are identical, what's left of it. So this one earring in my hand must belong to her. All I have to do is find the other."

"How do you know Daisy is the name of the woman in the picture?"

"Her name's on the back of this photo I found ripped on the floor." Footsteps on the stairs interrupted Kendal's analysis of the case. "Before the forensic boys arrive to invade our picnic there's one more thing. Take a closer look at the carpet. You'll see small traces of dirt?"

Claire studied the exact place where Kendal pointed. Before she could comment Gorilla arms grabbed her around the waist, flinging her towards the door.

"Hey," she yelled.

"Get out," growled the man, waving his gorilla arms in every direction.

"Erving, it's okay, we're on our way out," advised Kendal calmly, stepping towards the door.

"Lucky for you," he yelled.

Claire stepped forward curling her fingers into a tight white knuckle ball. "I call it a blessing."

"Kendal, put a lead on the puppy before I throw her down the stairs."

"Claire, he's only joking," he blurted quickly, stepping between Claire and Erving.

"Am I?" growled Erving.

"Don't you ever call me a puppy again?" screamed Claire. She gave him an iced stare before marching out of the room.

"When she wears a murderous expression, never argue," whispered Kendal.

A tall thin man boasting wire shaped eyebrows smiled at Claire. She pushed him aside like he was a cardboard cutout.

Peeling himself off the wall the man began to massage his shoulder.

"It's good to see you again, Miss. Ambroso. Erving gets a little excited when he sees someone too close to police evidence."

"Don't talk to me," yelled Claire.

Leaning over the balustrade the man called after the woman like a lovesick puppy. "I don't care about the bruise you gave me. Can I buy you dinner sometime soon?"

Stepping next to the man Kendal watched the top of Claire's head moving in rhythm with her feet as she trotted down the stairs.

"Leopold, I know you're relatively new and wet behind the ears to the field of forensic science, take my advice whatever you do don't let Erving put fear in you, he's really not a bad bloke when you get to know him."

"Thanks for the warning. I do want to live to see my twenty-first birthday next week. Is there a chance I might be able to obtain Miss. Ambroso's phone number?"

"Between you and me, forget about the woman, she's beyond your league. What you need is a quiet woman not a feisty one. One more thing, call her Claire. Miss. Ambroso sounds less like a

teacher and pupil relationship.”

“I heard what you said,” called Claire standing at the front door.

“It’s your birthday next week. Are you having a party?” Kendal glanced sideways at the man waiting for an answer.

Leopold nodded. His lips burst into a schoolboy grin.

“I sure am. Detective Kendal is there any chance you can talk Claire into coming to my party. I’m scared to ask her. She sure is the best looking young lady I’ve ever seen.”

“Interesting,” whispered Kendal rubbing his fingers across his chin. “If you want Claire at the party you know what to do. I’m not game enough to ask her.”

“Kendal, get out of the house. Kid, if you can’t stop thinking about girls, you can leave too,” growled Erving stepping into the hallway.

“Erving, lighten up, I promise, I touched nothing,” called Kendal.

The big man grunted, baring his teeth.

“See Leopold, he won’t bite.” Kendal walked back to the doorway of the room he’d been searching. Hovering over the photo on the floor he began to study the broken glass picture frame.

“I told you to get out,” yelled Erving in a strong Russian accent.

Kendal raised his hand at the big fellow, stooped and studied the small broken picture frame.

“What are you doing?” asked Leopold.

Kendal ignored the question. Picking up the photo his frown changed into a sly grin. He slipped it into his pocket.

“I’ll leave you two guys to your work. I’m not sure what you’ll find, there’s no murder here. It’s a simple burglary.” Kendal strolled down the hall then down the stairs. “Partner, when you’re finished talking to Gladys I’ll see you outside?”

The moment Claire finished jotting down the old dear’s details of the morning she walked to the front door. Stepping out into the fresh air she closed it in her wake.

“Partner, where are you?”

“I’m standing at the dead side of the house,” Kendal called.

“The tone in your voice is telling me you’ve cracked the remainder of the case,” advised Claire.

“Not yet, but I’m close.”

“Do you want to ease my curiosity?”

“You know me. I don’t want to table my ideas too soon. All the facts aren’t in.”

“I’m sure you only say those particular words to frustrate me so you can get one hundred percent of the glory.”

“Of course,” Kendal chuckled.

“I have ways of making you confess.” Claire grabbed her partner by the collar, puckered her lips and swept them close to his.

“Knock it off, I’m happily married. I have two daughters.”

“I know.”

“What do you think Marg might say if she found out?”

Kendal's words faded into audible mumbles when his brain registered Claire appeared to be extra serious.

"Nothing, you forget I knew you both at school."

Kendal conjured up old memories. The fact is she'd been trying to hit on him for years. He chuckled at her playful mood. A mood he knew was about to change. Her pendulum mood swings weren't a surprise. He pushed Claire to arms length.

"Sugar, why are we on this side of the house?"

"Leopold wants your phone number."

"I hope you didn't drag me away from Gladys just to tell me? Say you didn't?"

"I told him to forget the idea. He actually handed me his mobile number in case I could persuade you," taunted Kendal.

"Leopold isn't my style."

"You should think about his offer. He might be the bloke of your dreams, the one you've been searching for?"

Claire raised her fist.

"Take it easy. I'll bury his number."

"Good."

Kendal looked up and down the exterior wall, examining every nook and cranny of the two-storey brick wall. Stepping under a window he nodded slowly.

"Claire, what are you like at teaching?"

"Teaching?" she echoed.

"Yes, teaching."

"What sort of question is that?"

"I thought it happened to be a good one?"

Scrunching her nose Claire folded her arms, looking down her nose at her partner.

"You look cute when you pull that particular face."

"How do you know I'm frowning? You're not looking at me."

Kendal faced the woman. "I don't have to. I know you."

"Sugar, you're not making much sense."

Kendal beckoned Claire closer to the house wall. "Burglars are extremely predictable. It's beyond me why they must use a window above a rose bush."

"They must know you hate rose gardens." Claire giggled. "I can't imagine why. Margaret has a beauty out the back of your place."

"You're on her side," moaned Kendal.

"Someone has to be."

"If you train your eyes up the wall you'll notice a small hole about the size of your hand in the bathroom window. It's how the burglar entered the house."

"You're joking?" questioned Claire, sounding skeptical.

"Not in the least. I'm also not joking about finding out what your ideas are on the subject of teaching either?"

“Don’t go there,” she warned. “I’m a cop, not a teacher.”

“I’ll change the subject. How are you at climbing walls?”

“Give me a ladder and I’ll show you Mr. Pot Belly.”

“I have not,” Kendal grumbled.

“Want to change your answer?” warned Claire, poking a finger into his stomach.

Kendal’s face took on a sudden crimson appearance. He waved a flippant hand gesture at the house.

“I need you to climb the wall without the use of a ladder, Sweet lips.”

“Do it yourself.”

Kendal faked a grin, walked over to the wall and started to climb. He reached the third row of bricks before slipping. Turning to face Claire, he whispered.

“Please.”

“You only needed to ask nicely.”

Grinning, Claire walked over and started up the wall. Kendal watched the climb, deep in thought.

“Get your eyes off my arse,” she puffed moments before falling into the rose garden.

Clenching her fist she shoved it under Kendal’s nose. “Lucky for you I didn’t rip my black leather pants. If I did I’d be extremely irritable by now.”

“To put things into perspective I didn’t notice your arse. I was waiting to see how many courses of bricks you climbed before you fell, Miss. Greyhound shaped model of a woman. Claire, I have to confess I’m impressed by the altitude you reached.”

She stood barefoot in the soft dirt, scraping the mud from her leathers. She looked at her partner, shaking her head.

“My one question needs a simple explanation.”

Kendal was too intent on his study of the house to know Claire flashed him an angry glare.

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to use the ladder which is half hidden by the bush at the corner of the house? Or did you deliberately not see it?”

“I saw it and discounted its relevance.”

“You’re a strange man.”

“If the burglar used the fairly new aluminum ladder there’d be a scraping of dirt on most of the steps. The ridges built into each step allows for a good firm footing while the climber ascends.”

“So?” she growled.

“There’s no dirt on any of the steps. I believe the ladder might have been placed at the other end of the house so it could be found. The burglar wants us to think the ladder was used to aid in breaking into the house.”

“In other words, a red herring,” quipped Claire.

Kendal nodded. “The ladder idea was a perfectly conceived fake trail. The burglar seems to know exactly what he or she is doing.”

“It does explain why you wanted me to be a wall walker?”

“Not a wall walker, a human insect.”

“A spider?” questioned Claire, frowning. “I’m growing doubtful on your idea. I’m thinking the entry point must’ve been somewhere else, or you’ve been working too hard or you’re walking in your sleep. Pinch me. This is just a nightmare and when I wake I’ll be home in my bed. Or the best idea is; we’ll be back in the school-yard.”

“Neither, I’m now certain it’s possible for a person to climb a brick wall without using a ladder. If you look hard enough at the mortar between each row of bricks you can see small scratches.”

“Your point is?”

“If my theory is correct and I’m sure it is. The other burgled two storey houses have these same identifying marks.”

“You’ve lost the plot.” Claire raised her voice to an almost hysterical volume. “You wanted me to fall on my arse so you can gloat and have something to crow about back at Police Headquarters.”

“What’s there to crow about? You made it to the tenth row of bricks before you fell.”

“You could’ve at least caught me.”

Kendal grinned mischievously. “I’m too slow. Besides, I could’ve ripped my duffel coat on a rose bush.”

Claire curled her fingers into a tight fist. Lashing out she tried to punch her partner’s nose. His grin broadened as he easily sidestepped.

“You must be slowing down I saw your fist coming.”

“You think at thirty-five I’m slowing down.” She straightened her long thin fingers and lashed out. Her sharp backhand bounced off Kendal’s shoulder. “If you want me, Gladys and I will be inside having a cup of tea.”

Claire marched off. In a few seconds, Kendal heard the front door slam. Rubbing his shoulder he studied the scratches in the mortar on each row of bricks. He noticed four broken segments of glass in the dirt directly below the bathroom window. Squatting, he studied the fragments before pushing the pieces together. The glass measured half the width of his hand. He carefully placed the fragments of glass in a plastic inner pocket of his coat before walking towards the kitchen door. The moment he entered Claire’s stern face evolved into a school girl’s grin.

“How’s the shoulder?”

“I’ll live. Let’s go.”

“Where are we going?”

“The last place to be burgled isn’t far from here.”

“How can you be sure the two houses are connected?”

“I’ll be positive after we’ve studied the walls of the burgled houses.”

Claire and Kendal bid Gladys a good day. In less than a minute they were motoring down the road.

Kendal parked his car outside an old style two-storey brick house. The dwelling boasted a manicured blooming rose garden. It was the seventh house they’d stopped at. His hypothesis was

turning out to be right on the money. If he were a gambling man he'd have doubled his money.

Claire glanced sideways at the man sitting in the driver's seat.

He met her stare as his mobile phone sounded.

"Yes," he growled, after swiping the phone from his pocket.

"Al, what time can I expect you for dinner?"

"Margaret, I'm sorry for snapping."

Claire clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggling. Unable to control herself she burst out laughing.

"Alan James Kendal is Claire laughing?" questioned Margaret.

"Yes."

"Put her on."

Still giggling, Claire lifted the phone to her ear.

"What's my husband up to?"

"He's showing off his brain power."

"Again?" questioned Marg. "Come for dinner. Tell my husband to stop off and buy a dessert on the way home."

"I'll tell him the good news."

Kendal parked at the local supermarket. A small object glistening in the late afternoon sun caught his attention. He focused on a group of seven kids moving as one towards the supermarket's main door. One short dark haired boy wearing brand named jeans and T-shirt stood out from the rest. The girl walking on his right wore the same brand named clothes. A large diamond necklace hung low from around her neck. What caught Kendal's attention was the boy's large diamond and azure sapphire encrusted ring on his index finger.

Kendal stepped down from the car. Leaning in through the open window, he whispered.

"Claire, stay in the car for a moment before following me into the supermarket. Pretend we don't know each other."

"It'll be a pleasure," she replied, grinning at his sour expression.

Kendal caught up to and shadowed the group into the supermarket. He moved close enough to overhear their whispers. The boy slapped the girl walking next to him gently on the shoulder before separating from the group.

Claire picked up the tail end of the gang of teenagers.

One of the boys walked down the confectionary aisle. He stood gawking at the vast array of chocolates. He turned, staring at Kendal, walking past.

"You'd have to be a bloody coppa," the lad blurted.

"Excuse me?"

"Get stuffed. If you don't stop following me and my friends I might have to stick you."

The boy flashed the blade of a flick knife.

"It's not a good idea. If you put the knife away right now, I'll pretend I didn't see it."

The boy hesitated.

"I've never lost a fight yet. Be warned I've been up against some of the best insane people."

“So you are a cop,” hissed the boy, replacing the knife inside his jeans pocket.

“Where did you get the money to buy expensive clothes? Not to mention the ring on your finger?”

“If you must know, I’ve a paper round. I work hard and save harder.”

“The girl you slapped on the shoulder, where did she get the necklace?”

“I bought it for her.”

“It’s an expensive looking present.”

Glaring at Kendal, the boy grinned.

“You want to tell me the joke?”

“I bought it at the pawn shop opposite Flinders Street rail station.”

“What’s going on?” asked an irate woman, inviting herself into the conversation.

Kendal turned and spied the woman standing not more than two metres away. “We were having a friendly chat, Miss?”

“Ambroso, Miss. Claire Ambroso. I don’t like the sound of your questions. Is this your son, Sir?”

“No.”

“Can I go join my friends now, Miss?” asked the boy.

“You sure can. You look like a decent child. Have no fear I’ll deal this monster a few stern words of warning.”

The boy ran off to join his friends. In seconds the group vanished.

“Monster,” grumbled Kendal. “It’s not at all original.”

“It’s the only thing I could think of at short notice.”

A tall broad-shouldered security guard catching the tail end of the conversation walked up the confectionery aisle, jabbing Kendal in the ribs.

“You folks like to tell me why you were harassing the boy?”

Both detectives raised their eyebrows and studied the big-bellied man staring down at them. His facial expression would evaporate a thunderstorm.

“I hope you’re not a pedophile, fella?” snarled the guard. He stared through Kendal as if he wasn’t there.

“We’re both cops.”

“And I’m a fifty-pound weakling. Both of you walk in front of me to the manager’s office, we’ll sort it out there. Any funny business, I’ll handcuff both of you.”

“Sounds like a good idea,” rallied Kendal, leading the way.

The small untidy room appeared to be only large enough for a swivel chair and a small desk. The phone rang from under a pile of accounts which had fallen off the table, littering the floor. Claire started a frantic search.

“Forget the phone,” growled the guard, closing the door. “Start talking.”

“If you’ll give me a second, I’ll find my badge,” hinted Kendal.

The guard clicked his fingers several times in rapid succession. Both detectives fished for their police badges. Holding them in his hand they were studied at length. The guard stared at

Claire's photo for far too long.

"Your French cap is on crooked," whispered Kendal.

Claire patted her cap to set it straight on her head.

"Good, now you look human."

"You're gettin' me back for calling you a monster?"

"Me, never, I don't have an angry bone in my body."

Claire snatched her badge back. "Come Sugar, dinner is on the table." She glanced sideways at the guard before marching out of the manager's office.

Kendal gave the guard a hurt look. "Women," he stated and strolled out of the office.

CHAPTER THREE

A MAN marched across the road making a bee-line for the main doors leading into the mental institution. The modern designed building hid what business was conducted behind closed doors. He smiled at the security guard sitting at the front desk and found the men's toilet block.

In the mirror above the wash basin, he straightened his bright yellow tie. He re-groomed his hair by sweeping the sides back past his ears. He grinned in confidence at the reflection wearing the black pinstriped suit, winked, turned on his toes and marched down the corridor to a small office. He introduced himself to a young female secretary. He stood military style while she talked into an intercom.

The young woman, black hair tied tight in a ponytail, flicked her long fringe from her eyes. "Sir, you may go in now."

The man nodded. Stepped up to and pushed against the office door, closing it after he entered the room.

The woman seated at the expensive desk near the window glanced at her watch. Her lips parted showing two rows of perfectly straight white teeth.

"Good, you're on time; I do like punctual people."

"Good morning Senior-Etta."

The man's voice sounded friendly. The tone made him out to be absolutely full of confidence. He faced an intelligent woman. Her features and dress code reeked of business. She radiated a look of someone who inspired not only to strive for the top but one who'd defeat any one who tried to wobble the perch she stood on. The wiry built man marched across the grey carpet to the desk, outstretching his hand.

"Loud tie," commented the woman. She stood before they shook hands in a business-like manner.

"To respond to your earlier statement, I'm a stickler for punctuality. As for the tie, I believe it

represents my personality,” blurted the man. “Allow me to introduce myself. I’m Mr. Upp. May I sit?”

The woman palmed her hand at the chair opposite her. “I’m Ms. Tarskney. I’m in charge of the mental institution.”

“Yes of course you are. At long last, we meet. I do prefer to conduct my business in person and not via the phone.”

“Your name is unique,” said Tarskney, copying the man’s straight back sitting posture.

Mr. Upp stopped rummaging through the black briefcase he placed on his lap to look down his nose at the woman. He acted like he was about to say something, but changed his mind. Swapping his gaze back to the pile of papers in his briefcase he pulled out a manila folder. He leaned forward, opened the folder and slid the first page across the desktop towards Tarskney.

“In defense of your statement over my name, Ms. Tarskney, it’s a long story.”

The woman cocked her head to one side.

“At three days old my mother dumped me behind a door and fostered into the Upp family. A few years back I unearthed information on my natural mother. She was a sixteen-year-old prostitute. You don’t have to look so concerned. It is of no consequence to me now.”

Ms. Tarskney’s shoulders slumped. She looked a trifle disappointed and leaned back into her brown leather chair.

“Is it the reason why you wear a loud tie?”

“I feel it represents my character which I have already stated.” Reaching out for the sheet of paper Upp grabbed from the manila folder, he swiveled it around till it could be easily read. In a bold move, he thrust it under Tarskney’s nose.

“You did receive my Email?”

“Yes, I did. I’m not convinced a shopping trip will help in the recovery of my patient.”

“In front of you are my credentials. I have completed a thorough and extensive research thesis overseas on this particular case. I, like you, was skeptical at first. Case after case each patient has been healed jolting me to the realization I, and I alone have stumbled upon a cure. I must add my patients were miraculously healed of their mental illness.”

“You sound like a forceful man. I must add; only God creates miracles.”

“I’m of strong character. I have no reason to lie.”

Ms. Tarskney glanced through the information on the sheet. When she’d finished reading the last line she looked up at the man staring at her.

“How many cases have you studied?”

“I have worked on over fifty cases. All, I repeat, all, have achieved one hundred percent complete mental healing of the exact type of illness this Patrick person suffers from.”

Tarskney pushed her chair back, stood and sidestepped to the window. Staring through the window at the outside world she eventually talked.

“I feel it in my bones what you’re saying is impossible.”

Upp produced a handful of papers, sliding them across the polished desktop. “See for yourself.”

The woman turned from the window and sat back at the desk. She picked up the second and third page, reading the report. She reached down to scoop the next white sheet from the table.

“I believe you’re looking at case number twenty-nine. It fits Patrick’s criteria perfectly. In my professional opinion, two trips to a shopping centre will certainly and completely eradicate his mental problem. The patient in the particular case you are reading was admitted three weeks ago. After two, four-hour shopping trips, she has been discharged. Last week she landed her first job. Yesterday she rang me to say thanks for everything I’ve done for her. She has her mind set on the top position. She informed me the job comes with a company car and a six figure a year salary. By the look in your eyes, I deduce you want to believe me. The facts speak for themselves. When you allow my theory and not my hypothesis to run its complete course you will be able to explain to your peers exactly what transpired in our meeting today.”

Tarskney shot the man a sterile look. “What will you obtain out of all this?”

The corners of the man’s mouth curled upwards. “I will have proven once again my theory is sound. In time I will be a wealthy man.” He leaned forward over the desk. “I’ll be a very wealthy man.”

Tarskney dropped her reading glasses onto the stack of papers. She took a few moments to massage her throbbing temples.

“I hope you understand this is highly irregular. This has never happened before. Patrick has yet to stand trial. If he escaped lives could be in grave jeopardy.”

“I’m aware of this fact. When the case eventually arrives in court, the Judge and the jury will be able to see for themselves he has made a remarkable recovery. The case will be thrown out. When you receive a commendation you’ll feel a pat on the back. Not to mention your long awaited promotion. The one you’ve been striving for.”

“Very well Mr. Upp. I don’t like it. However, I seem to have no choice. When did you want the field trip to begin?”

“The earlier we start the sooner you will discover I’m correct.”

Before leaving the room Tarskney glared at the man in her office.

Upp strolled about the room waiting for her to return. A smirk creased his face. He stood staring at a painting of a fruit bowl sitting on a table next a computer when the door opened.

“This is a release form. Sign the bottom line and you’re in charge. I must insist on some reservations. Patrick must be back in his room at exactly two o’clock this afternoon. I repeat, 2:00pm.”

Mr. Upp nodded and quickly signed his name.

“If something goes wrong. It’s your head.”

“I assure you everything will be fine.”

“The security guard outside will escort you to Patrick’s room.”

Upp stood, dusted his pants and straightened his tie. “Thank you for your time and putting your utmost trust in me. I never disappoint.”

He shook Tarskney’s hand, turned and walked out, closing the door in his wake. He strolled down the brightly lit corridor, a skip in his stride; a whistle on his lips.

A tall rounded guard holding a bouquet of keys watched the male visitor walking towards him. Before he arrived the guard stood military style.

“You must be Upp,” he growled in a stern voice.

“It’s me.”

The guard clicked his fingers.

“You have a good clicking action. I wish I could make the sound. You can’t spare a minute to teach me?”

“No,” he blurted. “Hand over the release form.”

Upp gave him the white sheet of paper. Interlocking his fingers behind his back he watched the guard reading the document. He started to whistle a gentle melody which quickly changed to an upbeat.

“What are you so chipper about, mate?”

“I’m in a good mood.”

“I’m not.” The guard finished reading the form, folded the paper, stuffing it deep into his pocket. He turned and stepped towards a glass door.

Upp followed.

“We have five hours.”

“Pardon?” questioned Upp.

The guard frowned, swiveled his head, glaring at the man walking behind him. “We have five hours to get Patrick back here at the institution.”

“What is this, we?”

“I’ve been ordered to escort you. If you have a problem, go talk to Tarskney.”

“Good. I like the idea. It’s not exactly what I’d been hoping for, however, I’m sure a guard for an escort will be more than a genuine witness.” Upp forced a snappy chuckle. “What is your name, good Sir?”

“I don’t like this adventure one little bit. I don’t like you. If you insist on talking to me you can address me as guard Burrows,” snarled the big man, bringing his face in close.

“Do you have a first name? It’s less formal. More friendly don’t you think?”

“I don’t want to be friends.”

“I thought seeing how we’re going to be partners for the next, how many hours did you say?”

“Five hours and call me guard Burrows. I like to stay distant.”

Pushing his hand out, Upp grinned.

“Pleased to meet you it will be a privilege to have an exciting character to tag along. When we get back you can make a full report on how successful the day went. Now if you’d be kind enough to open the door?” Upp raised an eyebrow. “I suggest you leave it open. To prove there’s no funny business. I don’t want our friendship to start off on the wrong foot.”

Burrows failed to shake the man’s hand. He snorted before inserting a purple coloured key in the door lock. He back stepped allowing unrestricted access to the room.

Upp gave the guard a short sharp nod. A cursory smile followed before he stepped into the small padded room. Seeing a person sitting on a mattress staring at the floor, Upp’s painted grin

remained solid.

“Patrick?”

The man wearing casual masculine attire lifted his head. He stared at the man grinning close to the doorway. When he spoke his voice sounded detached.

“Call me Pat.”

“My name is Mr. Upp. I have some exciting news.”

“Interesting name, has Upp one P or two?”

“Two.”

“What does Upp stand for?”

“What my name means or how it’s spelt is totally irrelevant. It’s of no consequence to you.”

“Why do you sound slightly agitated?”

“The only thing you need to understand is; I’m nobody important.”

“For a man of no importance, you wear a loud tie, Mr. Upp.” Pat walked to the window. He gazed past the vertical bars to the outside world. The sunlight forced him to close his eyes. He eventually turned from the window to face the intruder. “What’s your news?”

“Background information is a good place to start. It will help you to decide on what to do?”

Pat gave an uninterested look.

“I have had a unique persuasive visitation.”

“Good for you. Did you get lucky?”

“Not that kind of visitation.”

“Sorry to hear it. I’m sure she’d have met every one of your expectations.”

Upp stared through slits at the person glaring at him.

“In one’s lifetime, the same choice doesn’t come around too many times. A horrid black looking transparent Judge has given me a second chance. You and I need each other. Let me spell it out for you in simple terms. This proposal I’m going to recommend is a once in a lifetime chance. I have an agreement. If I help someone to achieve their goal I’ll be pardoned from eternal damnation. I have to prove to the Judge I helped someone who has a massive need. If you don’t accept my proposal I’ll find some other desperate soul.”

“I’m intrigued. Please continue.”

“By helping you I help myself. I need someone to speed up my business. I need quick money, lots of money.”

“Firstly; I’m not interested in where you’ll spend eternity. Second: it’s impossible for me to help you, I’m in a padded cell, or haven’t you noticed?”

“I believe I can persuade you to help me.”

“You seem quite sure of yourself, Mr. Upp.”

“I am.”

“Seeing how you managed to make it this far, and I’ve nothing else to do, go ahead, amuse me.”

“I think I’m slightly disappointed. I expected more of a challenge.”

“Sorry, the head of the nut house wasn’t clever enough.”

“Remember my helping you will help me. I have a good business happening, however, I have a problem.”

“We all have problems. Take a look around this unattractive, barren, lifeless hole of a room. I think my problem trumps yours.”

“Does it?”

Pat looked down his nose at the man standing before him, jeering sarcastically.

“What do you want?”

“I’m inviting you to work for me.”

“You aim high.”

“If you want to catch big fish you have to make the bait look good.”

“To work for you I have to fix my significant problem.”

“I’d call it a small problem,” corrected Upp. “Do you know a man going by the name of Kendal; Detective Alan James Kendal?”

Pat glared directly at Upp. He watched a grin erupt.

“You have excited my curiosity. Kendal is spelt using only ‘L’ He’s now a Sergeant. Every cell in my body hates him. I’m in here because of what he did. He’s my significant problem.” Pat started to pace the floor. When he stopped he again stared directly at Upp. “Why are you here?”

“Tell me why do you hate Kendal?”

“Many years ago Ashlee Clarke landed a part-time job as an exotic pole dancer in a night club. She was earning big money to help fund her medical degree. Kendal fought his old man, knocking her off the stage. She broke her fingers. Not only did he put a stop to her plans to become a great surgeon he mutilated her future. The only thing she ever wanted in life was to be a surgeon.”

Upp stepped further into the room. Lowering his voice to a decibel above a whisper he stated.

“Revenge is sweet.”

“Only when you win,” replied Pat. “If you lose it leaves a bitter taste in one’s mouth.”

“I’ve been following the steps which have led you here with an enthusiastic zest.”

“I do hate repeating the same question, it infuriates me. Why are you here?”

Upp stepped closer. “How would you like to win?”

“How? I’m stuck in this hell hole waiting for the decision on the length of my incarceration.”

“I have a signed release form allowing me and the guard standing in the corridor to take you shopping for five hours. I have allowed one hour for travel, three hours to shop. I’ve assigned the outstanding hour to convince you of my intentions.”

Pat looked suddenly more interested.

“If you were to escape, what can I do?”

“What do you get out of all this?”

“You’re an intelligent person, work it out.”

“I want you to tell me. I want you to tell me what it will cost?”

Upp looked over his shoulder at the door, checking to make sure Burrows stood out of earshot. His smile faded. His facial expression changed to steel.

“I need a new heart of a spider.”

“Care to explain?”

“I’ll keep it short. Burrows will accompany us on our little outing. You will work for me?”

“Doing what?”

“I want you looking after my burglary operation. You will be highly paid. You can plot the assassination of Kendal in your own time.”

“If I were to use this information I could blow the whistle and receive a lighter sentence.”

“You could, but you won’t. One word from me and you will never leave this padded room. You’ve been dealt good cards. Don’t blow your winning hand. I play to win. I never lose. Do we have a deal?”

Pat walked around in circles. On his third rotation, he stopped directly in front of Upp to look into his eyes before stepping to the window to view the sky.

“I can smell the changing of the seasons. There is a definite change in the air. Yes, a definite change.” He swiveled his head. Staring down his nose he blurted. “We have a deal?”

Upp called Burrows to enter the room.

“Is there trouble?”

“None Sir,” stated Pat. “I’ve been told of the plan. I am happy to confess I won’t be giving any trouble. I know what’s at stake if I do. I’ll do everything you or Mr. Upp says. I won’t question a letter of a single word.” He faked a grin before sitting on the bed.

“I don’t like this situation. I don’t like either of you. I don’t care how long it takes you to be ready. I will have you back by 2:00pm. Four and a half hours from now,” snarled Burrows checking his watch.

Pat walked to the door, grinning. “The smell of freedom is divine.”

“Your freedom is only for a short time,” warned Burrows. He pointed his finger at Upp. “I clock off at 3:00pm. By that time this charade will be a distant memory.”

“Yes indeed. The clock is ticking,” whispered Patrick. “Tick tock, tick tock.”

CHAPTER FOUR

BURROWS PARKED his car in the underground car park at the local shopping centre. Imitating a chauffeur he opened the rear passenger door.

“If there’s any funny business-?” he growled, wagging his finger at Pat and Upp’s faces.

“I know,” groaned Upp, interrupting “You have my permission to take us back to the institution post haste. My dear man, you have the right to warn us. I stake my reputation on the fact there won’t be any trouble.”

“Pat, it’s my decision if this fiasco goes ahead or is instantly cancelled. If one incidental thing

even starts to go down the wrong path, I'll have you back in your padded cell so fast you won't know we even left this car park."

"Mr. Burrows, Sir, please trust me, nothing will go wrong," insisted Upp. "Come, partner, let us begin our journey."

Pat stepped down from the car, glaring at the shoppers rushing past. Sending Burrows a snappy smile Upp and Pat joined in the influx of people.

Inside the complex, people were too busy to notice the trio wandering about.

"Don't forget, I'm watching every move you two make. All I need is one wrong flinch of a finger to have you two back in the car."

"Please, Sir, if my theory is to be proven, I have to ask you to keep your tongue leashed. You don't want to be written in my report as the one who hindered Pat's healing process?" He gave a second snappy grin. "There is one thing. It's a small minuscule detail. I'd like to be given your permission to remove Pat's handcuffs."

"The handcuffs stay on," jeered Burrows.

"Only for now," hinted Upp. "Come, follow me. The clock's ticking."

Burrows portrayed an unhappy man. Entering the stream of the many elderly shoppers who were arriving from a number of local retirement villages, he walked at the rear of their group.

"Don't forget, Pat, I'm watching. You so much as cough, the wrong way, this outing will be terminated."

"Trust me, I'm a doctor. I'll do exactly what I'm told at all times. There is one thing I'd like to ask."

Both Burrows and Upp froze in mid step.

"Guard Burrows, since you insist on me being handcuffed, is it possible to cover my hands? Your coat will make them disappear. I'm seeing a few surprised expressions."

Upp slipped out of his coat, draping it over Pat's wrists.

"Thank you, Mr. Upp. You are indeed a courteous man."

Burrows grumbled incoherent words. He took to shadowing the duo while they walked from shop to shop. His eyes scoured every shopper who stepped their way.

Upp and Pat browsed through the fiction rack of the first bookstore they found before entering a small clothes shop. Upp circled the racks of clothes picking out two pairs of pants and matching shirts. When Burrows momentarily turned his head he slipped a small rectangular object into the pant pocket and walked over to Pat.

"Here, try these on. They should fit. Be sure to check the pockets for worn edges. I'll buy one for you and one for me. The change rooms are over there near the middle of the store. Enter the first cubicle."

"Hold it," boomed Burrows. He wore the look of a storm. "Why the first cubicle?"

Upp grinned. "No reason. You choose."

"Take the middle one."

Pat thrust his wrists under the guard's nose. "I can't change while tethered."

Burrows surveyed the shop before marching towards the cubicles. Stepping into the middle

cubicle, he pushed, tapped and kicked the walls.

“What are you doing?” whispered Upp. “The young lady behind the counter is glancing this way. She doesn’t look happy.”

“I’m trying to detect a hidden door.”

Upp smacked the guard on the shoulder. “I love the thoroughness. Even if there is a door, we’re in a clothes shop in the middle of a shopping complex. How can Pat possibly escape? He’d have to be invisible. If it makes you feel at ease stand outside the door.”

For the umpteenth time, the guard’s eyes narrowed.

“I insist.”

Burrows pushed his hand into his back pocket and produced a brass key. Reaching out he began to unshackle the handcuffs.

“Don’t forget my warning?”

“I like keys,” whispered Pat. “I like different shapes and colours. Do you like keys, guard Burrows?”

He grunted before housing the handcuffs in his back pocket.

“I don’t like any of this.”

“It’s the main part of the healing process,” hinted Upp. “You don’t want the head of the mental institution to find out you were the cause of Pat’s deterioration. I promise this shopping trip will extinguish his appetite for arson. Lighting fires will soon be a thing of the past.”

Burrows checked his watch. “Get in the cubicle and change. Two hours left and we’re out of here.”

“We won’t be long,” announced Upp. “This is just one part of the act.”

“Act?”

“Yes. I convince Pat we’re actually shopping. His thought lines are interrupted, de-programmed. He’ll entertain ideas using different brain waves. In plain words, his arson thoughts will be extinguished.”

“Sounds like double dribble to me.”

Upp slapped Burrows gently on the shoulder before stepping into the first cubicle, shutting the door. Pat mirrored his move.

Pat changed clothes and searched the pockets. He extracted the small rectangular disc which Upp buried. Studying it, he turned the disc over and spied a thin strip of white paper taped to the back. He read the two typed words. ‘Push button.’ He raised an eyebrow before, pushing the button.

Burrows stood military style outside the change rooms. He gave every shopper who approached carrying an arm full of clothes an angry stare.

A few minutes ticked off before the girl behind the counter rolled her eyes and walked over.

“Excuse me, Sir, could you please step away from the change rooms, you’re scaring the other shoppers away.”

“Look girlie I’m here on business,” snarled Burrows. “Since you’re here can you explain the reason why the change room walls go from floor to ceiling?”

"I only work here. I didn't design the place."

"Is there anyone else working today who might know the answer to my question?"

"No," shrieked the girl sarcastically.

"In that case, leave me alone. Go back to the counter and do what you usually do." Burrows waved her away as if she were an insect.

"I'm going to ring my boss. You're defying my request to step away from the change rooms. You're causing my nerves to be on edge."

With tears welling in her eyes, the girl turned her back and sprinted over to the counter. She snatched the phone from its cradle, stabbing eight numbers on the phone pad. Burrows watched her whispering into the phone. Glancing his way she hung up. Using her purple painted nails she re-stabbed the buttons. She spoke briefly into the mouthpiece before replacing the receiver back on its hook.

Burrows fidgeted slightly seeing the girl herd a few customers towards the door. He watched her step outside, pulling the door shut. There was an audible click. She stood, hands on hips, staring at the man guarding the change room door.

In the ceiling directly above the change cubicles, a manhole cover dropped open. A knotted rope fell. Pat grinned and started to shimmy up the rope. Upp sat in the roof cavity, waiting. His grin appeared to widen the closer Pat got to the top knot.

Upp put a finger to his lips, reached down, pulling up the rope. He closed the manhole cover and signaled Pat to follow. A sharp narrow beam of light from a thin torch led the way along a plank of wood. When Upp and Pat climbed through a maintenance door into bright sunlight, they marched across the roof to a waiting helicopter. Upp opened the door and waited for Pat to climb aboard.

"How long have you been planning this breakout?" Pat questioned.

"Not long. If your next question is of the helicopter, it's a rental."

Upp slipped behind the controls. He reached up and fired up the engines. Grinning, he pulled back on the control stick. The helicopter lifted off the shopping complex roof. Pat folded his arms noting they were flying directly at the sun. Five minutes of flying time found them hovering over a field where a black limousine appeared to be parked in the North corner. The driver, dressed in a crisp dark blue uniform opened the rear door before the reverberating throb of the helicopter blades begun to diminish.

"Before we walk across the grass to the car, I've a question," said Pat, stepping from the chopper.

Upp stopped walking and stared.

"When do I have my revenge?"

"Don't be concerned. You'll have a chance real soon."

"For your sake, I hope you're not lying? Every cell in my body is screaming out for revenge. I want Kendal to pay for my predicament. I want him to pay by losing his life."

Upp flashed the automatic Glock resting comfortably in his shoulder holster. "Let me warn you. If a letter of a single word leaks out about any of this you'll be quickly silenced. I can very

easily explain your death. The first example could go something like this. We fought. The gun went off. You were shot and killed. You're the one the cops will be searching for. Not me." He grabbed Pat by the arm. "I have lots of examples to choose from, would you like to hear a few more?"

Pat spat at his face then broke free of his grip. "Let me tell you something you little shriveled up weed of a man. If I don't get my revenge I won't give you a chance to pull the trigger of the gun. Do you understand what I'm saying? Or do you want me to say it extra slow so it can sink in through your thick head?"

"I understand lots of things. You'll work for me. You will do exactly what you're told. You will be my new heart of a spider. If you prove you're the perfect choice, I will give you what you want. It's up to you how long it'll take."

"This whole charade sounds like blackmail."

"I call it a business arrangement. We both need each other to accomplish the goal of the other."

"Stalemate," hissed Pat.

"You needn't worry. You'll have your chance. Now let's go."

They walked across the grass like they were married and sat in the back of the limo. Pat viewed the helicopter for the last time. He looked ahead deciding not to mutter a word for the rest of the trip.

When the car pulled up outside a seven-storey building Upp led the way to the lift. He reached out to press the fifth-floor button.

"There's one thing I need to know?" asked Pat, the moment the lift doors slid shut.

"You don't need to know anything else."

"I know you need money. You've gone through a lot of bother to spring me from my inevitable incarceration. There has to be more to this story than you're letting on. What's in all of this for you?"

"Good question," jeered Upp. He swiped the electronic card in the slot and opened the motel room door. "Make yourself at home. There's the bed, TV, phone for room service, balcony to sit and reflect on life. The only thing you can't do is leave the room."

"You didn't answer my question."

"When the time is right I'll answer."

"When?" whispered Pat.

"When the time is right," replied Upp. He walked to the balcony and stepped outside. He studied each of the windows of the building across the street before dropping his gaze to the street below. When he faced Pat he seemed to be relaxed.

"What are you looking for?"

"I have to be careful. I don't want my identity discovered."

"Discovered by whom?"

"The underworld, cops, a boy scout, Kendal, Ambroso, a two-bit rookie cop who pushes a pencil in a two-bit police station in the middle of the bush, anyone and everyone."

"Ambroso and Kendal," echoed Pat, snarling at hearing the two names. "Yes, we share a

common interest. After Kendal has been dealt a fatal blow, Ambroso's funeral will be a party, icing on the cake, cherry in the pie, escargot in a French restaurant."

Upp sprinted at Pat, pointing his finger. "You better not do anything to blow my cover?"

"I know, I know. Don't be a boring little man."

"If I'm discovered, I'm dead."

"You must get off on repeating yourself," jeered Pat sarcastically.

"You make me nervous."

"Good. Do you want to confess some more information about what's going on or do I have to guess? Like, what's this heart of a spider? Is it a drink, a food? What?"

"Heart of a spider is the name I've given my drug operation."

"Is that it?"

"I live the high life. It's the way I like it and the way I want it to stay."

"What does Upp stand for?"

"Unimportant person," he growled.

"Shame you can't spell." Studying the man closely, Pat chuckled. He pointed a long slender finger between his eyes. "I'm curious to know your real name?"

"You know what curiosity did? The last man who said I had a funny name died. Does that quench your fiery curiosity?"

"Not really."

"You have no need to know anything more than what I've told you." Upp walked to the door. "When I return, things will be cooking." He gave a short sharp chuckle and closed the door in his wake.

CHAPTER FIVE

BURROWS CHECKED his watch before again staring at the angry faces of the shoppers glaring at him through the ceiling to floor front glass window. He stepped back, banging on the change room door.

"Upp, what's keeping you? It doesn't take ten minutes to change." He banged on the door again. Scratching the stubble on his chin, he stood facing the cubicle door, shrugged and kicked the door in.

Outside the store, the sea of faces appeared to be at least twenty deep then more people lined up outside trying to see what all the fuss was about. One middle-aged woman began pounding on the door. She threatened to smash the glass if the door wasn't opened immediately.

Burrows sprinted into the cubicle, shaking his head. He repeated his performance at the other cubicle doors.

Pat and Upp were gone.

Swearing a mouthful of verbal diarrhea Burrows reached for his mobile phone. Hearing an audible click he saw the front door to the shop being pushed open. Two burly security guards ran into the store, making a bee-line for the cubicles.

“You, holding the mobile phone, get on the floor.”

Burrows watched the man’s rock steady hand pointing a gun at him. He quickly reasoned the man couldn’t be persuaded to put the gun away till he heard the full story.

The prison guard dropped his mobile phone back into his pocket. Lying on the floor he tried desperately to explain the escape.

“If you’ll phone a detective Kendal and get him here this drama will be settled? Besides, I have to go find an escaped prisoner.”

“At least ten minutes ticked off before the glass front door was again opened.

Kendal looked to be a half step in front of Claire when they marched into the shop. He held the surrounded man wearing a guard’s uniform in contempt.

“Are you both detectives?” asked Burrows.

His face looked strained. A large vein surfaced on his neck causing red capillaries to burst, making his skin look blotchy.

Kendal produced his police badge.

“Thank you for coming so fast. This is big trouble. The head of the mental institution didn’t appreciate the news of the escape one bit.”

“Me either,” jeered Kendal.

“Don’t concern yourself on what’s happening outside, Sir, the media always attracts attention,” stated Claire.

“You mentioned the person who escaped is from the mental institution?” growled Kendal.

“Yes.”

Burrows relayed the story in detail and ended by showing the three cubicles he’d been guarding. “There’s no need to study the walls. I’ve already done it.”

Kendal rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He walked into the middle cubicle and studied the walls, glancing suspiciously at the guard.

“If you’ve done a preliminary inspection how do you explain the escape?”

“I swear I did the inspection and I can’t explain how both escaped. The Upp bloke must have planned the whole thing from the start. He’s a real piece of work.”

Kendal grunted, walking to the front of the shop. At least ten journo’s immediately photographed him a least a dozen times each. An anchorman leaning against the glass shop front shoved a microphone under his nose.

“Detective, explain what’s going on?”

“No comment.” He turned his attention to the young female shop assistant. “Were you on duty when the escape happened?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Hearing the girl’s comment the media instantly photographed her. A barrage of questions

followed.

“Could you please follow me? I need to ask you a few questions.”

Kendal escorted the girl inside the shop well away from the hounding media.

The girl started to tremble. Her eyes quickly turned red. She buried her face in her hands a full two seconds before breaking out into uncontrollable sobs.

“It’s okay. This isn’t your fault.”

Looking up at Kendal the girl exhaled. She appeared to relax slightly. Though her face looked tense and her shoulders were slumped, her eyes were drying.

“Is your boss here yet?” asked Kendal.

“No Sir, not as yet.”

“Sir makes me sound old.”

Claire walked over chuckling. She needed to clamp a hand over her mouth to stop.

“That’s enough out of you, partner.” Kendal grinned knowing his plan to relax the girl further seemed to have the desired effect. “May I call you Trish?”

The girl looked a little-taken-a-back.

“It’s on a plastic name tag next to the register. Seeing how you’re not wearing one, I’ve put two and two together and assume you forgot to wear it.”

“Please don’t let my boss know. She expects me to wear it.”

“Your secret is safe, however, I think you should put it on. Judging by the commotion outside your boss might have arrived.”

Trish flashed a tense look before sprinting for her nametag, pinning it to her shirt.

“Do you have any idea why there’s a manhole in the ceiling above the change cubicles?” asked Kendal when the girl returned.

“No. They might be new. I’ve only been working in the shop for a week.”

A woman wearing a grey skirt and white shirt pushed her way through the crowd of onlookers. She stepped into the shop, a furious expression on her face. Marching across the floor to the counter she glared at the girl.

“Trish, I demand you tell me what’s going on and who these three people are?”

The girl burst into tears again, hiding behind Claire.

“Who are you?” asked Kendal focusing on the woman.

“I’m the owner of this shop. I’m not happy. Young lady, do you have any idea how much money I’m losing? I have a good mind to sack you.”

“Don’t do it,” urged Kendal. He glossed over the formalities, explaining the situation in ten words.

His statement melted Trish’s boss’ hardened heart. Her shoulders slumped. She even plastered a caring smile on her face. Before her mood changed Kendal aimed his questions at the owner.

“Why is there a manhole cover in all three cubicles?”

The woman walked to the change rooms to study each one in turn. Turning to face Kendal she wore a frown.

"I've no idea. They weren't there three days ago."

Walking back to Trish she reached to comfort the young girl by draping her arm over her shoulders.

"Sweetheart, it's ok. I apologize for my outburst. Detectives, this is my daughter, Trish."

"We've met," answered Kendal. "Have no fear over the escape. They won't be back. You can re-open your shop now if you like."

"Thank you. I'm Barbara."

The group shook hands. A few more questions were asked before the shop re-opened.

The moment Kendal stepped outside the shop he was immediately peppered by camera flashes and lightning questions. He confidently stood facing the reporters. When he spoke, poise and sophistication were written on his face.

"There is no comment at this time. Thank you."

"Come on detective, you have to give us something," stated a female reporter. She was dressed to impress in light blue pants and a white blouse. She looked tall and reeked of professionalism. "The public has a right to know. Is this robbery and the rumour of an escape married?"

"Any rumours you may have heard should be acknowledged as hearsay. The shop is open for business. I've no further comment."

"Is the escapee dangerous?"

Kendal whirled around on his toes as if he changed his mind and about to give the media what they wanted to hear. He waved them away, re-entering the shop.

"Sugar, Trish apparently grew concerned about the guard's, shall we say, 'lack of appeal.' She questioned Burrows. He told her to go away. She rang her mother then she rang the police."

"It's quite an achievement for a fifteen-year-old. Claire, escort the girl out the back to the tea-room and grab a statement from her, I'll be checking out the cubicles." He beckoned Barbara over. "How long have you owned the shop?"

"Two months. I inherited the place from my brother when he died."

"Condolences to you and your family," whispered Kendal.

"Don't bother. He was a jerk, a real idiot."

"Sounds like you didn't get along?"

"Have you ever heard the saying, 'black paws on a white dog?'"

"I can't say I've heard that one before. It sounds rare."

"He was rare alright, a nut case, a real slime ball. He never spent money and he treated people in such a way it's embarrassing just to think about it."

"I can conjure up a picture. Is the shop a success?"

"No. What's it got to do with this mess?"

Kendal shrugged. "Have you a ladder I can use?"

"Yes, it's out the back in the tea-room."

Kendal found the aluminum ladder and forced the manhole cover in the middle cubicle to open slightly.

“Will this take long?” asked Barbara, glancing at the faces of the shoppers looking their way.
“No.”

Kendal forced the manhole cover to the fully open position. To aid, in his search, he used his mobile phone by shining its inbuilt light into the roof. He grabbed the knotted rope and watched it unravel to the floor.

Claire emerged from the tea-room in time to see her partner dusting himself down.

“The space inside the roof was definitely the escape route. Let’s go take a closer look. Guard Burrows, please join us. Claire, how did the interview with Trish go?”

“Do you always have to make something traumatic into a no big deal for the innocent?”

“My emotions have to be in neutral at all times so I can channel my thoughts into the case at hand. How else can I solve the mystery?”

“Spare me the crap. I know it’s not true. Underneath your coat and Police badge, you’re just a big softy.”

“You and I know it. Don’t spread it around. What did Trish have to say?”

“She didn’t know what was happening. She told me nothing new.”

Kendal scrunched his nose. Facing Burrows he growled a six-word sentence.

“Do you want to add anything?”

“The man who talked to Tarskney, the head of the mental institution, is a Doctor of Psychology. The patient we brought shopping goes by the name of Pat.”

Both detectives eyeballed the guard as the lift doors opened on the roof. Sunlight poured onto Kendal.

“What’s the patient’s full name?” asked Claire.

“I have no idea. I only know the person as Pat. I have to add he’s a weird one. He sits on the bed all day every day. If you want my opinion he looks to be thinking of only one thing.”

“What?” Kendal asked.

“Revenge.”

“You’re a security guard, don’t you think you should’ve at least known the full name of a mental patient you were supposed to be guarding, of all things, ‘a shopping trip.’ Did you ever consider something might have smelt off?” jeered Kendal.

“Personally, I didn’t like the idea of a shopping trip. It wasn’t my call. For the record, I thought I could handle it.”

“You didn’t like the idea. You know what thought did,” yelled Kendal.

“Back off,” yelled Burrows. “I did my job. I don’t get paid to know the names of the screwball patients. It’s not in my job description.”

Seeing Kendal’s fingers closing into tight fists Claire quickly stepped between the men. She raised her hands in an attempt to keep them apart and to stop them from endeavoring to hit each other.

“Okay you two there’s enough testosterone on this roof, now both of you back off and let’s continue our examination of the escape route.”

“Can you at least give me the description of the mental patient?” asked Kendal, calming

himself. Even though his voice sounded sarcastic he thought he did a good job of hiding his fears.

“Tall, thin, soft features like a woman, tattoo on his face. Why do I care what a mental case looks like? For all, I know he has two noses, one eye, and four ears. I don’t get paid to know what they look like. I get paid to guard them.”

Both Detectives stood shaking their heads. Kendal held up his hand to call a halt to the guard’s description. He slipped his hand into his pocket, extracting his mobile phone. Pacing in circles he stabbed Police Headquarters’ phone number.

“You have dialed police dispatch,” answered a woman’s calm voice.

“Detective Kendal here, I want you to put me through to Captain Hughes’ office.”

In the short pause, Kendal stared at an advertising sign on the adjacent building. It read how to save hundreds of dollars on a holiday to Tasmania. He snorted a full second before a male voice boomed through the phone’s tiny speaker.

“Hughes.”

“Captain, Kendal. Patrick has escaped from the mental institution. I need every cop on the force looking out for the pyromaniac.”

The phone line fell silent for a few seconds. “I’ll inform the commissioner. I’m sure there’ll be a formal inquiry into the mishap. Whatever you do, don’t tell the media a thing. If they get a sniff of this incident no house will be safe from being burnt to the ground. Forget about the missing person case you’re working on. Find the arsonist ASAP. I’ll assign someone else to cover you.”

“I think the fireys should be told, they might be busy. I’d also like to continue in the original case, I have a strange feeling the burgled house earlier and this escape is connected somehow.”

“Forget about your strange feelings, it’s probably your wife’s cooking.”

“Can’t be, she’s a great cook. All Italians are.”

“Kendal, spare me the grief. Find the bum. Seeing how you were Patrick’s goal last time, I think it might be wise if you have your family move to a secret location.”

“Sending a cop to my house might be just as good.”

“I’ll consider your request. In the mean time inform Marg to pack, and Kendal, watch your back. When you have a chance I want a report on how the screwball firebug escaped. On second thought, I’ll ring the mental joint the moment I hang up. I want to know how this crap could possibly happen. Someone’s head will roll for this.”

Kendal dropped the mobile phone back in his pocket. Claire stared at him.

“What?”

“I’m on Hughes’ side,” stated Claire. “Ring Marg and tell her to pack a suitcase for her and the kids.”

“I disagree. Patrick won’t go to my house. It’s too dangerous. A surprise attack is more on the table. I can’t believe revenge is the only reason someone wanted to spring a pyromaniac out of a mental institution. There has to be more to this equation? We have to discover what it is, and we need to find out, now. We’ll start by discovering exactly how the escape was achieved.”

Burrows led the way to the maintenance door.

“Surprise, surprise,” chirped Kendal, opening the door. “It’s not locked.” He glared at the guard, shook his head and stepped through the cavity.

A narrow plank was suspended from the steel beams which made up the frame of the roof. Ten large steps from the maintenance door the group found a second and third knotted rope. Kendal pushed open the manhole cover and looked through into the cubicle of the clothes shop. Allowing the rope to fall, he discovered all three were long enough to reach the floor.

“Gotcha,” Kendal mumbled.

“Perfect escape,” whispered Claire, looking down at the floor.

“Partner, I think it’s time to visit the mental institution.”

CHAPTER SIX

Kendal parked the unmarked police car at the stairs of the mental institution. The building looked ultra modern, while the manicured garden beds full of flowering bushes was of no consequence to the two detectives.

Claire and Kendal bounded up the stairs two at a time. Stepping through the opening glass sliding doors, a guard met the two visitors head on.

“I’ve no time for games,” barked Kendal, sweeping the stocky man to one side.

Claire flashed her police badge as she walked past the gobsmacked guard.

“We need to talk to the head of this institution and I need to see her, now. I’m not in the calmest of moods so I demand you tell me where the woman hides when she’s here?” jeered Kendal.

“I’ll have to see if Ms. Tarskney is available?” stammered the guard.

A young secretary sitting at a desk typing on a computer keyboard looked up when she heard the angry ruckus. Her eyes bore the resemblance of a victim in a horror movie.

Spying an office door, Kendal swept the guard from his path for the second time and marched up to the desk.

“Is the head poncho hiding in the office I’m pointing at?”

Kendal didn’t wait for the young secretary to answer before marching to the office door. Twisting the doorknob he shouldered the door and marched into the room. Claire followed, closing the door in her wake.

“Excuse me,” yelled a middle-aged woman standing.

Three men representing the media also stood, facing the intrusion. Behind the two detectives, the guard pushed the door open. The office quickly filled. People were yelling over each other trying to be heard. The media were trying to record what was happening over the mayhem.

“Everyone out,” yelled the woman. “My office isn’t the grandstand at a football game.” Her

light grey uniform looked official. Her face instantly changed from business like to murderous.

Kendal stood military style wearing a chilled expression.

“How can anyone be so stupid as to allow a mental patient to go shopping?” he yelled in the lull of the noise.

“I resent the tone in your voice,” barked the woman.

“I repeat the question.”

“Thank you for spewing the news to the media.” The woman pushed her hands onto her hips, glaring. Her eyes were darker than storm clouds.

Kendal didn’t back off. He intended to inform the woman his blood was boiling.

“Who might you be?” she jeered.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Alan Kendal, Melbourne Homicide. Standing on my right is my partner Detective Sergeant Claire Ambroso.”

“I hardly think this a matter for the homicide goons.”

“Who are you?” Kendal blurted.

“I’m Ms. Tarskney. I run this institution.”

“It’s a good start,” added Claire. “At least we found the right person to yell at.”

Standing to full height Tarskney switched her attention to the media reporters. She plastered a steady smile on her face. Kendal knew she’d switched to recovery mode. He wasn’t impressed with the desperate look.

“Please wait outside I need to clear the air. If any one of you print or say one word of what has transpired in this office you will be sued.”

“What about our questions on the escape?” one reporter asked. He looked more than ready to thrust his microphone at anyone who spoke. “When will you give a statement? We need to know if the escapee is dangerous. We have a right to inform the public.”

“Your questions will be answered the moment these two detectives and I have conducted a chat and they have left this office to concentrate on other more impressing duties. Now please, wait outside.”

The three reporters packed away their gear. In a huff, they walked to the door. Claire marched across the floor and slammed the door shut when they stepped out of the office.

“After we have had a chat and more impressing duties!” growled Kendal. “What sort of excuse is that?”

Tarskney flopped onto her red leather chair at the desk, rubbing her temples. “It’s been a trying day,” she mumbled.

“Amen,” whispered Claire under her breath.

For the next thirty seconds, the tension in the room felt unbearable. No one knew exactly where to start. Kendal eyeballed Tarskney. She eyeballed Claire. Even Burrows stood guard at the door shaking his head.

Kendal leaned over the table glaring at the flabbergasted woman. He watched her shoulders slump before she sunk deep into the chair. Finally, he talked.

“I’ll start the ball rolling so we can have this so called friendly chat.””

“Somehow I don’t think this meeting will be friendly.

“At last, you have something right. Do you know how many hours Detective Ambroso and I have put in and what has been lost trying to capture the pyromaniac you let loose from a padded cell, of all things to go shopping?”

“No, I don’t. In my defense, I was conned.”

“Lady you’ve said a mouthful.”

“What’s been lost in capturing the pyromaniac?”

“Almost the life of my daughter myself and dare I say my dear mother-in-law who is now living in my house due to the fact her home happened to be burnt to the ground by the very same pyromaniac you allowed to go shopping. If you knew the old woman you’d never allow the charade to take place in the first place. The woman is a tiger in old lady’s clothing.”

“I’m staying out of this argument,” mumbled Claire.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” growled Kendal. “I can’t even fathom the idea you, the head honcho of the mental institution gave permission for an insane patient to go shopping. Didn’t you contemplate disaster? I’m still trying to understand how, in your right mind, you could have considered such a stupid move. Which one of you was the inmate?”

“Detective Kendal, I didn’t know this elaborate escape might be on the cards.”

“I’d like to believe you. I’m actually having a little trouble.”

“I did consider the danger. The man who convinced me into agreeing sounded like an expert in psychology.”

“Did he surrender any information about himself?” asked Claire.

“Did he say his name?” probed Kendal. “Did you question his motives? Did you grill him about his life, anything and everything which might have tipped you off into thinking he might have been a con artist?”

“Enough,” screeched Tarskney, standing.

“I’ll say it’s enough,” bellowed Kendal meeting her at eye level.

“Detective I don’t like your attitude. You come barging into my office like you own the building.”

“What did you expect; a church choir singing praises while they stood in the doorway? Kindergarten kids selling cookies?”

“All I can say is; I let my defenses down. I apologize.”

“Sorry won’t fix the problem you’ve created. Let’s try and capture this arsonist before the next strike,” grumbled Kendal. “Tell us exactly what transpired leading up to the time the pyromaniac walked out of this place?”

“A man in a business suit walked into my office. He produced watertight paperwork. His body language and the confidence he portrayed made him out to be quite the professional in his field of expertise. He introduced himself as Mr. Upp.”

“Strange name, how do you spell it?” asked Claire.

“There’s two P’s in Upp.”

“This genuine paperwork you mentioned, do you have it in easy reach?” asked Kendal.

“Yes.”

“I’d like to see it,” he growled.

“I hope you’re not insinuating I’m incompetent,” probed Tarskney.

“You gave permission for Burrows to escort a mentally disturbed person on a shopping trip. Please, feel free to disagree at any time.”

“Yes.”

“Sounds like pure unadulterated incompetence to me.”

“I resent the accusation. Mr. Upp’s credentials were outstanding.”

“I don’t give two hoots about his credentials.”

The woman wagged a finger at Kendal. “If there is even a splinter of a chance a mentally disturbed person can be miraculously cured we have to investigate the possibility.”

“I want to see his credentials?” insisted Kendal, pounding his fist on the desktop.

Tarskney retrieved the manila folder from a side drawer, slamming it on the desktop. Focusing on Kendal she glared at him through shark-like eyes.

“I don’t appreciate the rudeness, especially from a cop. Your superiors will hear about this.”

“I welcome their response.”

Kendal swiped the folder, pulling it open. He began to rummage through the pile of fifty pages. Eventually, he stared at the woman.

“The top five pages repeat themselves throughout the pile,” he spat. “You’ve been conned by an expert alright. It’s a shame you didn’t pick it. If only you were diligent in running this place I wouldn’t know you.” He began to pace the floor.

Tarskney watched him while he walked.

Finally, Kendal approached the desk. His face looked strained. “Lady, you’ve put me in a bind. Because of you, my family is now in grave danger. Patrick is not just insane he’s hell bent on revenge. It’s a bad combination.”

“I truly didn’t know I was being conned. Upp sounded totally professional.”

Both detectives walked to the door. Pulling the door open Kendal turned to face the woman. The throng of media reporters shuffled forward crowding around the doorway.

“The media is your problem. I’m tempted not to ask the two questions invading my mind however you have left me no choice.”

Tarskney folded her arms. “Go ahead, ask your stupid questions.”

The eyes of the media switched their gazes onto Kendal.

“To set the record straight, Ms. Tarskney, did you know Patrick loves to play fire games?”

“I hope you’re satisfied in the fact you have belittled me in front of the media? And no I don’t know anything about the so called fire games.”

“I thought as much.”

“You said you have another question.”

“Did you or did you not know Patrick, or as he calls himself now, Pat, is actually a woman and a medical doctor?”

The look of horror on the Tarskney’s face said it all.

Kendal barged through the reporters. Claire followed close behind.

CHAPTER SEVEN

UPP ESCORTED Patrick out of the building to a waiting taxi. A short five-minute drive and the car turned up a quiet street close to the sea. A third of the way along the street where tall Elm trees grew close to the road in the exact middle of each house block the taxi pulled into the curb. Upp stared out of the car's window at a single storey house. The grass at the front of the house appeared to be yellow. The garden beds needed some attention. Weeds appeared to have grown and were trying to choke the few plants.

Upp leaned forward, tapping the driver on the arm.

"If you come back for us in ten minutes there'll be a bonus. Keep the meter running."

Pat and Upp stepped down from the car. They watched it being driven to the end of the street and turn left. When the vehicle disappeared around the corner Upp and Pat focused on the house.

"I like second storey houses," commented Pat. "After I have set the house on fire I watch the top floor implode. It's a great sight. More the better if Kendal is inside the house. His charred body will be taken to the morgue. After spitting on his grave I'll walk away to plan my next wave of revenge. When do I begin to see what I want come to fruition?"

"When I've set up what I want and not a moment sooner. Do I make myself clear?"

"Upp, you bore me."

"Stick to my plan and you'll have your revenge sooner than later."

"So you keep saying."

Escorting Pat up the driveway towards the house, Upp pounded on the door.

"I'm eagerly waiting to hear how good you really are."

Hearing quick shuffles closing in on the door Upp whispered. "You're on." He stepped off the narrow verandah and hid in the garden two metres from the door.

A young girl, blonde hair cascading over her shoulders, answered the knock. Her younger brother looked from under her shoulder.

"I have a message from Detective Kendal," announced Patrick, in an authoritative voice.

"I'm not interested," replied the girl from behind the security door.

"If you'd be kind enough to open the door I'll hand you the letter. Then I'll leave. It'll take no more than three seconds."

Patrick heard an audible click. The door opened a tad. A girl's head poked through the narrow crack.

"Where's the note?"

Patrick raised an envelope, thrusting it at the girl. She opened the door wide, snatching it from

his hand.

“Before you close me out I have to comment this house is almost the perfect size,” advised Patrick.

“Perfect size for what?” asked the girl.

“To burn to the ground.”

Patrick pushed his foot into the gap preventing the girl from pushing the door shut. In a slick move, he swiped a handgun from his shoulder holster and aimed it at the boy. Pressure on the door eased. Patrick grinned and stepped inside.

“Walk into the lounge and sit.”

Patrick waved the loaded gun back and forth while he paced the floor in front of the kids. Finally, the girl sat straight-backed as if trying to defy the gunman’s order.

“There isn’t a message is there?” asked the girl.

“Of course, there is,” barked Patrick.

“So tell me the message,” the girl continued sarcastically.

“Do you know a detective Kendal?”

“Maybe I do, maybe I don’t.”

“Why are you here?” asked the boy.

Patrick quickly sized up the lad and snorted. “You’re too brave for your age group. What’s your name?”

“My friends call me Slasher.”

“I’m not your friend and I never repeat the same question, it infuriates me. Now answer my question.”

“Nick.”

Patrick glared at the girl. “What’s your name?”

“Kobe. Why are you here? And I don’t ask the same question more than twice.”

“Change your attitude or I’ll force you. I’m here to take charge.”

“Over what?” Kobe shrieked.

“Over the family business,” growled Patrick.

“Which business are you referring to?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about.”

“My aunt is in charge,” snarled Kobe.

“No, she’s not. I am.”

“Says who?”

“Me. Hey boy, I need your phone, bring it. Don’t try to escape. If you’re not back by the time I’ve loaded my gun, I’ll shoot the girl. Don’t just sit there trembling in fear, go now.”

Bug-eyed the lad looked at his sister before refocusing on the gun. He watched Patrick take two bullets from his pocket, slipping them into two vacant chambers.

“Four bullets to go,” announced Patrick.

The boy sprinted towards the kitchen. The swinging door he pushed on almost fell off its hinges. In his panic, Nick slipped on the polished floor. Grabbing the edge of the table his left

knee hit the tiles. He winced in pain as he struggled to his feet. Spying the phone sitting on the bench he limped around the table towards it.

“Three bullets to load,” called Patrick. Dropping his hand back into his pocket he extracted a bullet and began to juggle it a few times before sliding the bullet, head first into the next vacant chamber.

Patrick stared at the still swinging door. He grunted under his breath.

“Two bullets to go,” called Patrick. He turned his head to glare at the girl.

Kobe swallowed, squirming on the seat. “Brother, please hurry,” she squealed. Kobe wiped the back of her hand across her eyes to erase the bead of water appearing on her forehead. Her eyes welled as she repeated her sentence.

Patrick slid the last bullet home. “Last bullet,” he called sarcastically.

The lad grabbed the phone and ran for the door.

Patrick snapped the gun barrel back into its correct position. Painting a smirk on his face he aimed the gun at the girl. She cringed into the back of the seat. Her eyes widened. Her face slowly distorted from the anxiety.

“Here, here,” called the boy. He fell over his own feet for the second time and watched in horror as the phone bounced over the carpet.

“Very well done, you only did one thing wrong.”

The boy wore a pleading expression.

“The phone isn’t in my hand.”

Patrick re-aimed the gun at Kobe’s face. She closed her eyes. Her face changed to starched white. She tried to scream, but no noise filled the room.

Patrick’s finger started to constrict on the trigger. His murderous stare widened. Kobe sensed he loved the power.

The boy jumped to his feet, snatched the phone off the carpet and lunged for Patrick’s outstretched hand. The gun moved sideways. Kobe heard a click. Both kids were momentarily mummified. Patrick gave the lad a sharp backhand across the face which sent him spiraling into the wall. A horrid, evil laugh filled the room. Patrick roamed the gun back and forth between the two kids. His laugh changed to a chuckle.

“I’m sorry for taking too long. Please, don’t shoot my sister,” puffed the boy.

“You’re both too valuable alive.”

“So you weren’t going to shoot either of us?” questioned Kobe.

“Not yet.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Patrick aimed the gun at the boy. “I’ll prove it.” He pulled the trigger.

They heard a click.

“The gun won’t click next time.”

“I saw you load six bullets,” stammered Kobe. Her breathing sounded fast and shallow.

Patrick stooped closer to the girl. “You only think you saw me load six bullets.” He produced two bullets from his pocket and finished loading the gun. “Now I’ve loaded six bullets.” He

snapped the gun closed and aimed it at the boy.

“How did you pull off the trick?” Kobe asked.

“Magic my dear girl. A magician knows how to palm an object. I’m slow, but you kids were too scared to catch on.”

“What do you want from us?” asked Kobe in a confident voice.

Patrick pocketed the gun, pacing the floor. His grin looked full size when he finally stopped. He squared himself to the kids.

“You’re aunt will be arrested for the murder of Kendal. I’ll be off the hook. Free as a bird. I’ll be free to go anywhere I choose.”

“What if we tell my aunt or the cops of your plans?”

“You won’t. If you do your brother will be on the police missing board. He’ll never be found. Understand?”

Kobe gulped back a tear.

“Of course, you do.”

“All this is because you want to kill Detective Kendal?” asked Kobe.

“You’re a very intelligent girl. Go to the top of the class so everyone can tell you have an outstanding IQ.”

“Will you set us free when this is all over?” questioned Kobe, bravely. Her expression looked doubtful.

“Yes.”

“Can we believe you’ll keep your word?” added Nick.

“I do what I say.”

Kobe frowned. Standing so she could meet Patrick’s stare at eye level, she folded her arms.

“I hope you’re not thinking about defying me, girly? It will be the biggest mistake of your life.”

Kobe quickly summed up Patrick as not making idle threats. She relaxed her arms. “What do you want me to do?”

“I need you to tell me where I can find Detective Kendal? I want you to discover what his plans are for the near future? For example is he going out for dinner? What case is he working on at the moment? Does he have a clue where I am? I want you to find out all the Goss?”

“How can I?”

“You and his daughter are the same age. I want you to organize to be transferred to the same school. In fact, I want you and Tegan Kendal in the same class.”

“I can’t organize to be transfered from one school to the next. I’m a kid.”

“Find a way.”

“I can’t.”

“Where’s your mother?”

“Both my parents died.”

“Condolences to you and you’re brother. Who is your legal guardian?”

“My aunt,” jeered Kobe.

“Good. When she comes home you will tell her you want to change schools. Be imaginative in what excuse you give.”

The group heard clapping coming from the other room. The man looked pleased as if he’d won lotto.

“Excellent persuasive power, my hat goes off to you Patrick. I’m impressed. Kids, you are looking at the new heart of a spider. You will now take orders from Patrick. He’s in charge. All correspondence will be through him. You will answer to him and him alone. If there are any questions you will ask him. If I were in your shoes I’d do exactly what he tells you.”

“Who are you?” jeered Nick, sounding defiant.

“My name is Mr. Upp.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

KENDAL PARKED his car in the driveway of his home. Stepping onto the verandah he reached for and opened the front door to his five-bed room, two-storey house.

“What are you like at teaching?” he asked Claire.

“Not this question again. I hope you don’t mean teaching teenagers?”

Kendal nodded. “It’s exactly what I mean.”

“Am I missing something here? I went to detective school to find out, ‘who done it’ and you want me to teach kids. It’s not in my job description.”

“You’d make a great school teacher. Don’t forget one important rule. You can’t hit a kid.”

“Captain Hughes won’t like you suggesting the idea and I’m gonna make sure I’m there when you tell him. I can hear him yelling already.”

“I’ll run it past him tomorrow. Come on, it’s time for dinner.”

“Al, are you trying to sneak in?” called a woman.

Claire waltzed into the kitchen. “Something sure smells wonderful.”

Marg turned to face her high school friend. “Where’s Al? You didn’t leave him somewhere?” She stood waiting for her husband to walk into the room saying his usual greeting.

“Margaret, darling, you look absolutely divine.” He smiled at his wife, strolled over and kissed her neck, then her lips.

Claire watched shaking her head.

Kendal’s wife wore her usual expectant expression.

“What?” he scolded, pushing her to arm’s length.

“Nothing,” she giggled.

“Nothing my arse,” cut in Claire. “Sugar, every time you see Marg you say and do the same boring thing.”

"I do not." He looked his wife in the eyes. "Do I?"

She shrugged her shoulder. "I don't mind."

"Take my advice, change your opening line," jeered Claire.

Rubbing his chin, Kendal grunted.

"And further more. You always rub your chin when you're deep in thought. How predictable can one person get?"

"Okay ladies, I give up, how long have you been planning this ambush?"

Claire looked at her watch, grinning. "Four days, thirty-three minutes."

"You got me. I promise to think of something new each day."

This time, Marg cut in. "Sweetie, I doubt if you could keep it up. Go change, dinner will be in ten."

"Where are the kids?"

"Tani is watching TV. Tegan and a friend are doing homework."

"Is her friend male or female?"

"They're in the lounge. Go find out."

Kendal grunted before walking from the kitchen into the lounge. Claire followed.

"Tegan, hello, how's school?"

"Fine thanks, Dad."

"Who's your friend?"

The young girl sitting on a leather recliner looked to have the stare of a juror.

"Tegan, are you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"Dad, this is my friend Kobe; my dad."

"Hello, Mr. Kendal."

"You have an interesting name. Kobe is pronounced Kobbie, with an emphasis on the letter 'E,' if my memory is intact? Kobe is a Japanese state isn't it?"

"You have a good memory, Mr. Kendal. My mother named me after my Grandmother. She was born in Japan. At the time my mother didn't like any girl's names. They planned on having a boy."

"You don't look like Japanese descendent?"

The girl jumped out of the recliner. "I didn't say I was Japanese," she answered dryly.

"Please, call me Alan. This woman behind me is Claire, my wife's pen friend from Italy."

"Hello," said Kobe walking over.

The trio shook hands in a business-like manner.

Claire nodded at the girl and sent Kendal a strange cursory glance.

He instinctively sized the girl up. She had flame red hair which might cascade over her narrow shoulders if it weren't for her ponytail; wire thin eyebrows and a pale face from not enough sun and she looked to be a tall athletic shaped teenager. Thin top and bottom lips and pale freckles dotted about a small nose. Dark ocean blue eyes hiding behind rimless glasses. He concluded, Kobe to be a normal run of the mill thirteen-year-old girl.

"Have we met before?" Kendal asked, rubbing his chin. He glanced at Claire who shot her

eyebrows upwards.

“No, we’ve never met.”

“Yes we have, I never forget a face or a name. I’m sure we’ve met.”

“No never,” insisted Kobe, more forcibly.

“Dad,” barked Tegan wagging a finger. “You’re not at work.”

Ignoring his daughter’s heartache he continued. “We have met. You were wearing a different school uniform. It was a dark blue skirt and a light blue jumper. The day obviously felt warm; you had scrunched the jumper sleeves up to your elbows.”

“Impossible,” growled Kobe. “I’ve never worn a blue school uniform.”

Tegan’s expression took on the look of thunder. “Dad, stop embarrassing me.”

“Hmm,” replied Kendal, raising his hand to rub his chin.

“Dad,” grumbled Tegan, more firmly. She folded her arms and glared at her father.

“My apologies, force of habit.”

Tegan faced Kobe. Her cheeks looked slightly crimson. “Dad’s a cop.”

Kobe’s frown turned upwards. “Being a cop sounds interesting, Alan.”

Kendal locked eyes on the girl before shifting his gaze to her bare feet. “Forgive the question, aren’t your feet cold? They look it.”

“Dad,” moaned Tegan, using a stern authoritative voice.

“No, they’re not cold,” replied Kobe. “Thanks for caring, Alan.”

“If you don’t mind, I’d like a chat.”

“Dad,” protested Tegan, yet again.

Kendal waved a hand at his eldest. She knew the gesture all too well and sat next to Kobe in silence watching and listening to her father closely.

“I couldn’t help notice your toe ring,” said Kendal, almost whispering. “May I have a look?”

The girl blushed as she raised her foot, resting it on Kendal’s knee. He bent forward to have a closer look.

“Interesting, where did you buy it?”

“Dad, enough,” whispered Tegan. The tone in her voice sounded desperate.

Kendal looked at his daughter. Tall, thin off the shoulders black hair; skin a shade lighter than her Italian mother and when she smiled to appeared to be the mirror image of her sister’s. He felt weak in the knees. His gaze locked onto her brown eyes as he was attacked from behind. He threw the weight over his left shoulder and cradled the shape in his arms.

“Hi dad,” squealed Tani.

“Hello yourself,” said Kendal, kissing his nine-year-old daughter on the cheek. “You look more like your mother every day.”

“Dad, Mum said dinner’s ready.” She giggled from the poke to the ribs.

“Tell her I’m on my way.” Kendal stood and walked towards the stairs.

“Mr. Kendal, I didn’t mention my Mother’s Irish. My grandparents were on holidays in Japan when she was born. My father’s Irish too. So I guess it makes me full Irish blood.”

“Thanks for clearing up the discrepancy. I apologize for halting your homework.”

“It is okay; Tegan and I needed a break. We’ve finished our history questions. We are now trying to think up ideas for two short novels.”

Kendal nodded at the two girls and trudged upstairs, disappearing down the hall.

Kobe looked sideways at Tegan. “What was that all about?” she whispered.

“I don’t know. I’m more puzzled than you. Dad is definitely thinking about something.”

“You reckon?”

“Yeah, once you know him you’ll discover he’s always thinking.”

“Must be a good cop?”

“He sure is. When I’ve finished school I’m going to follow in his footsteps.”

Upstairs Kendal opened his wife’s jewellery box. For several moments he studied its neat and tidy contents. Gold rings were arranged on the left-hand side, necklaces and earrings on the right. He picked out a gold ring, holding it up to the light. He swiveled it on his index finger before replacing the ring back exactly where he found it. Closing the lid to the jewellery box he wore a widening grin.

Kendal slipped the shoulder holster off, stowing it in a side draw. He changed into a tracksuit pants and shirt and walked downstairs.

The dinner table sounded absent of conversation. Kendal watched Tegan watching him. Kobe’s stare moved back and forth between him and Tegan as if trying to pick up on the silent conversation.

At 11:00pm Kendal drove Kobe home. Claire and Tegan tagged along.

On the drive home, Tegan piped up. “Dad, what were all the strange looks at the table tonight?”

“I’d been thinking about the case Claire and I have been working on. Have you known Kobe long?”

“She’s new in school. The principle dumped her in my class. Mum thought it might be a good idea if I invited her for dinner.”

“If you happened to have a new teacher for a few days how would you react?”

Claire cut in, frowning. “Wait one minute. I don’t like where this conversation is heading.”

“You want Claire to be my new teacher?” asked Tegan. She appeared to be ready to burst at the news.

“Do you think you could keep a secret?” asked Kendal.

“Sure. Sounds like a great idea. Three full days of bludging, what a lovely thought.”

“There will be no bludging.”

“Sugar, you’re not thinking straight.”

Kendal opened the front door of his home. “Yes, I am. Good night Claire. See you in the morning. The guest room is always made up. Make yourself at home.”

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. “I always do.”

CHAPTER NINE

LIGHT RAIN fell from midnight to dawn. By 7:00am the sky looked a patchwork of blue and grey.

No sooner did Kendal sink his head into the pillow, the alarm clock sounded.

A quick warm breakfast of honey on toast then he and Claire dropped Tegan at school before driving towards Police Headquarters.

“Already the streets are awash with business men and women making their way to work,” mentioned Claire.

Kendal glanced at his watch. “8:50am.” He groaned before parking outside a large shopping complex.

“Sugar, it’s too early to shop.”

Both detectives walked to the nearest jewellery shop. They stood outside the closed glass door waiting for the owner to arrive. Kendal remained quiet by studying the few jewellery pads displayed in the window.

“Sugar, Marg’s birthday is not for six months,” mentioned Claire looking over his shoulder.

“I know.”

“If you insist on waiting for the door to open, I’ll shout you a coffee.”

Kendal nodded before being whisked off towards the food court. Claire pointed to a round table and marched to the first coffee shop she saw.

Kendal made himself comfortable at the four-seat table closest to an exit directly opposite the jewellery shop. He wore a frown but amused himself by studying the people rushing past. In a few minutes, Claire returned; two hot cappuccinos in hand. She placed them on the table and settled into the seat opposite him.

“Do you mind, you’re blocking my view? I want to see the jeweler arrive.”

“Why?”

“I want to be the first customer of the day.”

Claire rolled her eyes. Under sufferance, she moved to the next chair.

“You’re acting strange this morning old man.”

Kendal twisted his gold wedding ring before wriggling it off his finger. Placing it in the top pocket of his black duffel coat he grinned at his partner’s curious stares as she spooned the froth from her coffee.

“He or she is late,” growled Kendal, glancing at his watch. “9:01am I thought the owner of the shop would’ve been here well before opening time.”

“People do have a life outside of work. Unlike someone I know.”

Kendal grunted. He lifted the mug to his lips, swallowing half the steaming mug of coffee in one gulp.

At 9:03am, a short tubby balding man wearing black-framed glasses stopped at the jewellery

shop door, placing a black briefcase on the ground between his feet.

“Claire, drink up, our man has arrived.” Kendal downed the last swallow of hot brew and started tapping his fingertips on the table waiting for her to finish.

“Do you mind, it’s a hot drink,” she complained.

“You whine too much.”

“Do you want to wear the rest of my hot coffee?”

Kendal’s grin fell away when he moved his hazel stare from Claire back to the jewellery shop glass door. He spied a young dark haired male approximately 185 cm’s in height king hit the short balding tubby man from behind. Snatching up the black briefcase he hesitated long enough to glance to his left then his right. He appeared to be searching for someone. Kendal flashed a cursory glance around and spotted another young man loitering outside a florist shop off to their right.

“Got you,” he whispered. “Claire, you like flowers go catch the boy mauling the roses. I’m going shopping.”

Glancing at her partner Claire didn’t have to ask questions. She stood and quickly marched off towards the florist.

The boy started to move from the roses towards the mainstream of people pouring into the shopping centre to begin their spending. Claire stalked the boy for nearly a minute before grabbing him on the shoulder. He twisted, weaved and ducked before swinging a clenched fist at her jaw. She saw the punch coming but jumped back too late. Five knuckles scrape across her chin. Claire fell hard against the floor to ceiling glass window.

Early morning shoppers watched gob-smacked at hearing a mighty crack and witnessing a woman in tight black leather pants, green top and matching French cap fall through the glass shop front. Claire extended her arms and closed her eyes. Shards of glass rained down giving her a glass shower. She heard a rip. Like a cat ready to pounce on its prey, she jumped to her feet ready to chase the boy when he tried to lose her amongst the peak hour shoppers. The boy ran fast, but he wasn’t fit. He soon tired. Claire grinned. Her daily five-kilometer run paid high dividends yet again. Hot on his heels she reached for her handcuffs. In a perfectly timed sweep, she cuffed his hands.

“Punk, there’s no way you’re going to escape,” she jeered.

The boy’s whole body slumped. His breathing sounded quick. “What’s wrong little momma?”

“I’ll tell you what’s wrong. Look at my good leathers. You caused them to be ripped from top to bottom.”

The boy raised his thick eyebrows. A second later he let out a long low whistle.

“You have nice slender legs. You wanna go for a ride in my car? I know this perfect romantic spot. It’ll be me and you, the moon and afterwards a lovely skinny-dip in the bay. What do you say?”

Claire reached into her back pocket. Pulling out her police badge, she thrust it under the lad’s nose.

“I’d say you forgot to mention the condoms, punk. Not to mention you’re not old enough to

own a driver's license." Claire clipped the boy behind his left ear. "Start walking."

The lad moaned just before he stood. He sighed and walked back towards the jewellery shop.

Kendal hated physical exercise. He preferred to use brainpower to catch a criminal. He skirted the tables. The only exit the boy carrying the black leather briefcase could take just happened to be the one he stood at. To run through the influx of shoppers flowing through other entrances, he decided the idea wouldn't be in the teenager's thoughts.

Kendal watched the boy's every move. The teenager fidgeted, watching his friend being tackled by a woman. He shifted his weight from one leg to the other before beginning to move in the direction of the undetected man wearing a long black duffel coat.

"Come to Poppa," muttered Kendal.

The boy went from power walking to running in a matter of seconds. Kendal moved fast. Kicking his chair, he sent it skidding across the floor and into the boy's path. The briefcase slid across the tiled floor, banging against the closed exit door.

The boy swore heavily, crashing face first to the floor. Blood poured from his broken nose. He clawed his way to a standing position by using the chair. He stood swaying looking into the eyes of a tall man.

Kendal reached for his handcuffs, quickly tethering the boy's wrists behind his back.

"Start walking towards the table directly in front. To make sure there are no mistakes sit at the table which has one chair missing."

The boy dropped to all fours. Kendal reached for the boy's collar, dragging him to a standing position. They stared coldly into each other's eyes.

"Sorry about your broken nose. My chair went skidding across the floor when I stood."

The boy closed his eyes. He made a drawback sound in his throat.

"I'd swallow the spit if I were you," warned Kendal, lifting the boy's hands towards his shoulder blades.

The boy swallowed before screaming. "You're breaking my arms."

"You'll live."

Claire escorted her lad towards the table.

"Have you been to a party and didn't invite me?"

"Sugar, next time, I'll chase the close one."

A security guard came running over to help. He agreed to watch the two offenders. After swiping the briefcase off the ground both detectives marched to the jewellery shop to interview the owner.

"Morning Sir how's the head?" quizzed Kendal, strolling into the jewellery shop.

The tubby man looked up. Both hands were pressing into the sides of his head.

"How do you think I bloody feel? Some mongrel bloke king hits me, steals ten grand worth of watches and rings. A whole week's work out the window and you want to know how I'm feeling. Save your sympathy. What I need is a cop. One is never close when you want one."

Staring directly at the man Kendal chuckled.

"Don't piss me off. Who are you anyway? A car salesman, an insurance inspector, or some

religious person I don't want to know?"

"You're wrong on all counts."

"Whatever it is you're selling I'm not interested. The day has already started out bad and it's not even 10:00am yet."

Kendal produced the man's black leather case then pulled out his police badge and introduced himself. "I've good news, we caught the two offenders."

"There were two thieves?" he snarled. "I could have sworn there was only one, by the way, he snatched my briefcase and ran. I apologize. Thanks for coming to my rescue. I'm indebted to you. If there's anything in my shop which takes your fancy the piece of jewellery is on me."

"No thanks," insisted Kendal politely.

"Surely your lady friend or wife will love to receive a small gift?"

"Not today thanks. However there might be a way you can help me."

Claire used her shoulder to nudge the glass door. She waltzed in carrying a mug of coffee. She placed the steaming hot liquid on a glass shelf.

"It's for you Sir."

The man let out a low whistle. "Hello, gorgeous. My you have long slender legs."

"Don't go there," she growled. Her face instantly changed to a dark storm cloud full of rain. "If you want sugar, add and stir it yourself."

Claire rolled her eyes before marching over to a nearby mirror to review the damage to her leather pants.

"My partner, Detective Ambroso is a bit on the feisty side today," whispered Kendal, through a cupped hand.

"I heard that," hissed Claire. Peeling her image away from the mirror she rejoined Kendal, punching him in the arm.

"Detective, I feel sorry for you. I'm Jeff Delepan. I own this jewellery shop. She's my baby. I've put my heart and soul into his place. When I was robbed it felt like I'd lost a member of my family. Now I feel like the prodigal son has returned. Again I thank you." Facing Claire the man's smile broadened. "My offer stands about the jewellery. Is there something you might like Miss. Ambroso?"

"Jeff, if you could spare a moment?" interrupted Kendal. "Your time is enough for me."

"What about you Miss. Ambroso, fancy anything?"

Claire gave the jeweler a graveyard stare.

"In the way of gold, I mean."

She slowly raised her hands. "No thanks, against police policy."

"Jeff, if I could ask your expert opinion on something?"

The man raised his eyebrows to indicate his interest.

Kendal extracted his wedding ring from a pocket.

"You want it melted down and made new?"

"No, I like the ring the way it is. I need to know is it possible to attach a spike to the ring? If so will it be strong enough to hold my weight?"

Delepan had doubt written all over his face. “Not possible. Gold is far too soft to weld.”

Kendal started rubbing his chin. Glancing sideways at Claire he immediately stopped.

“What could I use to accomplish such a feat?”

“Metal. You’d have to use steel.”

“Could you do the job?”

“If I owned a welder I could easily do the job. Why the strange question?”

“I’m curious about the idea.”

“Maybe you should ask a local boilermaker,” suggested Jeff.

Kendal and Claire bid the man a good day and strolled back to the security guard. A sports store full of people caught Kendal’s attention. He jabbed Claire in the ribs, signaled the security guard to wait for a further three minutes before marching off.

Claire needed to run to keep pace. “Sugar, what’s up?”

“I’ve one more stop.”

She rolled her eyes as they power walked into the large sports store.

“Can I help you Sir?” asked a man standing behind the main counter.

He wore a grey tie over a faded pink shirt which could have housed two people. His salt and pepper hair looked long and untidy.

“How about you Miss? You look as though you need a new outfit.”

Claire stared at the tall middle-aged man.

“Fella, you need a haircut,” she replied.

“Sir, I hope you can help me,” hinted Kendal. “I’m after a certain type of sporting equipment. I’m hoping you might stock it. I’m after clips to climb a wall.”

The man’s hazel eyes sparkled. “We sell lots of mountain climbing equipment. If you’d like to follow me I’ll show you our extensive range.”

Kendal followed the man down a long narrow aisle. Claire brought up the rear eyeing off the new clothes hanging neatly on their hangers. She stopped to grab an outfit. She looked lustfully at the shiny green leather till she discovered the material was vinyl. Hastily she replaced the outfit. Glancing about the store she spied Kendal standing amongst golf equipment.

Marching over Claire grabbed a three iron, pretending to line up a fictitious green at the end of a fairway.

“Cleats, rope and everything you will need are right here,” reported the man. “Are you thinking of taking your kids’ rock climbing?”

“No,” stated Kendal, truthfully. He flashed his police badge. “Don’t look too disappointed. Maybe you will have a sale.” He pointed to women’s clothing over his right shoulder. “Do you have black leather pants size eight?”

The man nodded. “Miss, there are new leather pants hanging on the rack two shelves back.” The moment he saw Claire standing in front of the correct shelf he switched his attention back to Kendal.

“Detective I’m not sure how else I can help you?”

“What I’m after is something I can slip on my toes and fingers to climb a vertical brick wall.”

The man couldn't contain his excitement. "I've got just the thing." He ran for a small box nestled in the furthest corner of the shop. He returned holding up a pair of oval finger and toe rings. Both were wide enough to fit two toes and two fingers in each ring.

Kendal groped for the objects.

"What's the asking price?"

"You can have the lot for twenty dollars or five dollars each."

Kendal fished into his wallet and paid the man.

"I don't want to sound ungrateful for a bargain, four times five dollars is twenty dollars."

"I know," blurted the man. "I've prayed someone might buy the lot. They've been sitting in the box at the back of the store for ages."

"Can you remember exactly how long?"

"I made the cleats for a customer many years ago. I forged a spare set in case the owner ever came back for more."

Kendal's eyes brightened. He might have finally stumbled onto a solid lead. Not wanting to put undue stress on the man he reacted calmly.

"Can you describe this person?"

"I never met the buyer. The cleats were picked up by a taxi driver."

"Did you ask the driver where they were being delivered?"

"No, why should I? I'd been given nine hundred and nine dollars, cash."

"How did you know the precise measurements?"

"One morning a kid came into the store with a detailed drawing. Before I could ask, he'd gone. I knew he was a street kid. I'd seen him around a bit. They'd do anything for money."

"I can vouch for that statement. The amount you were paid for the small job seems suspicious. Did you report it to the police?"

"Why? I couldn't see anything illegal. I did a job and got paid."

Claire returned holding five sets of leather pants. Three black ones a dull red pair and one pale green.

"Back so soon, I'm surprised," snorted Kendal. "I never thought a woman could shop so fast?"

"It's because I'm a woman I can do lots of tasks at the same time."

Kendal paid the salesman for the cleats and marched out the shop, heading for the security guard.

"On your feet boys, you've won a free trip to the cop shop."

Claire giggled at her partner's sarcasm. She reached out grabbing one of the boys by the collar that seemed determined to defy the order.

"Let's go," she snarled, pushing him in the back.

A seven-minute ride in the back of a police car saw the boys inside Police Headquarters.

"Claire, take your boy to interview room one, I'll be in number two," growled Kendal.

She pushed the boy through the open door, walked in, slamming the door shut.

Kendal pushed a record button on the small tape recorder sitting squarely on the desk he sat

at.

“Sit down and start talking kid.”

“About what?”

“Not a good start.”

“Rule one coppa I’m not sayin’ nothin’.”

Kendal ignored the remark. “What’s your name?”

“Refer to rule number one.”

“Ok, I’ll call you shit for brains.”

“Rule two I’ll only answer to Wayne.”

“Start talking Wayne.”

“About what?” he mumbled.

“Why you king hit the jeweler in a hope to rob the man of his livelihood.”

“You’ve forgotten rule number one.”

“I haven’t got all day punk, talk.”

The boy sat sideways on the chair defying Kendal’s request.

“If you don’t start talking, I’m going to charge you with aggravated assault and robbery.”

“I’m not saying another word until I’ve seen a lawyer.”

The boy appeared surprised at having been charged but remained abstinent by clamping his teeth and lips together.

“I’ll go find one. When I’m gone I’ll think of a longer list.” Kendal stopped recording and walked to the door. “Don’t go away. I’ll find someone to take your mug shot. Don’t forget to smile for the camera.” He opened the door, closing it in his wake.

At the main desk, Kendal saw Claire leaning on the counter chatting up the young rookie constable who looked to be enjoying the conversation till Kendal snuck up from behind.

“Do you have his phone number yet, partner?” he questioned.

The tall wiry young constable’s face flushed red. “We were discussing all aspects of police work, Sir.”

“Good. There’s an offender in room’s one and two. Take care of both. When you’ve finished, come see me. I’d love to hear how you went?”

“What did they do?”

“Assault and robbery is a good place to start.”

“Before I forget, Captain Hughes left a message. He said an elderly man has been discovered in a park. He’s at the morgue. You might want to check it out.”

“Claire, let’s go,” urged Kendal.

“I’ll stick around to help Jeremy. He might need a hand. Besides, you interrupted an important question.”

“What might that be?”

“He was about to ask me out on a date.”

Kendal glared at the rookie cop. “Don’t bother. This one’s too feisty.”

CHAPTER TEN

KENDAL COULD hear ghostly whisperings as he walked along the cold corridor to the morgue's inner door. The thirteen overhead fluorescent lights which lit the way were a sight he'd seen many times. Behind him, the lift doors slowly slid open. Metal sliding over metal sent a shiver through his body. He hesitated only long enough to hear the doors bang shut. The distinct sound of a squeak from a wheel under the frame of a long trolley being pushed along the corridor came next. Being shadowed by a white sheet covered corpse didn't faze him.

Kendal gave a cursory glance at a side entrance before pushing against two heavy plastic doors. Stepping to the side he held open one of the frosted doors so he could watch the coroner wheel the corpse past. The coroner waited for the inner door to slide open before completing his twice-daily ritual.

"Help you?" asked the short wiry built coroner.

"I hope so. I'm detective Kendal, Melbourne homicide." He flashed his police badge.

"Nice badge. Step into my shoe box size office. I've a coffee waiting and a meat pie begging to be eaten."

Kendal followed the man into a small office. He felt sweat break out on his back the moment he entered. He threw his coat off, flinging it over a chair.

"Could I steal a moment of your time?"

The coroner raised his hand, grabbed the pie and coffee from off the table and sat behind the computer.

Kendal waited for the man to stop chewing.

"Okay. Now I've finished lunch. I'm all yours."

"I take it you love to work in a hot office."

"I know you didn't come down to the palace of the dead to ask me why I work in a heated room. If you must know the thermostat is stuck on thirty-seven degrees. Please, come to the crux of your visit, I'm busy."

"I need the name of an elderly man who was delivered her recently."

The coroner again raised his hand to signal a halt to the conversation. After tapping a sequence of keys on the computer keyboard he sat back waiting for the monitor to light up.

"Let me see. Three bodies came in today, a middle-aged woman and an old couple." He screwed up his nose after reading the words of the postmortem. He looked up frowning. "What is it you want to know?"

"How did the elderly man die?"

"Suicide," the man replied.

"I need to know details."

“Detective, I’m playing. It helps me to pass the time.”

Kendal sent the man a cold heartless stare.

“You, cops are all the same. You take life too seriously. The old man died of a heart attack. He was found in a park. He’d gone for a walk and died of natural causes. There’s no mystery.”

“Are you sure?”

“Detective, I’m a coroner, I resent your questions. I observe everything. Nothing escapes my keen eyesight.”

“Is there anything else worth putting in my report?”

“Zippo,” chirped the man.

“Thanks for your help.”

On the way out Kendal saw an elderly woman walking slowly towards the coroner’s office. Her eyes were red-rimmed. Her hair looked unkempt. She shuffled along at a snail’s pace as if the world was pressing down on her hunched shoulders.

Hesitating just long enough for the woman to walk past him, Kendal turned and started to follow her back to the office. For a brief moment, he stared gob-smacked at the head and torso of a dead man lying on the slab in one corner of the morgue. He looked grey and appeared to be transparent. The moment Kendal blinked the image vanished. He dismissed the idea of ghosts and watched the woman struggle to open the heavy plastic doors. Kendal readied himself to sprint to her rescue if she suddenly collapsed.

“Excuse me,” the old woman said in a croaky sounding voice.

The coroner stepped from his office, his nose buried inside a clipboard, oblivious to her presence. The man’s feet almost left the floor when he finally heard the woman’s voice the second time she spoke.

“May I help you?” he blurted.

The coroner quickly hid his awkwardness at not realizing the woman was actually in the building by open palming his hand at the shoe box size office.

“Yes I’m sure you can,” the woman replied. “I’m hoping my husband is here. I mean, not here.”

“Please enter my office. I’ll see what I can do.”

Kendal followed the woman into the office. He grabbed hold of a chair and rushed up behind the woman.

“Madam, here’s a seat. You might be more comfortable sitting.”

The old woman turned her wrinkled face to look Kendal in the eyes. “Thank you.”

“I’m Ted,” announced the coroner introducing himself.

“I am Mrs. Joan Stanfield,” said the old woman sitting at the desk. “My husband’s name is Max.”

“I’ll take a look at my computer,” said Ted.

Kendal marched three steps to the corner of the room. He returned pushing another swivel chair. He sat on the edge of the seat next to the woman.

“I’m Detective Alan Kendal. I’m keen to help you locate your missing husband. You said his

name is Max?”

“Yes. Is there something wrong?”

“The computer can’t match the name,” whispered the coroner interrupting. He looked down his nose at the woman through half oval shaped glasses. “Maybe he’s not here.”

“Do you have a picture of your husband?” asked Kendal.

“Indeed, yes, the photo goes everywhere I do.” Joan rummaged through her bag, opened a zip, extracting a small square photo. For a long moment, she stared lovingly at the creased picture she held in her trembling hand. “Max has been missing for two days.”

Kendal tilted his head for a clearer look. His eyes bulged from their sockets.

“May I have a closer look at the photo?”

The woman handed over the picture. She saw Kendal’s eyes protrude further.

Ted snatched the photo so he could take a look. His smile suddenly fell.

“Are you sure this is your husband?” he asked.

“Of course, I’m sure. I might be old, however, I’m not senile. Here, have a gander at this other photo. You can plainly see me in my wedding dress and Max in his top hat and tails. We’ve been married for thirty-five years last August.”

“I have some sad and some disturbing news,” whispered Kendal, gently.

“Oh dear, is Max okay?”

“If I may cut in?” interrupted Ted. “I think I should be the one to relay the news.”

“Please, someone inform me. If you both know the where-a-bouts of my Max you have to tell me.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news,” moaned Ted. “Max is in our fridge. If you’d step this way to help make a formal ID I’d be more than grateful.”

The woman, led by Kendal, shuffled slowly towards a row of small fridge doors. Ted opened the center door and slid a trolley out. He glanced at the woman before graciously folding back the white sheet covering the corpse’s head.

Joan stared at the dead man for a few seconds before collapsing on the floor. Kendal fanned her face using a wet towel supplied by the coroner. Ted recovered the corpse’s head and pushed the corpse back into the fridge.

The woman slowly gained some decorum. Kendal helped her to a standing position. Back in the office, the woman sat trembling on a chair switching a teary gaze between Kendal and the coroner.

“I’d like to go home,” she whimpered.

“If you have a moment, could I ask you some questions?” asked Kendal in a soft tone.

The woman slowly nodded.

“Are you sure you identified the dead person to be your husband?”

“Max,” scolded Joan. “His name is Max.”

“Max,” repeated Kendal. “This might sound terrible and inappropriate to say at this time, however, I don’t think there’s any other way I can put it.”

The woman started to sob. “I think I need to know what’s on your mind.”

“I have a photo in my possession showing Max and a different woman dressed in a white silk wedding gown.”

“I don’t believe you. Max could never cheat on me. He’d been a great husband and a great provider for me and our four children.”

Kendal drove his hand into his coat pocket, fishing for the photo he obtained from the burgled house. He placed it on the desk, face up.

The old woman studied the picture through tears.

“I have a statement from the meals on wheels lady. She said he called himself Mr. Ernest Brown. He was married to the woman in the picture. Her name’s Daisy.”

The woman’s tears turned into a flood that cascaded over her cheeks and onto the photo.

Kendal extracted the brass key from his pocket, placing it on top of the picture.

“Does this key hold any significance you’re aware of?”

Joan gave the key a cursory glance. Using her hands she covered her eyes. “No,” she mumbled.

“I understand how much grief you’re in right now. I promise I’ll discover the answers to help you clear this mess up. I need you to be certain the key means nothing?”

Joan raised her head, staring an uncomprehendingly look at Kendal. It was as if he’d asked her to do something she might be incapable of doing. She picked the key up with a trembling hand, slowly raising it to eye level.

“I don’t remember where I placed my glasses, but I’m positive this key means nothing to me. Why do you think it belongs to my Max?”

“I assumed it did. I found it in a pedal-bin under men’s socks in the house where I found the photo.”

“What’s the name you called the woman?” asked Joan. “The one you said is standing next to my husband in the photo?”

“Daisy,” he replied. “Do you know someone going by that name?”

Joan shook her head and placed the key back on the table.

“Please detective Kendal, find out the truth for me?”

He nodded, pocketing the photo and the key. “Would you like me to give you a lift home?”

“Yes thank you, how thoughtful.”

Kendal drove Joan home. She invited him in for afternoon tea.

“I’d love a coffee. Do you mind if I take a look around?”

“If you think it might help, you go right ahead detective. I’ll call when your coffee is ready.”

Kendal glanced about the ground floor of the two-storey house. Before sprinting upstairs he checked to see where Joan was. The layout of the house looked identical to the other house where Max or Ernest Brown lived. Same colour carpet and walls, same tiles on the floor, even the same brick pattern on the outside. Kendal stood in the doorway of the main bedroom studying the interior of the room. Spying a pedal rubbish bin underneath the window he walked over. He lifted its lid by pressing on the pedal. At the bottom of a plastic bin liner, he saw men’s black socks.

“Instant replay?” he mumbled. “I wonder?”

“Detective Kendal if you’re upstairs, the coffee is ready,” called Joan from the bottom of the stairs.

“I’ll be right there,” he yelled back.

Kendal moved the two pairs of neatly folded black socks apart and found a brass key.

“Now that’s too weird.”

Snatching up the key, he felt for and grabbed the first brass key from his pocket to study it.

“Detective, are you on your way? The coffee will be getting cold.”

Walking towards the stairs Kendal mashed the keys together. Their wrinkled pattern appeared to be a perfect match. He reached the stairs, pocketing both keys.

“I’m here.”

Joan started to pour the percolated coffee a few moments before Kendal walked back into the room.

“Detective, did you find anything which might help you solve the case of my missing Max?”

“Not much. Can you tell me something about Ernest, I mean Max?”

“What would you like to know?”

“From the outside, you look to be at ease over the death of your husband.”

The woman looked directly into Kendal’s eyes.

“I’m not entirely convinced he’s dead.”

“I don’t want to upset you,” whispered Kendal. “You did view the deceased man at the morgue.”

“I have to admit he does look like my husband.”

“But you’re not sure?”

“You might call me an old fool, however until you discover the truth, I’ll tell myself he’s only missing.”

“I don’t believe you’re an old fool.”

“Detective, please do everything you can to find my husband. For all you know he might have fallen over and hit his head. He could be lying in a hospital bed right now trying to remember who he is.”

“I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you. It’s all I can ask for.”

Kendal drank half a cup of coffee before placing the cup back on the saucer. He looked directly at Joan before starting his questions.

“Did Max have any hobbies? Did he enjoy going to the movies? Did he like fishing, bet on horses, the dogs, anything that might help me find him?”

“He loved to go to the horse races. He owned a horse you know.”

“Did the horse ever win?”

“Occasionally,” she replied. “He was always off interstate or overseas watching over the darn thing.” Joan paused as if reliving the moment. “Come to think of it, he owned more than one.”

“Interesting,” said Kendal. “Do you know each of the horse’s names and how many he owned?”

“Oh no, I don’t like horses. They’re smelly, wild things. They have a mind of their own. Every time Max wanted me to go to the racetrack I told him he’d have to go alone.”

“So you never went to a horse race?”

“No. I tried many a time to convince Max to forget the horses. He never listened. He’d just go out and buy another.”

“Joan I hate to leave, but I must press on. I have two cases to solve simultaneously.”

“Please, let me know of any new developments.”

“I’ll be in touch. Will you be okay?”

“My children are on their way. One thing I know for certain, I’ll see my Max real soon.”

Kendal thanked her for the coffee before walking towards the door. He paused for a few moments listening to the quiet conversation the dear old woman started having with herself as she tried to convince her mind Max is still alive.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THE RACECOURSE looked to be a hive of activity. The seventh race was about to get underway. Kendal marched past the entrance window flashing his police badge.

“Go right in,” announced the elderly man collecting money. “You do realize the day’s almost over?”

Kendal nodded and walked towards the main pavilion. He mingled amongst the winners and the losers. No one took any notice of him walking around observing the gamblers. Their quirky habits and nervous twitches amused him. Finally, he came to the strapping yard. Leaning against the railing he watched a young girl he thought couldn’t be any older than fifteen glance his way as she led a grey mare thirteen hands high around in circles.

“Nice horse,” called Kendal when the girl walked past him for the fifth time.

The girl’s reply came back colder than an ice stare.

“What’s the horse’s name?”

“Not my place to say,” answered the girl.

“So you can talk.”

The girl came around again, stopping at the railing.

“Up yours, fella,” she jeered.

Kendal watched her more closely, walking the horse out the gate towards the track.

“Excuse me, Sir.”

Kendal turned his head to face a big man. He wore a concrete expression.

“Track security. Mind stepping away from the railing?”

“Certainly,” replied Kendal.

“Are you a member of the track?”

“No.”

“Show me some ID.”

Kendal reached into his back pocket, pulling out his police badge.

“Detective Kendal Melbourne homicide,” said the guard breaking into a grin. “Good fake. Do you understand it’s illegal to carry an imitation police badge?”

“It’s not a fake.”

The guard looked to be sizing up the man standing before him. “I’ll believe you for now. Are you here at the races for a bet, or to buy into a syndicate?”

“Neither.”

“I think you’d better explain your presence.”

“I’m here on official police business.”

“Which is?”

“I have in my possession two identical keys. I’m led to believe the man who owned at least one of them loved horses. How long have you been a guard at this race track?”

“I’ve been here every day for the past seventeen years.”

Kendal produced the photo Joan surrendered. “Do you know this man?”

“Max Stanfield,” reported the guard.

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I haven’t seen him for a few days; is the old bugger okay?”

“He’s dead.”

“So he finally croaked it?” The guard snorted. “I thought the old bugger would never die.”

“You sound like a man who doesn’t care for the news?”

“It’s not that I don’t care. It’s not of my concern.”

“Why?”

“Why should it be?”

“I take it you’ve known the bloke for a number of years; I thought you’d be, to say the least, slightly tilting towards the grieving side,” mentioned Kendal.

“Spare me the sentimental crap. If it makes you happy, I’m sorry to hear the news the bastard croaked it.”

“I get the idea you and Max Stanfield didn’t get along?”

“We sort of did. We didn’t see eye to eye on a lot of things, ok.”

“Like what?”

“The way he ran his affairs,” snarled the guard.

“I don’t follow what you mean.”

“The man was a professional gambler.”

“It’s not a crime,” stated Kendal.

“He never worked a day in his life. From time to time he’d ring his wife to explain he’d been working overtime.”

“Hearsay is gossip,” hinted Kendal.

“He’d ring from the member’s phone box.”

“Why didn’t he use his mobile phone?”

“I’m not a genius, but I know when he was lying. I caught him several times telling two women the same thing. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“No.”

“Personally, I think he might have been deeply involved with two women. I reckon he was married to one and dated a sheila on the side.”

Kendal rubbed his chin, absorbing the man’s words.

“The young girl you were talking to was walking one of Stanfield’s horses.”

“How many did Stanfield own?”

The guard pulled at his small salt and pepper goatee. “At a guess, he must own about fifteen horses. He’d buy and sell them too quick to keep up.”

“The girl strapper, does she work for Max Stanfield?”

The guard laughed. “She’s his daughter.”

“Did she see him often?”

“I suppose. She lives here at the stables. Loves the horses she does.”

“I assume Max Stanfield owned a room or a locker?” asked Kendal.

“He has his own locker in the member’s gym. I can take you there.”

Kendal followed the guard through a series of buildings to the exact locker. It was tucked in the corner adjacent to the member’s grandstand. He examined the name on the locker and faced the security guard.

“If you’d kindly step back for a moment to give me some elbow room?”

The guard grumbled before stepping to the side.

“Thank you.”

Kendal reached into his pocket, extracting one of the keys. The lock sprung open easily. He removed the padlock and opened the door.

“Do you have a warrant?” asked the guard.

“No. I’ve permission from his wife. This is police business, you’re dismissed.”

The guard grunted before walking off.

Kendal grinned at the guard’s back. He tried the second key in the lock with the same result.

There wasn’t much on the locker’s bottom shelf. A couple of old race tickets a jockey’s helmet and another key. On the top shelf, he found a small metal box, thirty by thirty centimeters by five centimeters high. A horse’s head was etched into the metal lid. Kendal grabbed it and the key then closed the locker. He had a hunch the answer Mrs. Stanfield sought might be in the box.

The same security guard who showed Kendal the locker met him on the way out.

“Found what you were looking for, Detective?”

“Yes, I believe I have.”

“I don’t suppose you want to share what you found?”

“No. Whatever is in this box is police evidence.”

“I thought so. Come this way. It’s a short cut to the front gate.”

Kendal walked on the inside of the man, closest to the track. He caught the tail end of race eight. He stopped to study the lead horse as the group flashed past him towards the finish line.

"You like horse racing?" asked the security guard.

"No. I couldn't pick a winner even if there were only two horses in the race. Tell me, the horse in front of the pack, is it the same one the girl strapper was leading around the enclosure ten minutes ago?"

"Yes, it is. Before you comment the girl has a foul mouth. She's been severely reprimanded."

Kendal gave a quick glance at the guard, before returning his attention back to the horse race.

"I know it's none of my business, what do you mean, the girl has been reprimanded?"

"You're right, it doesn't concern you."

Kendal faced the guard. "I don't want to ask again."

"I gave the girl a stern talking to."

Max Stanfield's horse won the race by a short head. The girl strapper ran over to the winning circle to lead the horse back to its stall.

"Here," said the guard, thrusting a photo forward.

The photo floated to the ground. Kendal placed the metal box down on top of the fence railing and squatted to retrieve the photo. A twelve-year-old boy marched over. Swiping the box from the fence post he sprinted away.

"Hey, come here you little brat," yelled the guard.

Kendal glared wildly at the boy then the guard. "You go to your right, I'll go straight."

"I'll go left," cut in the girl strapper. "I'll jump on the back of 'His Majesty' and cut the kid off. The horse will easily catch him."

"Thanks for the help. The box is important."

Kendal watched her ride off to intercept the kid. The girl was right. She caught up in seconds. Kendal slowed to a walk. Standing in disbelief he watched the boy being pulled up onto the horse's back. Together they rode off towards a rear gate before disappearing.

A female guard burst through the dispersing crowd and came sprinting up.

"I saw the whole thing from over there," she puffed, pointing at the main gate.

"Shit," cursed Kendal, studying the area. "This whole scene was a setup, a perfectly timed setup."

CHAPTER TWELVE

KENDAL GRUNTED while pacing the carpet of his study. He glared at the woman sitting in his chair then he stared at Marg.

"One of you might as well say something."

“You lost it. You lost the very lead we might need.” Claire was staring directly at him. Her eyes were watching his every move.

“You don’t have to rub it in.”

“I will. The man who prides himself on being correct at all times and does everything by the book, had a metal box stolen right from under his nose?”

Kendal’s eyes narrowed. He burst into uncontrollable laughter a mere second before the two ladies.

“I’m impressed,” said Claire calmly.

“I knew you were about to laugh,” chuckled Kendal.

“Liar, you did not.”

“Your eyes sparkled like a young teenage girl when she’s about to have her first kiss behind a tree in the schoolyard.”

The statement forced the two ladies to burst into laughter again.

“This case doesn’t have many leads,” grumbled Kendal, red-faced. “The metal box might have contained an important piece of evidence.”

“And you lost it,” giggled Claire. “Please, tell me the story again.”

Kendal looked sullen. He knew he was about to be humiliated again. Instead of a cover up, he decided to let Claire have another laugh at his expense. Besides, she needed to laugh after the death of her partner and husband. Yes, he thought, she needed to laugh. It had been a long time.

“I held a metal box in my hands. I put it down for a second to pick up a photo which fell to the ground. The box was stolen from under my nose.”

“I love it,” laughed Claire holding her side. “I have to stop, this stitch is killing me. You crack me up. And you call yourself a good cop?”

“Yes.”

Claire walked across the floor to slap her partner on the shoulder.

“Partner, you’ve given me no choice, I have to say this. You aren’t perfect. You might want people to believe it, please, don’t be too offended when I say you’re not.”

“Enough now,” hinted Kendal.

“Are you serious about a box being stolen from right under your nose in broad daylight?” questioned Marg.

“Yes, I am.” Kendal sat in a chair, massaging his temples.

“I’ll never let you forget this moment,” blurted Claire. She let another round of giggles flow over her lips.

After dinner, Kendal paced the floor of his study again. The worn track in the carpet showed the many hours of trudging the same strip of carpet. He paused at the wall furthest from the door, turned and started his return journey.

“In this case, things don’t add up,” he mumbled. “We know a bloke going by the name of Mr. Upp helped Patrick to escape the mental institution. There are kids breaking into houses. I’ve one dead old man and the deceased seems to have two ladies in his life.”

Kendal stopped and mumbled the clues for the second time. He only just recommenced his

pacing when he heard footsteps approach the front door. He froze in mid-step to listen.

The doorbell rang.

Checking his watch, Kendal's eyes narrowed.

"11:43pm," he whispered.

Quietly he walked to the front door. He hesitated long enough for the doorbell to be rung again. Reaching out Kendal twisted the doorknob, pulling hard on the door.

"You scared the crap out of me," moaned the man, clutching his chest. "When I had finished counting to ten I planned to leave."

"You're the security guard from the racecourse."

"Yes," mumbled the man, looking at his feet.

"Do you know how late it is?"

"Yes Detective, I do."

"State your business."

"May I come in?"

Kendal moved to the side, allowing the man to step across the threshold.

"This belongs to you. I didn't give my kids consent to steal it."

Kendal grabbed the metal box with the horse's head engraved on the lid from the man's hand. His eyes sparkled at having it returned, before sending the man an angry stare.

"You said your kids stole the box?" he growled.

"Can I confess something, off the record?"

"I can't make any promises."

"I know if you arrest me you're only doing your job, but please, consider my plea. I've quit my job. If my wife finds out, I'll lose her."

"I'll see what the wind brings. Start by explaining the fiasco at the racecourse."

"The young female stable hand who I said is Max Stanfield's daughter is actually mine. The kids and I have been stealing from punters for years. It's only small time stuff. When my son saw the metal box on the wooden post he took it upon himself to steal it. He thought it might be full of money. I gave him a thick ear and picked the lock. Inside were two photos, two keys and a final will."

"Was there any money?"

"None," reported the guard.

Kendal looked doubtful.

"I swear there was no money."

"If you leave now I'll forget you came."

"Thank you."

In seconds the guard had been swallowed by the charcoal coloured night sky.

Kendal heard a car's engine roar to life. He spotted taillights moving down the court and turn into the next street. He closed the front door and was met by Claire and Marg. Before walking back into his study Kendal faked a smile.

"Sugar, who came to the front door?"

“No one,” he lied. “Whoever rang the doorbell dropped the stolen metal box on the doorstep. By the time I opened the door he’d gone. Partner, go to bed, I’ll fish through the contents. We can talk about the case in the morning.”

Claire grunted. Turning her back on Kendal she dragged her weary body upstairs. Marg followed close behind.

Kendal sat deep in his black recliner, staring at the locked box, lost in the case. Slowly he shook his head.

“Something’s indeed wrong,” he heard himself whisper. Again he went through the clues. An elderly man found dead in a park apparently dying of natural causes, the woman and the whisperings at the morgue, not to mention the visitation of the ghost. Adding to the information he discovered Max Stanfield happened to be leading a double life.

Kendal started to pace the floor again. He felt a sudden chill. The wind picked up rattling the window. The light filtering through the gap in the drapes suddenly vanished. The dog next door howled. Footsteps approached the front door.

Kendal darted to the lounge-room window. He pushed his back against the wall. Lifting his hand he slightly parted the heavy curtain. The moon re-appeared at the right time lighting the front door and the welcome mat. All seemed quiet. His eyes swept the front yard. He fixed his stare on the front tap, watching the water drip rhythmically from the faucet. He made a mental note of the fact he’d have to replace the washer to stop the drips.

Movement behind a small bush across the road caused him to frown. Without blinking, he settled his gaze on the area.

The grandfather clock in the hall ticked tirelessly. It geared up to strike. Kendal exhaled. His breath formed smoke. The chill had returned. Upstairs a floorboard creaked. Kendal reached inside his coat. His fingers slid over the .38 Smith and Wesson nestled snug in his shoulder holster. His index finger embraced the revolver’s trigger. He extracted the gun.

Satisfied the outside world was clear of an intruder he turned from the window. Again he listened. The refrigerator hummed as the motor switched itself on. The freezer in the laundry started up. The noise echoed throughout the small room. The sound of the grandfather clock’s ticking was drowned as the hammer struck. Kendal stood in the dark counting the strikes.

‘Midnight.’

Kendal exhaled. Again he watched his warm breath hover in the chilled air.

“Excuse me, Sir,” whispered a quiet voice from the doorway of his study.

Kendal swiveled his body, leveling his gun at the figure standing in the open doorway.

“Excuse me. May I have a word? You won’t need a gun. I’m friendly.”

“I’ve seen you before. What’s your name? What do you want?”

“I have a confession to make.”

“Place your hands on your head.”

The study started to brighten. The darkness slowly changed from black to a dawn grey. The light around the figure brightened. The man stepped through the doorway. Placing his hands on his head, he stood at ninety degrees to the gun.

"I'm Max. If I could I'd like to shake your hand."

Kendal slid his gun back into his shoulder holster.

"Thank you," said the figure. He lowered his hands to arms length.

"You look like the corpse at the morgue."

"He and I are one of the same."

"If you and he are the same person, that makes you a ghost; I don't believe in ghosts."

"I am a ghost. I have some explaining to do. Firstly, I do apologize for my transparent appearance."

Kendal raised an eyebrow.

"Please, don't be afraid."

"I'm not. I've an open mind about everything. You were saying?"

"Before I'm allowed to ascend to heaven I have to confess my double life."

"You have created an interesting mystery. If you're who you say you are; I have a woman asking me questions about another woman in a photo."

"It's not really a mystery," stated Max. "I couldn't decide which girl to marry. I didn't want to stop loving either. Love isn't like turning off the tap. I was in a bind. I remember not being able to sleep for a week over the decision I needed to make."

"Go on," urged Kendal.

Max paused for a moment. The ticking of the grandfather clock returned, echoing throughout the room.

"I knew I needed to make my mind up. I did the only thing I felt brave enough to do."

"Which was?"

"I married both girls. I fathered eight children, four rug rats to each of my two wives. Four sets of pigeon pairs. I assume you know what a pigeon pair is?"

"A boy and a girl is one set."

"I'm happy someone knows of the saying. Both my wives couldn't understand the words."

"Where did you get the money to feed and house two families?"

Max floated slowly across the room towards Kendal.

"For a cop, you own a nice house. You must earn a good wage yourself."

"I do okay," he whispered. "I couldn't support two families."

"I never did have a real job," confessed Max.

"If you never worked how on earth could you afford to buy a race horse or would I be correct in saying, several?"

Max floated to the center of the room, staring Kendal in the eyes. "I was a professional punter. I made my money at the race track."

"You said you never worked."

Max rushed up to and passed through Kendal and back again. Kendal swiveled around in circles trying to keep track of the transparent torso.

"Quit moving. You said you were here to confess, not to play."

Max stopped at the study doorway. "You're right. Time is short. I feel a slight pulling. It's

growing stronger by the second.”

“Do you want to tell me everything?”

Max stared at the carpet. “Nice floor covering.”

“Quit stalling.”

“I’d been a professional punter. I made millions. Though now it all seems in-material.”

“Do you have any surplus you want to distribute to your wives?”

“Yes, I do. Firstly I want to tell my whole story. Under the circumstances, I should stick to the short version.”

Kendal shook his head, flashing a grin.

Max copied the expression. “For a coppa you’re okay.”

“Coming from a ghost I’m not sure if it’s meant to be a compliment or not?”

“It is. Now where was I? It’s getting harder to remember. I think I should hurry.”

“It’s your future. If you don’t tell your story you’ll have to live with the secret for eternity.”

“You make a good point. I earned my fortune at the racetrack. Buying and selling racehorses was a hobby.”

When Kendal tried to interrupt Max waved a warning finger at him.

“I placed a bet on every race. At the height of my career, I owned seventy-three horses. I paid for two of my horses to be in each race. I lived for the track. I loved the smell of horse sweat and saddle leather. The crisp morning air and the way money felt as it came to rest in the palm of my hands, was to die for. Excuse the punt.”

Kendal raised an eyebrow, scrunching his nose.

“I had everything I wanted. Money, fame, two wives, two houses, eight kids, I loved my life.” Max looked up to the heavens, his smile fading. “I woke one morning, realizing I’d grown old.” He gave a haunted stare as if his life was put on hold over the thought.

Again Max frowned when Kendal tried to interrupt. Conceding defeat he listened, absorbing every word Max spoke. Kendal won’t ever forget this night in a hurry. He pinched himself to make certain he was awake.

“I kept the secret of my two families like I kept the secret of my many horses. My families never knew the exact details. I told them I was an office worker, a real estate junkie who bought and sold houses.” He let out a slight chuckle. “They never caught me out. Only once did the ladies come close to discovering each other. I told them I needed to go to Japan for a real estate conference. Be gone a week. I was going over to win the Japanese cup. My horses came first, second and third. I won a bundle of money, three million dollars to be exact. I sold the winner’s cup and came home wearing a broad grin. Of course, I needed to go shopping for expensive perfume and women’s stuff. I was an expert at keeping my ladies happy.”

Kendal nodded his approval. “I’m impressed. I can’t even say something different when I come home each night.”

“I’ll give you a few pointers before I leave. Do you want to record my confession? You haven’t a tape recorder.”

“I’ve an identic memory. What you say I’ll remember, word for word.”

“A smart cop, I’m impressed.”

“I thought you said time is short.”

“Indeed it is.” Max paused before continuing. “Both my wives came to the airport to welcome me home from Japan. They were standing next to each other waiting for me to appear. They were strangers in a sea of faces. Fortunately, I came through the wrong doorway and saw them in the nick of time. I ducked back the way I came and rang Joan on her mobile phone. I told her I sensed something bad might happen and switched my flight at the last minute. I fast-talked my way out of an argument. She sounded happy when I said I’d be home the next day. Even though my darling Joan looked disappointed, she left.”

“How did you choose which lady you were going to send home?”

“Good question.”

Kendal stood at ease, waiting for the response. He felt intrigued at the man’s ingenuity.

Max chuckled. “I was scientific about the whole thing. I borrowed a coin from a security guard, tossing it into the air. I nominated if heads landed face up Joan will be going home. You know the answer.”

Kendal shook his head in disbelief.

“I have to hurry the pulling is becoming stronger,” reported Max. “In the metal box, the security guard gave you are two identical letters, one for each of my wives. I wrote my story a few years ago in case I died. The letters explain everything. There’s also a photo of both my weddings. Both wives looked great in their wedding dress. As bride and groom, we looked like we belonged together. To make sure my two families never found out about each other I paid cash for everything. It happened to be the perfect plan. In the box, there should be a slip of paper which has a message. ‘John, three, three.’ By the way, the piece of paper has been folded six times.”

“Why that number?”

“For the record, you can’t fold a piece of paper seven times? Before you say a word, I know, it’s a worthless bit of information.”

“All info is valuable.”

“You think?”

“Yes. Quit stalling. What does the message mean?”

“Kendal, read your wife a poem once a week. The ladies love that sort of thing. At least mine did. Do you know how hard it was to find two new poems every week? After a few months, I cheated by repeating the same poem to each of my lovely ladies.” Max sighed. “I’m going to miss their company. They’re both great gals. Never could choose which one was the best.”

“Tell me the meaning of the message on the paper.”

Max started to float towards the ceiling. “Make sure the poem rhymes. Sorry, I can’t stay. I live in hope the scales of life will tilt in my favour.” He looked down. “Bye Mr. Cop man.”

“Max, Max, come back here,” yelled Kendal.

Long soft arms gripped his waist. Kendal jumped and spun around.

“Darling, who were you talking to?”

“Talking to?”

“I heard voices,” said Margaret.

The study room light came on. Claire marched into the room. “What’s the reason for the midnight romp?”

“I was talking to a ghost.”

Claire burst into uncontrollable laughter. Margaret echoed her chuckles. The grandfather clock chimed midnight plus thirty minutes. The chime seemed to join in the laughing.

“I’m too, skeptical,” grinned Kendal. “If everything is true there’s supposed to be a note in the box the security guard dropped off earlier. It’s been folded six times.”

“Why that number?” asked Marg and Claire concurrently.

“Long story, I’ll explain later.”

“How much later?” quizzed Claire.

“When the sun’s high in the sky,” said Kendal.

The trio quieted, allowing silence to invade the room.

Kendal walked over to the coffee table. Inserting one of the keys into the small padlock, he twisted it. The lock clicked. He lifted the lid, viewing the contents of the box. Inside was exactly how Max described. Kendal picked up the note and carefully unfolded the paper six times.

“John 33,” said Claire looking over his shoulder. “What does it mean?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Didn’t the ghost of Max tell you?” asked Margaret.

“He said he didn’t have time.”

Claire chuckled. “I’ve never heard of a ghost not having enough time.”

“Another long story,” grumbled Kendal.

“Things will be clearer in the light of day,” stated Margaret. “I’m off to bed.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CLAIRE GLANCED at Kendal sitting next to him in his car at the red light. The intersection of Flinders and Elizabeth Street seemed unusually quiet.

“Sugar, you look deep in thought, what gives?”

“I’ve an idea. Let’s go visit a priest.”

Yanking on the steering wheel he drove a short distance and pulled into the car park of a church.

Claire appeared to be still shaking her head when she followed her partner into the large one-hundred-year-old building. Their hurried footsteps echoed off the walls of the marble floor. The deep silver dish half full of water sat firmly on a stand next to the inner doors. A middle-aged woman, engrossed in tying pink ribbons into bows at the ends of all the pews looked up as they

made their way to the altar.

“Alan, darling, I know you’ve gone through a lot of trouble into setting this amazing building up, however, there’s a sticking point you’ve forgotten about.”

Kendal flashed Claire a frown.

“There are two good reasons why we can’t marry,” continued Claire. “One; you have to ask me, although I’d say yes at the slightest hint of the question. The second reason is; you’re married.”

An elderly woman lighting candles near the large pipe organ stopped to stare at the two arrivals.

“Excuse me,” called Kendal, walking towards her. “Have you seen the priest?”

“This is a time of prayer young man. One has to be quiet,” explained the elderly lady. “Your hurried footsteps echo in the great chapel. I suggest you walk slowly next time.”

“My apologies; Madam, I must speak to the priest.”

The woman clicked her tongue before nodding at the confessionals. Kendal scooted over. Claire stood in front of the altar giggling.

“Excuse me, Miss,” whispered the woman. “I can’t see anything funny about this intrusion. We are busy preparing everything for the wedding tonight between a lovely young couple. They have been a member of this congregation for nearly five years. I don’t like being interrupted by a giggling woman who should know better.”

“You don’t understand. My partner is about to walk into a confessional for the first time in his life.”

The elderly woman cupped her hand over her wrinkled mouth. “Oh dear, he might be in there for a long time.”

Waiting for an old man to abscond the confessional, Kendal commenced tapping his polished black shoes on the white tiles. After the man left the church Kendal entered. He quickly sat facing the tiny louvered window.

“Speak your confession,” whispered the priest.

“I’m not here to confess anything, Sir.”

“Why are you here?”

Kendal flashed his police badge. “I need information.”

“I see,” said the priest. “Come, I’ll see you in my ready room.”

Opening the confessional’s narrow door, Kendal beckoned Claire to follow. The priest led the trio into a small brick room behind the altar on the left-hand side of the church.

“I’m Detective Kendal Melbourne homicide,” he announced closing the door. The woman is my partner Detective Claire Ambroso.”

Standing in the middle of the room the priest portrayed a worried expression.

“Don’t be concerned we’re not here to arrest anyone,” mentioned Claire.

“That’s a relief. Confessing secrets someone has told me in confidence is taboo. I could be excommunicated if I cross the line.”

“I’m sure you’ll be fine. I need to know what John 33 might mean?” quizzed Kendal.

"I don't know a John who is 33 years-old."

"Could it be a verse in the bible?"

"You need to come to church more often, Detective Kendal."

Claire shook her head, smiling.

"I don't have a bible in my coat pocket to look up the scripture. I'm hoping you might help me shed some light on what it actually is?" urged Kendal.

"John 3 verse 3 states; all who call upon the name of the Lord will be saved."

"It helps, but not in the way I want."

"I'm sorry if I was unable to assist further," said the priest. "Maybe if you knew a little more about the problem I might be able to help more."

"Thanks for surrendering a few minutes of your valuable time."

"I'll pray your question will be solved soon, Detective."

Kendal and Claire shook the priest's hand before leaving the church.

"So much for my theory," he grumbled.

"Sugar, what are you on about?"

"I thought John 33 might be a code or something which came straight out of the bible?"

"Safety deposit box?" hinted Claire.

"Maybe," said Kendal, rubbing his chin. He looked sideways at Claire's raised eyebrow and immediately folded his arms across his chest.

A man wearing a blue bib and brace overalls walked slowly past holding his mobile phone against his ear. Kendal chuckled at his conversation.

"J.R.T. 69. Race 7 Randwick fifty bucks on the nose."

Both detectives looked at each other. Kendal's eyes bulged. He sprinted after the man, grabbing him by the arm.

"Hey you piece of shit," screamed the man. He clenched his fist and swung around ready to let fly.

Kendal flashed his police badge, quickly subduing the man.

"What do you want coppa?"

"Could you repeat what you just said into your mobile phone?"

"Why?"

"I need to know exactly what you said."

"What's it to you?"

"I'm asking you for an explanation to the words you spoke."

"Again I ask why?"

"Police business," snarled Kendal.

"You're not tracking me so you can tell my wife?"

"No. It's not that complicated. What you do in your day to day affairs doesn't concern me."

"If you must know I was puttin' me bet on. You better not tell me wife, she thinks I cancelled my TAB account. She made me promise to cancel it after she threatened to kick me out of my home. I work hard so why shouldn't I have some pleasure in life?" The man spat on the sidewalk.

“I won’t be kicked out of my home by anyone.”

“Sir, your secret is safe.”

Kendal fished for his mobile phone, watching the man walk off.

“What are you doing?” Claire asked.

He was about to explain when a female’s voice came through the tiny speaker.

“Police department, may I help you?”

“Dispatch, Detective Kendal, put me through to the TAB head-office.”

“One moment please.”

“TAB head-office,” said a confident male voice.

“I want to find out the balance on my TAB account?”

“Password and number?” said the voice, his tone dropping a decibel.

“John 33.”

For a few agonizing moments, silence marred the connection. Finally, the man’s voice returned loud and clear.

“Your balance is seven million, seven hundred, fifty-three dollars and seven cents, Max. Care to make a bet?”

“No thanks. Maybe tomorrow after I’ve studied the race page?” Kendal closed his mobile phone, dropping it back into his pocket. “Interesting conversation,” he gloated. “It’s time to make phone calls to a couple of nice ladies.”

Kendal opened the door to interview room one and walked in. Claire followed, shutting the door in her wake.

Kendal stood in front of the group of men and women, glancing at each person in turn. They, in turn, cemented their stares on the man wearing the long black coat.

“Before I begin to explain the reason why I’ve summoned you all here today, I’d like to say a special thank you directly to Mrs. Joan Stanfield and Mrs. Wendy Brown. It must have been a difficult job for arranging this group to meet here on such short notice. Today is an important moment in all your lives. I have uncovered some interesting news you need to hear.”

“Speed it up, I have places to go,” snorted a big man standing four rows from the front. A dark well-groomed beard hung from his face.

Kendal stared him down before continuing.

“Let me first start by saying; Joan Stanfield, Max was your husband. He was also married to you, Wendy Brown. Everyone please, stay calm and quiet this won’t take too long to explain.”

The group fell silent. The four men in the room folded their arms, glaring. The six women seated at the front wore the same blank expression.

“I have uncovered facts Max lived a double life. He was married to Wendy and called himself Ernest Brown. Joan, you knew him as Max Stanfield. He couldn’t decide which of you two ladies he loved more and hid the truth from both of you. The rest of you are half brothers and sisters. I’ve written the relevant information in my statement. Max Stanfield, alias Ernest Brown, died of natural causes. I have unearthed a TAB account in Max’s name. The balance of which I’m sure you’ll be most delighted. Again everything is in my report which is on Captain Hughes’ desk. If

all of you would like to take the lift to the second floor you'll be shown his office. He'll explain the details and answer your questions."

Both detectives led the group to the lift. They watched the door close on their astounded faces. Kendal swiveled on his toes and walked his partner to the main door of the building.

"Your statement certainly sounded abrupt," reported Claire.

"I didn't want to be bogged down in legal discussions. Besides, Marg will have dinner ready by the time we arrive home."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CLAIRE AND Kendal entered his house and found Marg sitting at the kitchen table staring at a black envelope.

"Sad news?" asked Kendal, opening the fridge. He snatched up a carton of milk and proceeded to make three strong milk coffees.

"I'm not sure."

Claire walked out of the room, into the lounge.

Kendal stopped half way to the microwave oven to look at his wife. A frown erupted on his brow. "I'm not following what you mean."

Marg held up the envelope.

"It's a black envelope. Has the kids' grandma died?"

"No," growled Marg. "Mum's outside collecting the washing."

"Who sent the envelope?"

Puzzlement swept Marg's face.

Kendal placed the cold cups of coffee onto the bench. Swiping the black envelope he swiveled it slowly in his hands.

"It's a flat envelope. My name has been typed and it's addressed to me. Interesting," he coughed, dropping it on the bench. He walked off to finish making the coffees then settled himself at the kitchen table.

"Are you going to open it?" asked Marg.

"You can," replied Kendal, sounding unconcerned.

Marg started to peel back a well-glued corner.

"Hold it. I'll do it." Kendal grabbed a knife from the draw. Gently taking the envelope out of Marg's hand, he placed it flat on the bench. His eyes scoured its black surface. "Who sends black envelopes through the mail?" He looked up, catching his wife's worried stare.

"No one from my side of the family," she stated.

"Who died?" questioned Claire walking into the room.

“It’s about time you showed. Where have you been?”

“I’ve been watching the evening news. There’s been another gang murder.”

“The envelope won’t explode when you open it?” questioned Marg.

Kendal chuckled. “No, the envelope’s too flat.” He could almost hear his wife’s sigh.

Glancing at Claire, he raised an eyebrow.

She looked back through narrow eyelids.

“First, you confessed to speaking to a ghost, now this. What’s next, a dead person coming back to life?”

“Claire you should’ve been a drama queen instead of a cop,” chuckled Kendal, starting to cut the top edge of the envelope away. “Marg, did I miss your mother’s birthday?” he quizzed.

“No,” she grumbled.

Inside the card, Kendal spied a slip of paper. Thirteen words were typed in bold lettering. He read the note out loud. “We need to meet. Port Melbourne wharf. Number 7 Midnight. Come alone. GP.”

Marg stood so she could re-read the note over her husband’s shoulder. She started to yell the moment he looked up. “You’re not seriously thinking of going?”

“I have to.”

“You can’t. I won’t allow it.” Staring at Claire, Marg continued to debate the issue. “Claire, Al won’t listen to me, you tell him not to go. I’ll rephrase my words. Order him not to go.”

“For what it’s worth, oh stubborn one, I agree in what Marg said. Don’t go.”

Kendal shook his head. “You two, I’m a big bloke. I’ll be fine.”

Claire picked up the envelope, studying it. “Why was this envelope addressed only to you?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“I’ll tag along.”

“No,” replied Kendal, shaking his head.

“I don’t care what the note says or how big a man you think you are. I’m tagging along.”

Marg sighed, flopping back into a chair. “If you insist on going you must have back up.”

“You’ve got a point. Claire, you can shadow me from a distance. I’ll have my finger on my mobile phone ready to message you if I need help.”

“I’ve seen you text a message. You’re too slow.”

“I’ll have a pre-written text.”

“Al, I don’t like it,” sobbed Marg. “I don’t like it at all.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. I’ve never failed to come home yet.” He gave her a reassuring kiss on the cheek then her lips. Focusing on Claire he stated. “I’ll see you here at eleven tonight.”

Marg walked into the hall and leaned against the wall. Kendal came up behind her, placing both his hands on her shoulders. By keeping her back to him she hid her tears.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine,” he whispered soothingly.

“How do you know?” she sobbed.

Kendal spun her around. Lifting his hand he wiped her eyes. “If someone wanted me dead I don’t think they’d go through so much trouble to invite me to a dark abandoned wharf at midnight.

I sense this GP character wants to stay inconspicuous. I've a gut feeling he knows I'm a cop and I'd be carrying a gun. Besides, Claire won't be too far."

Simultaneously Marg let go of a wintry day smile, hugging him close. "Promise me you won't take too long."

"I promise. The moment the meeting's over I'll call."

Claire stood in the doorway wearing a thunderstorm expression. Folding her arms across her chest made her look worse. "Partner, escort me to my car."

Kendal knew the moment he shut the front door Claire will begin her verbal abuse. Her pendulum mood swings were all too predictable.

Claire turned, facing her partner. Her eyes were daggers.

"Don't worry I'll be fine," she growled. "What kind of crap statement is that?"

"It was supposed to sound convincing."

"I'm not buying."

"What could go wrong?"

"Has it occurred to you this GP character could be Patrick?"

"Yes, I have. If things go pear shaped I know you'll be close."

Claire sighed and gave a mischievous look. "I agree on that point." She puckered her lips. "Kiss me, just in case I never have another chance."

"I'm married."

"Who cares? If you die, I'll keep the secret."

Kendal snorted. "I'll see you at eleven. Don't be late."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THERE WERE few clouds in the night sky. The sea breeze blowing across wharf number seven wouldn't enter a windsock.

Kendal checked his watch. 11:55pm. He messaged Claire.

'Stay alert. I'm walking to the end of the wharf to meet GP.'

He felt confident she'd be by his side in seconds if things were to change and fall ugly.

Kendal brought up his pre-recorded text message, shifted his finger to hover over the send button and pushed his hand and the phone deep into his duffel coat pocket.

Keeping to the shadows of the many large shipping containers, Kendal stood motionless watching two rats, disturbed by his presence, run away. Using his right foot he bumped his snub nose revolver strapped to his inside left ankle. The weapon reassured him. His fingers on his right hand slipped effortlessly around the butt of his Smith and Wesson. He extracted the gun from his shoulder holster, pointing it at the ground before moving on.

The end of the wharf came into view.

Kendal could sense danger lurking ahead. This GP character must be close. He pushed his back against a dark green shipping container. Wooden pallets stacked four metres high lined the edge of the wharf. Besides his footsteps, the only noise came from the gentle lapping of the water against the pylons under his feet.

“This is not a good plan,” he conceded. “Not good at all.”

Claire glanced at her watch before pushing a button on the console of her car. The window quickly slid down. She studied the area. From the road in the background to the security lighting on the wharf, she saw nothing out of place. She listened to the gentle breaking of the toe size waves flopping onto the sand. She spied a bird flying past her car towards a streetlight. It flew through the net of light before it disappeared.

Claire’s mobile phone screen lit. She swiped it from the seat, reading the words. Forwarding the message to Marg, she texted another message which read;

‘It’s a peaceful night. No trouble or problem.’

Claire placed the phone back on the seat and stared out over the dead calm sea towards the end of the wharf.

“I sure hope tonight stays extremely boring,” she whispered. “It seems strange there isn’t a soul about.”

Two rats frolicking in the dark darted about her car. They disappeared as if they were spooked by someone lurking about.

Claire repeated her search pattern again.

“I have a feeling things are about to turn bad,” she mumbled.

Kendal’s black duffel coat hung heavy as he walked to the wayward side of the wharf, closing in on the end of the pier. He spied two fishermen re-baiting their fishing hooks under the only overhead light. He slipped his Smith and Wesson from view while approaching the men. He gazed at a red light meticulously flashing ten metres out from the end of the wharf.

“How’s the fishing?”

One of the men looked over his shoulder. Grey smoke rose into the air from his lit cigar. He whispered back.

“Bit slow tonight. No moon. I’d a few bites earlier, but nothing of late. I’m thinking of chucking in the towel. I might even eat the bait for breakfast.”

“Are you both alone out here?”

“Yep, me and me best mate Smithy.”

“Have you seen anyone else?”

The men looked at each other. “Naw. Saw couple ‘ov rats an hour ago,” called Smithy.

Kendal bid the men the best of luck and walked back towards the beach. Approaching the first shipping container, he again spotted the rats playing happily. They looked his way. Startled, they sprinted off across the boards, disappearing into the night. Kendal wasn’t one to get nervous, however, tonight seemed to be an exception. His nerves were on edge. He rounded a pile of wooden pallets and shouldered another shipping container. It was black and looked to be un-sea

worthy. He could feel a chill in the air.

Making no noise Kendal walked about the shipping containers. In the distance, he heard the clock in the town hall strike midnight.

In his hesitation from moving from one shipping container to the next, a voice whispered.

“You look like a cop.”

Kendal hugged the side of the rusting shipping container, raising his gun. His eyes darted back and forth trying desperately to figure out the exact where-a-bouts of the voice.

“Don’t bother trying to find me,” said the voice, a pitch louder than the first whisper. “If you find me, I’ll be forced to kill you.”

“I’m Detective Sergeant Kendal. I am a cop. I don’t take threats lightly.”

“Call it what you like, it’s the truth. I’m GP.”

“You sound close. I can hear you breathing.”

“I make it a rule never to repeat myself. I’ll make an exception only this once. Don’t ever try to find me or see my face.”

“Why?”

“You’ll know in due time. Now put the gun away.”

“How do I know you won’t shoot?”

“You’d be dead already. Don’t bother to text a message to your partner. I’ll be gone before she arrives.”

“She?”

“Detective Sergeant Claire Ambroso.”

“You seem to know a lot about me. I know nothing about you. What does GP stand for?”

“Put the gun away.”

“You put yours away first.”

“Ok,” whispered GP. “It’s a deal.”

Kendal thought he heard a light scraping noise, but he couldn’t be sure. “How do I know you don’t have another gun?” he questioned, slipping his gun into his holster.

“You could have a snub nose revolver strapped to your inside left ankle, but I’d be guessing. I’m around the corner of the shipping container you’re leaning against. If you so much as sneak a peek, you’ll be dead,” warned GP.

“That line is becoming boring. State your business?” growled Kendal.

“I come across information from time to time which might be useful to the police.”

“I assume you’re not a cop.”

“Correct. I’m the opposite,” replied GP.

“Why the secrecy?” asked Kendal.

“Good question.”

“I’ll have a shot in the dark. You must be a well-known criminal.”

“I’m one of the biggest.”

“I could shoot you right now.”

“You could, but you won’t,” said GP.

Kendal's eyes narrowed as he slipped his fingers around his Smith and Wesson.

"Are you sure? Seeing how you're so high up the criminal ladder getting rid of you might put a hole in someone's organization."

A whispered chuckle filled the air. "For a cop you're ok."

In the sudden noise, Kendal silently extracted his gun, leveling it at the edge of the shipping container. He didn't like the standoff. GP could easily shoot. Kendal pondered his pre-written text message and pushed the button.

"We meet at last Sergeant Claire Ambroso. Don't move a muscle. I want you to keep both hands on the steering wheel. If I was you and I'm glad I'm not, you'll do exactly what I say. Understand?"

Claire looked sideways at the gun barrel pointing at her head then looked for the man behind the voice.

"You," she spat.

"I'm happy you remember me. I've only the one question."

"Look up the answer on the internet?"

The man pushed the barrel of his gun against Claire's temple. "I don't care much about smart mouthed women. A single bullet from this semi-automatic Glock will see your brains splattered all over the seat."

"If you pull the trigger before you ask the question, it might never be answered," stated Claire.

The man spat on the ground. His evil smirk looked cold blooded.

"It will be a real pleasure to see you permanently asleep."

"It's a shame I'm not tired."

"Shut up coppa. Do you recall the person you killed a few months back?"

"Maybe?" Claire growled.

"Let me refresh your memory. The person you killed just happened to be my brother."

"So you were the accomplice waiting in the car?" Claire probed.

"Call me Short Sleeves. I've been tracking your every move since that night. I knew it would be only a matter of time before we met."

"Your brother killed my partner. I've been closing the gap on you," advised Claire.

"Your dead partner happened to be your husband."

"How did you know?"

"We all have our secrets. Now where's the other one?"

"I don't understand the question."

The thug's trigger finger constricted. He leaned through the window, whispering in a cold monotone voice.

"You think you're so brave. Answer my question. Tell me where your male partner is right now or you'll never blink again?"

"I'm at a loss. Whom are you referring to?"

"Detective Alan J Kendal, where is he? Sweetheart, don't look so surprised. I know more

about your life than what you do. Now where is he?"

"I thought you said you only wanted to ask one question?"

"I changed my mind. Two kills in one night will be cream on the top of the apple pie."

"He's on the wharf."

"Get out of the car very slowly."

"You insisted I not move," said Claire calmly.

"You think you're so tough?"

"Everyone's entitled to an opinion."

"Get out," spat the man, yanking the door open.

Claire slid slowly out of the bucket seat. She stooped, dropping both hands to her ankles. When she straightened she coughed to mask the sound of her ankle zip being undone. She stood staring directly at the man. Her lips slowly curled upwards into a smirk.

Short Sleeves pushed his gun against Claire's French cap, tipping it. "What's there to grin about?"

"Arsehole, watch the cap."

"Don't want to answer?"

"You've asked your extra question."

Short Sleeves tipped her cap making it fall onto the ground. "Step to the rear of the car and open the boot. We're going for a ride."

"What if I don't want to go?"

"I'll shoot you right where you stand."

"You'll shoot me anyway."

"Clever lady," snarled Short Sleeves.

"It's a family trait."

The thug stepped on her cap, twisting it into the gravel.

"You shouldn't have dirtied my cap."

Claire received a clip behind the ear forcing her to fall to the ground. Short Sleeves reached out, grabbing a handful of hair. Yanking her to a standing position, Claire pulled her gun from her ankle strap. She came up pointing her gun at the man.

"It looks like we're in a checkmate position," grumbled Short Sleeves. "If you pull the trigger I'll shoot you in the head."

"Checkmate is a word I don't recognize," spat Claire. "You'll be dead."

"Sweetie, unless you're a dumb chick, a bullet to the head trumps a bullet to the heart. You'll be dead before me. Now drop your gun like a nice girl."

"I've a smart card."

"Poker doesn't have a smart card."

"I'm a woman. Believe it or not, men can't do two things at the same time."

"That's where you're wrong." Short Sleeves tilted his head slightly upwards. His laugh sounded like garbled notes.

Claire squatted. Thumping the gun from his hand, she swung a double fisted jab to the man's

torso. Short Sleeves eyes widened. He fell to the ground face first. Claire whipped her handcuffs from her back pocket, tethering his hands behind his back.

“You’re under arrest for being accessory to a murder. I’ll throw in just for good measure, kidnapping, and robbery, etc, etc.” She looked around. Seeing no one, she squatted. “You underestimated the scorn of a woman. My secret ambition was to shoot to kill the accomplice to the robbery in which my husband was killed.”

Claire stood, pointing her gun at the man’s face.

“You won’t shoot.”

“Wanna bet.”

She pulled the trigger. The bullet entered and exited the man’s right calf muscle. She re-aimed her gun at his other leg.

Short Sleeves spat on the ground, screaming. Claire kicked him in the ribs. She heard a crack.

“My report will read: You grabbed my gun. We wrestled. You fractured a rib when I hit you. My gun fell out of your hand. I hurriedly pulled the trigger and the fight ended.”

Short Sleeves spat at her feet, moaning as blood oozed from his leg, pooling on the ground.

Claire looked the man in the eyes. “Are you in pain?”

“Yes, I’m in agony.”

“Good. Suffer.”

“Call an ambulance.”

“I seem to have lost my mobile phone in the struggle. I’ll have to search for it. Don’t go away. If I can’t find it in the dark I’ll have to wait for my partner to return.”

“If you don’t free me my brother will hunt you and your partner down.”

“You live in a fantasy world.”

“Are you going to risk it?”

Claire answered by kicking the man in the ribs a second time.

“Let me think. Should I let you free? Or should I say bad luck buddy.” She searched the ground for a few seconds. “Sorry, I’m fresh out of ‘set the thug free cards.’”

“You’ll be sorry.”

“Join the queue. There was no-one else around the night Peter died.”

“Blake sat in his car four streets away waiting for me. He wasn’t happy when I told him you murdered our brother.”

“I’m not thrilled over the death of my husband. If you don’t shut up another bullet is coming your way.”

“The moment you close your eyes Blake will be pointing a gun at you.”

At the shipping container, Kendal started to sweat heavily. For the first time in his life, he wanted to see Claire running along the wharf.

“Before you reach for your gun I have to let you know I’m more important to you alive. If I’m dead someone else will fill my shoes and the hole you created will be sewn up.”

“If we’re to do business I need to know your name,” said Kendal.

“I told you, GP.”

“That’s not a name.”

“It’s the only name I’m going to say.”

“How much money do you want for talking to me?”

The whispered chuckle returned.

“I don’t want your money. I don’t want anything.”

“You’re risking your life so the criminal organization you run, or help run, won’t catch you being a traitor so you can give me information, and you don’t want anything?”

I want to redeem myself. The only way out of the organization I’m in, ‘is death.’ If I can pass on any information I happen to come across it’ll make me feel human.”

“A criminal with a conscience,” stated Kendal.

“Let me convince you,” urged GP.

“We don’t need your help.”

“Daniel Weakom has been placed in deep cover. He’s your partner’s ex-boyfriend.”

Kendal’s eyes widened. He felt shocked at the man’s knowledge. “I’m listening.”

“I knew those facts will get your attention. Weakom’s predecessor, ‘Little Mike,’ God rest his soul, received his information from me. He’d set up video cameras all over Melbourne. They were all bogus. I’m the one who sent him the videos. I don’t want another fire games in Melbourne which by the way happened to be your previous case.”

“Stay away from Weakom,” warned Kendal.

“The man has a foot in each camp. He’s out for whatever he can get.”

“Is that all your information?”

“It’s good enough for now. Too much too soon could be hazardous to one’s health.”

“I never would’ve imagined philosophy to be your strongest subject.”

GP’s whispered chuckle again filled the air. The sound quickly subsided.

“I’ll be in touch.”

“What if I need to contact you?” asked Kendal. “I forgot the name you told me.”

“You, forget something? Don’t make me laugh. You have a memory larger than an elephant. I didn’t confess my name. When I discover more information, I’ll be in touch.”

“How?” asked Kendal.

“You’ll receive another birthday card in the mail.”

“Why the mail?” asked Kendal.

“No one can trace the mail.”

“I can always let Australia Post keep a lookout for any black envelopes. I’ll be able to trace it back to the suburb.”

“If you thought it might be a good idea you’d have told me. I always post twenty black envelopes at various points around Melbourne. If you want to talk to me, put an ad in the public notices of the newspaper. Your words will read.

‘GP, we need to meet.’

I’ll read the invite and send you a birthday card detailing where and when. Let me warn you. Always come alone.”

"I'd like to conduct a small test to confirm if you can ever be a trusted," quizzed Kendal.

"Sounds fair," replied GP.

"I'm after news of a possible missing girl. Her name is Sam. She lives on the streets of Melbourne. Her real home is in Riddles Creek. Also, I need some info on the gang murder which made the news earlier?"

"That was quick. The news media must be desperate to fill a thirty-second time slot."

"What's the Goss?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"Or won't?"

"When things cool off I might have some information. On the subject of the missing girl I'll see what I can find out."

"I guess I have to call you a friend," said Kendal, reaching out his hand to shake GP's.

"Don't take offence when I say I won't shake your hand. Only once a good friend shook my hand, now he's dead. One last thing before I slip away."

Kendal retracted his arm.

"GP stands for Ghost Partner."

Kendal pulled his mobile phone from his pocket. Claire answered it on the first ring.

"Don't panic," he said calmly. "I'm fine. The meeting is over. I'll see you at the car."

He ended the call before his partner could utter a word. He wasn't in the frame of mind for her pendulum mood swings. He could feel a headache coming on and the smell of a distant coffee plume was inviting.

Kendal walked up to the road. He found Claire sitting on the bonnet of her car. She wore the look of a caged lioness on steroids.

"I hate to ask, what's up?"

"While you've been talking I've been busy," growled Claire, pointing to the man moaning on the ground.

"Is he your secret admirer or a midnight visitor who just happened to be walking by?" Kendal chuckled. "Let me guess. He asked you to light his cigarette. You said no. He took offence and wouldn't take no for an answer."

"Funny."

"Please help me," moaned the man on the ground. "She shot me in the leg. I asked her to call an ambulance. She said to suffer."

"Ambulance is on the way," advised Claire casually. She stared at the man as if he wasn't there. "I couldn't find my mobile phone in the dark. I searched and I searched. I stumbled across it when I saw my partner walking towards me. It's the reason why the ambos aren't here yet."

Kendal shook his head, watching a police car pull up.

"Claire, thanks being here tonight, it felt good knowing you were close. I have to admit, you look like shit. A detailed explanation of the visitor might be a great place to start?"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

QUIT STALLING, inform me of what went on at the end of the wharf?” barked Claire. “If you don’t convey what happened and soon, I’ll shoot you.”

Kendal looked into the eyes of his brooding partner. “I’ll be first after you. What’s the explanation on lover boy?”

The two detectives had walked into an all-night coffee shop, ordered two hot drinks and were sitting at a rear table.

“There’s not much to say. He was the accomplice driving the car when Peter died. He wanted a piece of me.”

“He certainly picked the wrong woman to do business.”

“Do you want to confess what happened tonight at the meeting or shall I beat it out of you in front of the shop’s owner?”

Kendal leaned forward grinning.

“I don’t think the whole night’s a joke,” jeered Claire.

Kendal raised his finger to his lips, pulled his mobile phone from his pocket and dialed his home phone number.

“Marg, meeting’s over, I’ll be home in an hour. No need to worry. I’ll explain everything when I get home.”

Claire looked furious. She repeated her question through a locked jaw.

Kendal buried his phone deep in his pocket. Their coffees arrived in the hands of a young female waiter. Claire smiled up at the girl and sounded cheerful.

Watching the girl walk off Claire started tapping her foot on the tiled floor then her fingernails joined in on the melody. The noise was soft at first but quickly intensified.

“Interesting,” whispered Kendal, lifting the coffee cup to his lips. “The meeting was interesting.”

“Is that all you’re going to report?” whispered Claire. Rolling her eyes she turned away to gaze over the tabletops.

Kendal shook his head, leaned forward, replaying the entire scene on the wharf word for word.

Claire sat hypnotized listening to the whole story as it unfolded. Kendal eventually sat back.

“Interesting,” she whispered.

“I told you. I believe the meeting might have been a trial run. GP might have been checking his system out.”

“He sounds like a weirdo.”

“He’s an informer, scared of both sides of the law.”

“Meat in the sandwich,” suggested Claire. “He’s caught in the middle and no way out.”

“Only death,” corrected Kendal.

“I wonder what GP stands for? I’ll run the initials through the computer in the morning.”

Kendal swallowed half his coffee in one gulp. “Don’t bother. GP stands for Ghost Partner.”

“To me, it sounds like he’s trying to muzzle his way into this duo.”

“I hope you’re not jealous?”

“No.” Turning her head towards the front door, Claire sipped her drink. “So you reckon GP will contact you again?” she asked in a detached voice.

“I’m certain of it. I believe sooner than later.”

They both watched a man of neat appearance enter the coffee shop pushing four milk crates on a new trolley.

“I wonder?” Claire stood, walking over. “Hello there.”

“Giddyay,” replied the bloke.

“Do you deliver here every day?”

Seeing Kendal approaching the man took a step back. “Who’s asking?”

Claire swept her police badge from a back pocket. “My partner and I would like to ask you a few questions.”

The man’s shoulders instantly slumped. “Yes, I’m here every day. Why do you ask?”

“Have you time for a chat?”

The man checked his watch. “Only if it’s quick.”

He sat at the nearest table watching the two detectives collect their drinks from where they were sitting before settling themselves opposite him.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Ambroso. This side kick is Detective Sergeant Kendal.”

“Pleased to meet you, I’m Mick, milk’s the game. The way you two came bounding up to me when I entered the shop I thought you were going to beat me over the head.”

Mick reached out his hand. The only greeting he received was from Claire by the way of a grin.

“Have you seen anyone loitering around the wharf in the past hour?” whispered Kendal.

“No. I’m not due to arrive there for another two hours.”

“Have you seen anyone walking about trying to keep to the shadows?” asked Claire.

“There’s always someone standing in the dark.”

Kendal leaned on the table, staring into the man’s eyes. “I’m not in the mood for smugness. I need to know what’s so amusing?” he questioned.

The man put his elbows on the table. “Detective, I’m not sure if your partner knows how to tell the time, there aren’t any shadows this time of the morning.”

“Thanks for your time,” snarled Kendal. He stood to leave.

Mick stood and walked to his trolley, collected four empty milk crates and marched out of the shop.

Outside, Kendal noted the milk truck’s number plate and swallowed the last mouthful of his coffee.

“It’s a dead end,” reported Claire, watching the van pull away from the curb.

“Perhaps.” Kendal threw the coffee cup in the bin. “I’ll see you at Police Headquarters at 8:00am. It’s time I went home.”

Claire started to walk in the direction of her car.

“Detective Ambroso, don’t stay up all night. The milky has work.”

She glanced at Kendal from over her shoulder. “I’m going home. Besides, you didn’t give me a chance to slip him my phone number.”

“I had plenty of time,” confessed Kendal.

“You sound jealous.”

“Me? Are you joking?”

Claire chuckled and held up a small white piece of paper with eight numbers written on it. “Mick’s quicker than you.”

Kendal shook his head, rattled his car keys and slid behind the wheel. Driving away he saw Claire already talking into her mobile phone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THE MORNING sun felt warm. Pat casually walked out of the hotel room, heading for the coffee shop next door. She ordered a latte and spied a man staring at her over the top of a coffee mug. She flicked her long blonde hair into the breeze and walked over. She hovered over the man like an eagle circling its prey. The man looked up into her luring blue eyes, gave a warm inviting smile which accentuated his handsome looks.

“May I sit?” she whispered, placing her cardboard mug on the table.

The man stood. Showing an open palmed hand, he gestured to the vacant chair opposite.

“I’m Pat.” She extended her hand allowing the man to kiss her knuckles.

“My friends call me GP.”

“Intriguing,” she replied. “My friends call me Ashlee. What does GP stand for?”

The tall man shook his head. “My friends know not to ask that question.”

“I see,” whispered Ashlee. “What do your enemies call you?”

“Many things,” confessed GP.

Ashlee leaned forward, scraping her foot up his leg. “You’re a very secretive person, GP. I love that in a man.”

“We all have our secrets.” GP sipped his coffee, looking the woman in the eyes.

“Let’s get down to business. I’m in the market for a good mate. Do you know of a man going by the name of Kendal?” questioned Ashlee.

“No.”

“I think you do.”

“Why do you think along those lines?”

“Kendal is a cop. I thought everyone knew him.”

GP shrugged. “I like to keep clear of the cops.”

“I’m not sure if it’s a good thing or not.” She uncrossed her legs only to re-cross them. “I think you like to live dangerously.”

“I’m not sure where this conversation is going?” quizzed GP.

“Obviously not far enough,” grumbled Ashlee.

“If you’re fishing for more than I think you are, the bait doesn’t look appetizing enough.”

Ashlee swiped her latte from off the table, pushed her nose into the air and walked off in the direction of the hotel. She hesitated only long enough at the entrance to the building to flash the man seated at the small round café table a cold steel look. She vanished behind the rotating glass doors.

GP reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a black envelope, wrote twelve words on a small section of white paper and slipped the note into the envelope. He stood and strolled off in the opposite direction Ashlee went.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

WALKING TOWARDS the main gate at the entrance to the park, Kendal glanced over his shoulder at his home. He knew Claire will be watching his every move from the lounge room window.

He stepped onto the jogger’s path, pulling out the black envelope GP dropped onto the front seat of his car. He read the short note by the light of the crescent moon.

‘Meet me in the park closest to your house. 7pm tonight. GP.’

Kendal pocketed the message and studied the area. The park resembled his dream. The only difference being the stars were out, the night air felt cool the moon only just cleared the treetops and definitely no fog.

Kendal extracted his gun. Slowly and carefully he walked along the edge of the path. Every few steps he stopped to listen for any footsteps. The usual group of female joggers chatting while they ran came into view. He waited patiently for them to be out of sight before moving to the next tree.

“7:09pm,” he whispered, scanning the area again. He pushed his back against a tall gum tree. A full minute ticked off before he moved further along the path.

A lone figure stood next to a tree not more than twenty metres further on. The girth of the tree easily obscured his presence. Kendal watched two hands rise in the air. A small silver cigarette lighter was lit. The flame touched the end of the cigar. The man clamped the lighter shut and flame

disappeared. One hand seemed to beckon him over.

Kendal darted across the narrow path. He pushed his back into the tree adjacent to where the lone figure stood watching his every move.

“GP?” whispered Kendal.

“Good guess. Where’s your partner?”

“Ambroso is at my house. You needn’t be concerned about an ambush, I came alone.”

“I know. I checked your sincerity.”

“I thought the trial of trustworthiness might be over.”

“It doesn’t hurt to do a surprise test?”

“Are you having any luck in discovering any information on Sam, the young female runaway?”

“I’m working on the problem. The kid seems to have vanished into thin air. Either that or she wants to disappear. I’m not risking my life tonight to talk about a missing brat.”

“I knew you’d want to contact me sooner than later,” Kendal lied. “It’s the reason behind why I left my car window half down. I thought it might make communication a trifle easier.”

“The excuse sounds like a lie,” whispered GP. “I have to admit it’s effective.”

“Did you consider how much risk you put your life in by dropping a black envelope through my open window?”

“I was quick.”

“Why change your modus operandi to inform me of the next meeting?”

“Latin, I’m impressed,” GP chuckled.

“Yes, the two words are one of my favorite sayings for doing the same thing. You informed me a message will come through the mail if we must meet.”

“We needed to talk urgently. The envelope in the post will arrive too late.”

Kendal heard the jogging group returning and slid his gun from view. “What’s the emergency?”

GP waited for the group to disappear. “The ladies look a little worse for wear. They’ve run past this tree seven times already.”

“I don’t believe you’d risk your life on a meeting to talk about a group of women joggers.”

“You married men are all alike, square as toast.”

“I’m happily married.”

“Keep your shirt on. I have some interesting info’.”

“I’m listening,” advised Kendal.

“There’s been an escape from what you cops say; ‘the mental institution.’ I call it the nut house.”

“We know.”

“I have to add it was quite an ingenious escape.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“Not far from here I happened to be minding my own business having a nice coffee waiting for my lunch to arrive when along came a woman. Her walk looked majestic, confident. The way

her hair caught the sun's rays was magnificent. She wore an expression which radiated sophistication. Her attractiveness and appeal seemed absolute. Does the description remind you of someone?"

Kendal fell silent, deep in thought.

"I know what you're thinking."

"Do you want to enlighten me?"

"You're a married man. Things like the way a gorgeous woman walks doesn't concern you."

Kendal's eyes narrowed. "Keep moving forward."

"This woman walked into the café. After buying a latte she strolled over. She asked if she could sit. Have I kicked your imagination into high gear yet?"

"Interesting," commented Kendal. "This woman, did she happen to be blonde?"

"I'm not here to play catch-up games," warned GP. He fell silent, hearing the lady joggers approaching at a snail's pace. They walked past, giving Kendal a dirty look.

When they were gone GP continued.

"This woman introduced herself as Ashlee."

"Did she give a last name?"

"No, she got ticked off and walked. Strange though, the café was next to the building she exited. She's staying in a room on the fifth floor."

"How do you know this?"

"She stood on the balcony overlooking the café ten minutes before she introduced herself. She's the same woman who'd been escorted into the hotel by a man who also stepped onto the same balcony, checking the surrounds.

"Did you recognize this man?"

"No, he wore a disguise."

"I don't suppose you know his name?"

"Mr. Upp, spelt using two P's."

Kendal grew suspicious of GP. He seemed to know too much. He took a punt.

"How do you know so much?"

"I can't reveal my sources."

"You can't or won't?"

"If you're thinking I'm Upp, guess again. He's a snake. I want him off the streets."

"What does Upp stand for?"

"I don't know yet."

"I take it I should check out the hotel in the hope of finding this woman?"

"Yes. Did you know the patient at the mental institution has the same name as the woman on the fifth floor?"

"Yes." Kendal grinned slyly, deciding to let GP in on a secret to see where the information might lead. "The full name of the woman you were talking to is Doctor Ashlee Clarke."

GP chimed the secret. "Yes, Ashlee Clarke alias Patrick. Take care of your family, detective. Pat, Patrick, burns two storey houses. This fact you know all too well. I'll be in touch."

Kendal went to walk off.

“Before you go I’ve a hypothetical question. If we were friends and you were torn between arresting me or to allow me to escape, what would you do?”

For a few seconds, Kendal pondered the question. “I’m a cop.”

“Yes, I know.”

“Do you want an answer right now?”

“I’ll make it easy for you. Don’t tell me what you’d do.”

Kendal saw a hand protrude from behind the tree.

“I only shake hands with a friend.”

They pressed the flesh. Kendal looked at the small matchbox in his hand GP easily palmed him, before poking his head around the other side of the tree. He spied a man walking away. His head was bent and his shoulders slumped. He wore a hat and a long brown coat which dragged the ground.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KENDAL AND Claire started their stake out at the building where GP relayed the fact Patrick, alias Ashlee Clarke, might be hiding. Both detectives watched the many shoppers and business people walking past.

Studying the hotel’s main door, Claire asked. “Are you sure this is the right building?”

Kendal fished for the matchbox GP palmed to him. “This is the correct address.” He looked at the café next to the hotel and spied a man sipping a hot drink while hunched over reading the newspaper. He held a black pen in his hand. He looked to be in the middle of writing something. “I’m actually looking at the cafe GP mentioned.”

“No wonder they’re busy, the aroma in the coffee plume smells divine,” hinted Claire.

“I’ve an idea,” whispered Kendal. He counted off five floors and stared directly at the balcony. “We’ll act as employees to gain entry.”

The man holding the pen got to his feet. He folded the newspaper in half and folded it in half again. Leaving the newspaper on the table he limped away.

“Let’s walk across the street.”

Choosing not to wait for his partner, Kendal sprinted across the road to the café; in particular to the table where the newspaper had been left. Facing him he saw the crossword page.

Claire came trotting over.

“Question five down; another word for doctor?” Kendal asked, settling himself in the chair.

“Sugar, I think you’re losing it. Let’s get back to the stakeout before you blow our cover.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“A surgeon, a specialist or maybe a brainwave?” jeered Claire.

“The word I need has only two letters.”

“GP,” whispered Claire.

Kendal nodded slowly. “GP left us a message. Doctor Ashlee Clarke is on the fifth floor. Let’s go.”

He sprinted underneath the hotel canvas awning. Keeping to the shadows Kendal beckoned Claire to quickly follow.

They ran into the building and for the opening lift doors. A young woman pushing a sleeping baby in a dark blue stroller sidestepped out of the lift. Kendal held the lift door open. He studied the woman as she walked towards the main door. She marched across the street, pushing the stroller through the park gate.

The lift doors opened on the fifth floor opposite room two. Dragging pout their guns, both detectives ran towards the door, kicking it off its hinges. Kendal’s sharp eyes swept the area. The room was long and narrow. A TV hung on one wall at the foot of the bed. Claire double-checked every square inch while Kendal re-checked. He nodded at a second door. Kicking it open, the interior of the room happened to be the bathroom.

“All clear,” stated Claire.

“This place is empty,” snarled Kendal. “I’m convinced Clarke’s been here today. The only evidence left behind is the coffee table has been moved in front of the sliding glass balcony door.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“There are two sets of scuff marks in the carpet. They were made by the table as someone dragged it across the room. If the tracks were made yesterday the cleaners would have repositioned the table and vacuumed the carpet.”

A high-pitched scream out in the corridor made Claire jump. Kendal sprinted for the door. Both detectives found a woman hugging her knees in a coiled position on the floor three doors to their right. Through her tears, the woman stared at the newest arrivals. Seeing their guns her face turned the colour of white paper. She appeared to be ready to scream again.

A second lift door opened. A security guard stepped out. Glaring at the two detectives, the man crouched, extracted his gun and spat out his chewing gum.

“Step away from the woman lying on the floor. Nice and slow I want both of you to drop your weapons,” he growled.

“We’re cops,” advised Claire.

The woman sitting on the floor screamed. Kendal cringed at the noise.

“I don’t care who you are,” yelled the guard. “Step away from the woman.”

Both detectives stood their ground.

“Do what I say or I’ll be forced to shoot both of you.”

“Someone stole my baby,” yelled the woman.

Kendal’s eyes widened. He pointed at the guard. “Don’t panic. I’m reaching for my police badge.

“Move your hands real slow,” yelled the guard, moving his gun between the two detectives.

Kendal produced his police badge, flashing it at the guard.

“Are you Detective Kendal?”

“Detective Sergeant,” he growled. “Now get out of my face. I believe the kidnapper was the woman pushing the stroller. She left the building the moment we entered. I have to hurry. If I take too long, the woman and the baby will disappear.”

Claire turned to face the woman as the guard lowered his gun. “What was your baby wearing?”

Kendal grabbed his partner by the arm and headed for the open lift door. He pointed at the guard.

“You’re coming too. Lady, stay right where you are, we won’t be long.”

Claire threw the woman her police badge as the lift doors closed.

“What the hell is going on?” the guard bellowed.

“What’s your name?” Kendal used a gruff voice and stared down his nose at the man.

“Jeremy Bradshaw.”

“We’re both homicide detectives. My name you know. This woman is my partner, Detective Ambroso. The woman kidnapper is pushing a baby in a dark blue three-wheel stroller. The baby has a light blue blanket wrapped around him. I believe the woman is Doctor Ashlee Clarke. She escaped from the mental institution a short time ago.”

“The nut house?” echoed the guard. “This is too far out of my league. I’ll have to call my superior on the two-way radio before I take another step.”

When the lift doors opened on the ground floor Kendal stared the man down, barking out orders.

“I don’t give a flying crap about how you feel about this scene I’m telling you to help. My partner and you will scan the area to your right. I’ll go left. Bradshaw, what’s your mobile phone number?”

“I’m not sure if I should tell you. It might be against company policy.”

“Read my lips, mate, I don’t care about company policy. If we don’t locate the woman and the baby you’ll be dealing with every media personnel on a witch-hunt. Got it?”

The guard’s voice sounded strained blurting out his mobile number. Kendal punched in the phone number and waited for the guard’s phone to ring.

“Answer it and keep the line open. Okay, fan out. Claire, request backup. I want Clarke and the baby found. No exceptions.”

Lunchtime shoppers hampered the search. Several times Kendal lifted his phone to his ear, asking for an update as he twisted through the mob of people scrambling for their favorite lunch table. He jumped onto an outside table not far from their stakeout point for a bird’s eye view. In moments a waitress swinging a broom at his feet forced him to jump off. Spying a three wheel blue stroller Kendal sprinted across the road. He yelled through the phone for Bradshaw to catch up. He then phoned Claire who had decided to move further to her right.

The three posse members began to converge on the tall thin woman from different directions. Kendal’s black duffel coat resembled a flag in a storm. To save time Claire ran down the middle of

the road, grinning at the horns tooting. Seeing a low chain being used for a fence she easily jumped it and entered the large park.

Kendal took a short cut across a low wooden bridge. In one swift movement, he swiped out his handcuffs and snapped one end around the woman's wrist, the other around his own.

"You're under arrest, Clarke," he growled. Bradshaw and Claire grabbed the woman by the shoulders quickly subduing her.

Staring at the three attackers the woman screamed. Kendal's face turned beetroot red. He held his hand up to stop the woman from screaming for the second time.

"I apologize," he quickly whispered. "You're not the person we're after."

For his mistake, Kendal received a slap across the face.

Claire walked off, surveying the area. Bradshaw mimicked her escape.

Kendal unlocked the handcuffs, burying them from view. "Detective Ambroso, where do you think you're going?" he hissed.

Grinning shyly Claire continued to back step. "Shopping?"

"Very funny, partner. You're always a barrel of laughs." Kendal focused his full attention on the fuming woman. Her eyes looked wild. "I do apologize again for my mistake."

"What is your name?" jeered the woman.

"I'm Detective Kendal this is my partner Detective Ambroso. The other bloke is a security guard."

"I'm going to report the lot of you."

"Please don't, I need to keep my job. I've five kids and a wife at home. The bills are piled higher than my eyeballs," pleaded Bradshaw.

"I don't care. After your boss hears from me don't be surprised if you're sacked on the spot. As for the police department, I'm thinking about lots of zeros trailing a high number. I'm positive the amount will satisfy my embarrassment."

"Up to now I thought you would've been a nice woman and mother?" snorted Kendal.

"You made a calculated mistake."

Bradshaw tapped Kendal on the shoulder. "I spied a second stroller not far from here. It's deeper in the park. I was following the woman when you called me over here."

"Good work. Lead on. Lady, call the police department. Speak to a Captain Hughes at the Saint Kilda road Police Headquarters. He'll square things up," urged Kendal.

Running at speed away from the woman the group came across a blue three-wheeled pusher. A mob of people had quickly rallied around it.

"Make way," called Kendal, pushing through the sea of strangers. "Excuse me."

At the center of the circle, they found a sleeping baby wrapped in a blue blanket totally unaware of the fuss.

A news van pulled up outside the entrance to the park. An anchorwoman stepped down the moment she spied Claire pushing the stroller back towards the hotel.

Kendal was on the phone talking to Police Headquarters.

Hughes' voice boomed through the phone. "The media is your problem. I'll be eagerly

waiting to discuss your charade when you and Ambroso are sitting on the other side of my desk.”

Kendal scrunched his nose, dropping the phone back into his pocket.

“So much for the backup,” he mumbled. “Claire, you and Bradshaw peel off. I’ll meet you back at the hotel after I’ve talked to the media.”

Kendal watched the anchorwoman power walking over the damp grass towards him. She displayed a sour expression which quickly changed to a fox-like grin. The moment she stepped up to Kendal she pushed a microphone under his nose. A torrent of questions poured from her mouth. Kendal used poise and sophistication in his two-word answer.

“No comment.”

Arriving back at the hotel Kendal again found the man who filled out the crossword in the newspaper seated at the table. He sat in the exact same seat sipping a cappuccino. The man walked off when Kendal approached.

Kendal reached the table and found a second newspaper. He swiped the newspaper from the table, shoving it under his arm.

The mother of the baby ran to the lift the moment the door started to open. She’d stopped screaming, only to start sobbing uncontrollably. She looked a mess. Her eyes and face were swollen from crying. She’d been clutching a tear-soaked handkerchief she’d attempted to twist the red spots from.

Claire gently handed the mother her baby and sat on the floor next to the woman for a talk.

Kendal rubbed his right temple, deciding to step into the hotel room. He found a rookie constable fresh out of the Police Academy sitting at the table finishing off his report. Kendal snuck up behind him.

“There’s only one ‘L’ in Kendal, not two,” he stated, looking over his shoulder. “I’d like you to give up your chair to the mother in the hall.”

The constable jumped. “You scared the crap out of me. Quit looking over my shoulder. Sir, this area is a crime scene. If you fail to leave right now I’ll have to arrest you.”

Kendal shook his head before sweeping the constable to the side. “I need to use the table.”

“Who might you be?”

Kendal flashed his police badge and slapped the constable on the shoulder. “Good work. Keep it up.”

“Sir!” he exclaimed.

“You look as though you’re collating an extremely detailed report. What info have you compiled?”

The rookie puffed out his chest. “I have ascertained the height of the woman kidnapper and what she was wearing at the time of abducting the baby.”

“Good. It sounds like you’re pushing to be a detective.”

“I don’t suppose you need a partner?”

“No,” he growled. “One partner is bad enough. I could never put up with two.”

“Never is a strong word,” hinted the rookie. “One day you just might need an extra partner.”

Kendal shook his head.

“You can add to your report, the kidnapper’s name is Patrick. He didn’t want to bring harm to the baby.”

“How do you know this?”

“It was plan B. Patrick always has a plan B.”

The constable frowned, giving him a skeptic look.

“It’s a long story,” hinted Kendal, using a casual sweep of his hand.

“Care to explain it?”

“To cut a long story into an extra short one, Patrick and I were playing a game of catch me if you can which ended in a Fire Game.”

“Forget I asked.”

“Go finish your report somewhere else. I’ll hand it to Captain Hughes.”

“Who are you referring to?”

“Senior Sergeant William Hughes.”

“Why does everyone call him Captain?”

“His predecessor happened to be an army bloke. The nickname stuck.”

The constable nodded as if everything he’d heard happened to be true. He scribbled several more details on his notepad, picked up the chair and walked out of the room.

Kendal dropped the newspaper he carried under his arm onto the table and slipped his hands into white disposable gloves. He stuck his head out of the room.

“Claire, stop cooing over the baby and get in here.”

“Any clues?” asked Claire, stepping into the room.

“It’s about time you showed. Erving will be here soon. We have to finish our search.”

“What are we looking for?”

“Any object that doesn’t belong in this room.”

An exhaustive search revealed; “Nothing,” fumed Kendal. “Except for the scuff marks on the carpet made by the table, there’s not a scrap of evidence to link anyone to anything. This Upp character that sprung Clarke from the mental institution is a real professional slime ball. He and Clarke are two of a kind. Very neat and extra clean.” He stopped at the table and unfolded the newspaper.

“Time for a break?” giggled Claire, venturing over.

Kendal gave her a stern cursory glance.

“There’s no time for a rest. I swiped this newspaper from the café table.”

Staring at her partner through longing eyes, Claire spoke in a whisper.

“Sugar, how could you steal a newspaper? Tell me how could I have been so wrong to direct my love towards a common thief?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. I know you love me, please, not now, we’re working. Besides, I’m married.”

Claire clicked her tongue. “One of these days you’ll confess your love for me.”

“Dream on. Now, about this newspaper, I believe it belonged to GP. He might have left a clue.”

“Workaholic,” she replied.

Kendal ignored the statement.

“This crossword has only just been started. He checked the date on the newspaper. “It’s dated yesterday.”

“That’s my boy, always showing off your brain power.”

“Claire, lighten up.”

“Wise arse.”

He grinned at her childish taunts. Knowing Claire happened to be in a good frame of mind was of some minor comfort. Her pendulum mood swings made her volatile. They were a constant battle.

“Sweets, look at three down. What’s another word for a female sheep; three letters?”

“Ewe,” blurted Claire, looking into his eyes, battering her eyelashes.

“Four across is; another word for fog.”

“Mist.”

“Ewe and mist can be transposed to.”

“You missed,” cut in Claire. “The bloke who left the paper must have been GP. Did you get a good description of him when we arrived back at the hotel?”

“No. He wore a cap and his shoulders were hunched. When he walked off he used a pronounced limp which helped to disguise his features. It was the perfect disguise. Maybe I shouldn’t pursue the bloke. So far he’s been ok.”

“Where to now?” asked Claire.

“Little Mike’s funeral is about to begin. Afterwards, we have to help plan the extras for Leopold’s party. I have a feeling Clarke and Upp will decide to invite themselves.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

WEAKOM’S RESTLESS night made him toss and turn under the blankets for hours. He opened his eyes and sat bolt upright in bed. For a few moments, he stared at the bedside clock, grumbling.

“1:05am.” He moaned and fell back, prone on the bed.

Leaning on an elbow, he stared through the charcoal coloured room to the chair in the corner near the door. He watched a small hovering light. It slowly rose in the air then lowered. The small light danced a half metre off the floor before repeating the whole sequence again. It suddenly plummeted to the carpet and vanished.

“Good, you’re awake.” The voice sounded deep, slow and decisive.

“Who are you?” croaked Weakom. His voice sounded hoarse from not enough sleep.

“I’m a messenger,” whispered the voice.

“I repeat my question.”

“I’d repeat my answer. However, we’d be going around in circles all night. You don’t need to know who I am.”

Weakom reached for a remote on the side table, pushing a small black button. A dark figure wearing a balaclava came into focus when the overhead light lit. The figure slid another cigarette between his lips. Weakom heard a click. A small flame shot up from the silver lighter the visitor held in his hand. He sat cross-legged in a seat at Weakom’s feet. The visitor closed the lid of the lighter and slid it into a pocket of his black jeans.

“What do you want?”

The man sat in silence staring at Weakom. Lifting the cigarette to his mouth he drew a breath and exhaled. A grey cloud hovered above the bed.

“What is it you want?” snarled Weakom for the second time.

“I’ve a message.”

The deep monotone voice now sounded cold. It matched the look in the man’s eyes. The chair squeaked as the figure stood, his broad shoulders disturbing the cloud of smoke.

Weakom sat straight-backed against the wall. The sound of a lone cricket looking for a mate would have been his only comfort if it weren’t for the sudden shrill of his mobile phone. In one fast sweep of his hand, he snatched the phone off the side table. He eyeballed the night visitor who stood wagging his finger and shaking his head.

Weakom let the phone ring. Eventually, the noise stopped. An uncomfortable silence descended in the room.

“I’ve a message for you,” growled the man’s baritone voice. “I hate repeating myself so don’t say a word. The only thing you have to do is nod. The boat is on her way. Mr. Big has sent me to make sure you’ll have the money.”

Weakom nodded.

“The boat will be here in three days. The police must be anywhere, but near the wharf when the boat docks. In two days I’ll return for the money. Mr. Big doesn’t like to be short-changed.”

Weakom nodded again.

“The red suitcase in the corner will be packed full of money on my return.” The figure took a few puffs of his cigarette. He stepped forward pulling his gun from his shoulder holster.

Weakom stared at the barrel of the gun, gulping for air.

The visitor unclipped the gun’s magazine extracting a bullet. In the moonlight, he scratched the word ‘Upp’ on the side of the bullet and tossed it onto the bed.

“An exact duplicate of the bullet will be found by the forensic people wedged inside your head if you don’t cough up the money.” He crushed out his cigarette in the carpet and stepped back into the shadows of the room. “Make sure the money is ready.”

“May I say something?”

The man cocked his head to one side.

“You’ve made a mistake. I’m not Upp. My name is Weakom.”

“I don’t make mistakes.”

“I can prove you are in the wrong place and talking to the wrong person.”

The man stepped closer to the bed. “You have thirty seconds.”

“If you have the phone number of the man you called Upp, may I have it?”

The midnight visitor threw a mobile phone onto the bed. “His number is listed under the letter ‘U.’”

Weakom scrolled to the ‘U’s’ and pressed connect. He tossed the phone back to the man. “You can plainly hear, the phone is ringing, but I can’t hear it. I’ve played no trick on you, it’s your phone.”

The man jeered, climbed through the open window and vanished into the night.

Weakom sprinted to the window. He watched the messenger running towards a waiting vehicle. Smoke lazily rose from the exhaust pipe. The driver of the large black car doused the headlight beams. The engine purred as the driver eased the car away from the curb and around the first corner.

Weakom dressed, turned his collar up and quietly walked across the street. He entered an all-night café, ordering a strong black coffee. A man at the rear of the café reading the local newspaper looked up, eyeballing the trembling man.

Weakom faced him square on.

“Do you have a problem?” he hissed.

The man sitting at the table stood. Walking towards the front door he stepped into the light of an overhead fluorescent tube. His face looked secretive as if he wore a mask. His stare was fused on Weakom’s bulging scared eyes. Their shoulders scraped.

Weakom reached up, putting his hand on the big man’s shoulder.

“I asked you a question. Do you have something on your mind?”

The stranger shook his head, pushing the handoff.

“Why stare at me?”

“If anyone touches me they won’t do it twice,” whispered the man.

Weakom flicked his coat open. “Take a look at the metal piece hanging under my arm. Isn’t it a beaut? In case you don’t recognize it. She’s a Glock; a fully loaded automatic gun. The first bullet has your name on it.”

“You shouldn’t make threats you don’t intend to keep.”

”You think you’re so tough?”

The stranger walked to the coffee shop door before glancing over his shoulder.

“We all think we’re tough at different times. In case you’re serious about wanting to inscribe my name on the bullet. Name’s ‘GP.’ I don’t get scared by anyone carrying a weapon. Understand, Weakom?” He turned his back and walked out of the cafe.

Weakom sprinted outside, but GP was gone, swallowed up by the darkness.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

FIFTY COPS congregated around the coffin waiting for the final words from the priest. Soon the coffin will descend, depicting the closure in the life of Little Mike. The once hood and thief turned informer. He'd paid the ultimate price.

The memory of Little Mike in time will fade. Someone with a vendetta had tracked him down and put a stop to his eighteen-month dream of redeeming himself. His violent end came when an arrow went through his heart. The only thing he wanted was to help clean the streets of the hoods and organized crime in Melbourne.

The priest stepped up to the coffin, completing the sign of the cross. Everyone bowed their heads, watching the casket slowly descend into the depths of the earth.

"If anyone wants to drop a flower into Mike's final resting place, a red rose is being distributed," mentioned the Priest. He stepped back to allow the small group to file past.

"Thanks, old mate, you'll be missed," whispered Kendal, looking down into the deep hole at the coffin. He dropped his flower and watched it bounce onto the polished lid.

Behind the priest past the group of people, stood a man. His stare seemed transfixed on Kendal. He appeared to be watching his every move. Kendal looked his way. The man tipped his wide-brimmed hat, before walking away.

"Isn't this a pleasant surprise?"

Kendal faced a wiry man who looked to be slightly nervous. His face appeared to be strained at having the whole world resting on his shoulders.

"What brings you here?"

"Can't you sound a little more cheerful when greeting an old friend?"

"Weakom, I'd never call you an old friend," snarled Kendal.

Ignoring the taunt Weakom continued.

"I've come to ask a favour. Please say you'll help."

"Depends?"

"I'm begging."

Kendal looked deep into the man's eyes. His eyebrows angled to a point. "What's the favour?"

"I've had a very unhappy night visitor. He's mistaken me for a man named Mr. Upp."

"How do you spell the name, one P or two?"

"I don't know. What's more, I don't care. You have to protect me."

"You should expect these sorts of surprises. They come when you play hardball. You want to be in deep cover you have to expect these visitors."

"Keep your voice low. I don't want anyone to hear."

"The only ones here are the good guys."

"Kendal, the trees and the bushes have ears."

“Dead people talk too.”

“I’m serious. My life is on the line and you’re cracking jokes.”

“I’m not trying to be a comedian.”

“Look, when I took on Little Mike’s job I didn’t realize it might be this dangerous.”

“Be a good hood or informer and disappear.”

“Do you even care I might end up like Mike?”

Kendal swiped his sunglasses away from his eyes. “The world will be a happier place.”

“You don’t mean it?”

“I sure do. Now if you don’t mind, my partner and I have important matters to discuss.”

Weakom shadowed the two detectives as they walked away from the gravesite. Finally, he stepped forward, level to Claire.

“You’re standing in my sunlight,” she moaned. “Leave or I’ll throw you head first onto the coffin and bury you myself.”

Weakom shrunk away. He stood watching the two detectives mumbling at each other.

Claire looked over her shoulder giving Weakom a short sharp grin.

“Why is he here?” she whispered.

“To pay his respects to Little Mike and ask us for help.”

“Over?” asked Claire.

“He reported a night visitor disturbed his sleep.”

“It sounds like the messenger might have been a hit man,” warned Claire.

“If he was he’d be dead.”

“Did they rough him up?”

“He didn’t say. By the look of him, I don’t think so.”

“What a shame,” growled Claire. “We should locate this visitor and order him to do his job properly.”

“I did mention to Weakom I’d shoot him if he didn’t leave.”

“So why is he still here? Sugar, you’re growing soft.”

Kendal eyeballed his partner.

“You need to practice your powers of persuasion.”

“Maybe we should find out more details?” jeered Kendal.

“After spilling what he knows and if he doesn’t leave, have I your permission to shoot him?” quizzed Claire.

“He’s your ex-boyfriend.”

Both detectives walked across the grass. They reached the cars and stood in front of Weakom.

“You’ve reconsidered my request?”

“No,” said Kendal. “We’d like more info.”

“What did the hit man want?” asked Claire.

“I didn’t say he was a hit man.”

“Why else would you have a visitor in the dead of night?” asked Kendal. “What did he want?”

“He told me there’s a shipment of drugs coming in.”

“Why tell you?”

“No idea. I’m thinking he got the wrong address. I went for a walk to clear my mind. I ended up at an all-night café. I was sitting at a table when the answer came to me.”

Kendal listened un-interested.

“The messenger made a mistake on the address. I reckon Upp must live in the area. If you stake out my place, when the night visitor returns for the cash you two can nab him.”

“Not much to go on,” stated Claire, raising an eyebrow.

“He told me he’ll be in touch.”

“When?” questioned Kendal.

“He said he’d be back in two days. I need both of you to protect me. Lay in wait for this bloke to arrive. When he does, pounce on him.”

“Is there anything else you want to add?” questioned Kendal.

“Like what?”

“Tell us about any illegal activities?”

“Look, Kendal, I can see where you’re heading. I can assure you I’m legit. I’m on the side of good one hundred percent.”

“That’s your opinion.”

“Stop trying to make me confess to something I didn’t do.”

“It’s not what you’ve done it’s what you will do.”

“I’ve done nothing wrong. If my information is correct, and I believe it is, you were the only one who was against the idea of Little Mike being in deep cover and working for the good guys.”

“At first, I was, yes.”

“The trouble with you Kendal is you’re too suspicious of everyone. Hell, you’d suspect your own partner.”

“I wouldn’t go so far.”

“You think?”

“Don’t upset me Weakom. I don’t like you. Little Mike was different. He went out of his way to prove he had changed and could be trusted.”

“Let me have the same chance.”

“If you want my loyalty you have to prove your worth.”

“One chance is all I need.”

Kendal threw open his car door, glaring at Weakom.

“I’ll give you your one chance, don’t blow it. Claire let’s go.”

Both detectives sat watching Weakom slide onto the passenger seat of a taxi. He leaned towards the driver and talked for several seconds. Then the taxi left the area.

Claire looked sideways at her partner. He wore a far-away look. “What’s up?”

“I don’t like the way Weakom is playing coy. I don’t know what it is? Something isn’t right.”

“I think the man’s just scared.”

Kendal snorted. He moved his stare so he could look out the passenger window. He spied a

man in a wide-brimmed hat walk up to a gravesite about fifty metres from the car park. He stood hunched, reading the inscription on the tombstone before walking off.

“Do you feel like a walk?”

“In a cemetery?” questioned Claire.

“Yes.”

“It’s not what I’d call ‘my favourite place’.”

“Come on, you look like a woman in need of some exercise.” Kendal opened the car door, marching off.

“I need exercise? Speak for yourself.” Claire rolled her eyes. To catch up she needed to sprint. “Where are we going?”

“To the same place, the man wearing the wide brimmed hat went.”

“What man? It’s not the ghost story again?”

Remaining tight-lipped, Kendal glanced at Claire before he caught sight of the man loitering around the rows of headstones. Kendal abruptly stopped, looking Claire in the eyes.

“Could you do me a favour?” he asked.

“It depends.”

“On what?” Kendal grumbled.

“Am I going to receive anything in return?”

“What’s on your mind?”

Claire gave a schoolgirl grin before puckering her lips.

“The price is too high.”

“I won’t do you the favour.”

The man in the wide-brimmed hat looked their way. He studied the love scene before hiding behind a large tombstone.

“Please?” Kendal asked.

Claire battered her eyelids. She wore a look of expectancy.

“Okay, you win.”

Closing her eyes she puckered her lips again. “I can’t count the number of years I’ve been waiting for this moment.” She allowed a giggle to tickle her lips.

Kendal stepped forward, grabbing her by the shoulders. Claire tilted her head back, craning her neck. Kendal stooped slightly, kissing her on the top of her head.

Claire opened her eyes. She pouted before crossing her arms across her chest.

“You’re a thief,” she blurted. “I ought to order you to receive a public flogging.”

“Why? I gave you what you wanted.”

“It’s not exactly what I had in mind.”

“I lived up to my end of the agreement. I want you to stay here. I need to catch up to the man wearing the hat.” Kendal turned and walked off.

Claire kicked at a tuft of weed growing next to an old grave. She read the inscription on the gravestone.

‘Eric you are greatly loved and missed; rest in peace.’

Claire looked up in time to see Kendal walking along a path. Only a remnant of its former glory remained. Weeds were winning the battle to reclaim the path.

Kendal stepped up to a large gravestone. He squatted, picking up a mobile phone from off the ground. It rang. He answered it before it had rung twice.

“Are you alone?”

“GP, you know the answer to the question.”

“I’m testing your honesty.”

“Haven’t I been tested enough?”

“You’ve a good argument. I couldn’t be sure where the love scene might have been heading?”

“What love scene?”

“You and Ambroso,” whispered GP on a chuckle.

“I know you didn’t let me follow you into a cemetery to talk about a fictitious love scene.”

“I didn’t think it was so obvious. You’re right I’ve something important to say. First, I need you to take your partner by the arm and escort her to the funeral commencing on your right. It’s about to rain. Grab an umbrella.”

“Why?”

“I look after my friends, even to the point where I don’t want them to get wet. I’ll catch up in a minute.”

Kendal placed the phone back where he found it before walking back to Claire.

“GP wants both of us to slip into the funeral group on top of the hill.”

“Why?”

“He said he’d explain when we’ve mingled.”

Kendal and Claire walked over to the small congregation. Most of the people were wearing black. A funeral director watched them approach, walked slowly over, handing them both a black umbrella. Kendal and Claire gave the woman a ‘thank you for being so thoughtful’ nod. The female funeral director stepped to the side allowing them to join the rear of the group. She spied another man walking up. His head was bent. His collar was up. She handed him a black umbrella before walking off a short distance.

The rain changed to a fine drizzle. The three latecomers waited for the priest to talk. When he did the man at the rear stepped close. Kendal and Claire felt a jab in the back.

“I know that feel,” growled Claire. “I don’t appreciate a gun digging into my spine.”

“Keep smiling and relax doll face. The only thing I need from both of you is your assurance you won’t turn around.”

“GP, we promise,” whispered Kendal.

He immediately slipped the gun from view.

“Seeing how you can see our faces I think it’s only fair at least one of us sees your face,” hinted Claire.

“You have a valid point. I must refuse the offer.”

“Why? Can’t you stand to look at a woman? Are you ugly?”

“As a matter of fact, I’ve wanted to get close to you doll face so I could smell what brand of

shampoo you use.”

“Do me a favour?” whispered Claire.

“Name it?”

“Don’t ever call me doll face again.”

“Hey Kendal, you’re right, she’s a feisty one.”

Claire flashed squinted eyes at her partner.

“I’m sure we’re not here to talk about Claire’s shampoo,” said Kendal.

The rain started to fall harder. The small group of mourners standing in front of the priest giving the dead person in the coffin his last rights glanced at the sky. Some looked to be moving towards the main building where a light meal will be served the moment they step inside.

“Be careful of the messengers,” whispered GP. “One more thing, Weakom can’t be trusted.”

“Have you any proof?” asked Kendal.

“None yet,” GP replied.

“Not much to go on,” interrupted Claire.

“You should keep a close watch on Weakom.”

“We’ll chew over your thought carefully,” mentioned Kendal.

“I hope you heed my warning. I don’t want to attend either of your funerals.”

The moment the heavens opened the mourners sprinted towards the canteen. The priest looked appalled at the exodus. Out of respect for the dead person, the two detectives remained, waiting for the coffin to settle at the bottom of the pre-dug hole.

The priest made the sign of the cross and looked up. He gave a short sharp smile. “Thanks for staying. You must have loved the dearly departed man.”

“On behalf of my partner I apologize. We seemed to have joined the wrong funeral. Please convey our regrets to the relatives of the dead man,” stated Kendal.

The priest looked horrified, watching the two detectives hand back their umbrellas before walking off to the car park. Wasting no more time the priest quickly followed the main group to the refreshments.

Scanning the cemetery Claire pointed out. “I see GP has slipped away undetected yet again.”

“Yes. I’m sure he’ll be in touch when the time is right.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

KENDAL PARKED his car not far from the previous night’s coffee shop. He led Claire across the street. Two customers looked up the moment they entered the cafe. Both detectives ignored their stares and proceeded to walk through to the kitchen. They paused at the base of a flight of stairs. Ascending the stairs two at a time Kendal’s eyes started to narrow. He didn’t

hesitate when he saw the door at the top. He opened it and marched into the room.

They found a pale skinned man, rat-shaped eyes and of a medium build seated behind a desk. He held a phone to his ear. The room looked no larger than a shoebox. The bed was nestled under the window. The curtains were closed to block out the look of the weather.

The man dropped the phone back onto its cradle and stood. He extended his hand in a welcoming gesture.

Kendal pointed his finger at the man. "I don't want you to think I'm being rude when I tell you I'm not in the mood. I have some inside information you're not playing by the rules."

"Good to see you again detectives. Kendal, I didn't know you have a creative bone in your body. Rude and mood in the same sentence could make for a one hit poem."

"Don't play games."

"Now what gives you that idea?"

Kendal leaned on the desk. Claire skirted the room and stepped up behind the man.

"Weakom, start talking," bellowed Kendal.

"Detective, I don't know what you want me to say?"

"Detective Sergeant to you, Daniel," spat Claire.

"I'm at a loss on what to say. I do want to personally thank you for giving me my one chance," chirped Weakom.

"I think I should retract my statement."

"Why? I'm not sure if you've been told, I am on your side."

"Of course, you're on our side," jeered Kendal. "You and Captain Hughes are like brothers from the moment you two met."

Weakom chuckled. "So what's the problem?"

"You are."

Claire leaned over the desk, thrusting her nose at her ex-boyfriend. "We need a confession," she probed.

"Honey, darling, I haven't a clue what you're talking about?"

"Don't you honey darling me."

"Tell me something, why were you given this job?" Looking over Weakom's shoulder he stared at an old picture behind a sheet of glass.

"Little Mike died. I was offered the job. It paid well and I took it."

"You took it." Kendal refocused his attention on the man sitting at the desk. "You took on the job?"

The man's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I told you."

"Yes, you did. You took on the job."

Weakom nodded. "Claire, remember how I helped you through the tough times after your husband died? If you come back to me I'll spoil you rotten."

"Daniel, you don't stand a chance. If I knew then what I know now, I'd have run a mile."

“Weakom, you’re a snake. I don’t like you and I have to confess you repulse me. However there’s nothing I can do about it,” snarled Kendal. He swiped up a vase. Pulling out the single red rose he looked into the water before replacing the flower.

“What are you looking for?”

“Nothing, in particular, I’m curious on knowing how people live. You can call it a bad habit.” Kendal again focused on the picture hanging on the wall.

“You don’t have a bad habit, you’re snooping.”

“Nice photo of the jungle. What does it mean?” asked Kendal.

“I don’t understand?” quizzed Weakom.

“What does the picture represent?”

“It’s a picture I found at a garage sale.”

“Why did you go to Little Mike’s funeral?”

“Why not, he was my predecessor.”

“Captain Hughes confided in me he thought it might be too dangerous for you to attend.” Kendal scrunched his nose. “The picture, what did you say it meant to you?”

“You didn’t come for a chat about my picture.”

“You didn’t answer my question?”

“I said I bought it.”

Kendal interrupted. “Yes, at a garage sale.”

“It looked nice and tranquil.”

“I don’t think a Cambodian jungle scene is tranquil.”

“I do.”

“I suppose everyone has their own opinion.”

“The job you took on could be dangerous to your health,” advised Claire. “If the wrong person ever found out where you live you’d be dead meat. Doesn’t that concern you?”

“I get paid a lot of money. A few years from now when I’m retired and sitting on a beach somewhere I’ll think of you two chasing criminals,” hinted Weakom. “What information are you in need of? I’ll use my expertise to find the answer.”

“I’m wondering if you know anything about a man going by the name of GP?” quizzed Kendal.

“What’s his real name?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“I’ll see what I can dig up. In the mean time is there anything else?”

“Yes, there are two more things.”

Weakom looked Kendal in the eyes as if he was interested.

“I’ll make this quick. I’m looking for kids who break into houses.”

“I’ll see what I can find out.”

“For the record, I’ve yet to decide whether we should help protect you from these night messengers. We’ll get back to you.”

“You said there were two things?”

Walking over to the wall Kendal faked a grin.

“You’re right, I did.” He pulled the picture frame from off the wall and placed it under his arm. “I need to borrow this picture for a few days.”

“Certainly,” snorted Weakom. “Can you tell me why you need that particular picture?”

“My daughter Tegan is in need of a jungle photo. I thought she could make a copy to use in her project.”

“Be my guest. I hope your daughter gets a top mark.”

Kendal opened the door. Claire closed it on their way out.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

KENDAL DROVE towards Melbourne airport. His silence portrayed his mood.

“Sugar, why on earth did you confiscate Weakom’s photo?”

“I’ll let you know inside.”

Kendal parked the car outside a busy terminal. Leaning behind him he snatched the photo frame from off the back seat. Claire stepped from the car in time to argue with a traffic officer.

“You can’t park here,” Kendal heard him say. “Tell your boyfriend to move it or I’ll write him a ticket.”

“Boyfriend?” grumbled Claire. “I wish.”

The well-groomed athletic built parking officer produced his ticket machine.

“You,” he bellowed, pointing at Kendal. “Move your vehicle; you’re blocking the way. If you don’t I’ll finish writing you a parking ticket.”

Kendal stepped up to the man.

“I’m not going to repeat myself.”

Before the man uttered a word Claire flashed her police badge.

The man’s hardened face quickly softened. “You can stay parked.”

“Call me, I’m Detective Claire Ambroso. Here’s my phone number.” She placed a neatly folded piece of white paper in the man’s hand and helped him curl his fingers into a fist. “I’m available 24/7.”

“What about the bloke?”

“He completes the package. He’s my partner. Come Sergeant Kendal. We have an appointment.”

“What was that all about?” he asked, catching Claire up and grabbing her by the arm. “Don’t start something you might regret, I’m not in the mood.”

“Lighten up. I wanted the bloke to think I’m in charge. By the expression on his face, I could tell he felt impressed. I’m sure he’ll ring me for a night out, and you’re not invited.” Claire

giggled, poked him in the gut and broke into a trot.

Kendal stood shaking his head. He whistled. “Miss in charge,” he called. “We have to go the opposite direction you’re running. The sniffer dogs are this way.”

Claire turned on her toes, scouting the area for the traffic officer. She spotted him talking calmly to an irate woman.

“Why do you have to give every bloke you meet your phone number?” Kendal questioned when she finally caught up.

They stepped onto the travelator, heading for the customs area.

“I’m a single woman. I can do what I want, Mr. Jealous.”

“Me, jealous, never!” he exclaimed.

They walked to the frosted glass door of the international lounge. The moment Kendal saw a security guard he changed direction.

“Can I help you folks?” the security guard quizzed, folding his arms.

Kendal faced Claire. “Give him your phone number to get it out of the way.”

“I’m married doll face, but thanks for the flattery.”

“Why do you men have to call me that stupid name? If you think it’s fashionable forget it. The words won’t get you any brownie points, or red or green or purple.”

Kendal flashed his police badge at the man.

“What’s on her goat?” quizzed the guard.

“She’s having a bad day.”

“What can I do you for?”

“I need a dog to sniff this photo.”

“I’m not sure what it’ll achieve?”

“Me either,” confessed Kendal. “I’d like to try anyway even if it’s futile.”

The guard led the detectives towards the customs area. Walking past a newsagency Kendal spied three people walking about the large shop.

“By the way, I’m Lewis,” announced the guard.

“I’m Detective Sergeant Kendal, Melbourne Homicide. This woman is my partner, Detective Sergeant Claire Ambroso.”

“It’s nice to meet you both.” Lewis stopped at a door. Staring at Claire, he chuckled.

“What?” she demanded.

“You must be desperate for love if you wanted to give me your phone number?”

“One has to keep fishing.” Claire let go of a giggle before lowering her voice. “I’m not desperate for your sort of company.”

A cold steel expression replaced the guard’s friendly look. He cleared his throat by coughing into his fist.

“What I’ll do is place the photo at the end of this line. The dog will be led up and back down as it sniffs the bags. If there is any drug residue he’ll sniff it out.”

Both detectives waited patiently for the dog to be led up and back down the line of bags, twice. When the dog reached the photo he walked past.

“Nothing,” grumbled Kendal.

“Sorry,” said Lewis.

“I’m not sure if I’m disappointed or not.”

The guard looked puzzled.

“It’s a long story. I was hoping to turn a negative into a positive.”

“What we can do is open the back of the photo to have a closer look. No damage will come to the photo. It’ll be replaced as it is. Nobody will know.”

Kendal watched the proceedings. It appeared to be a simple task. The whole operation took less than five minutes.

“Nothing,” announced the custom’s officer handing the photo back.

“Thanks for your time. Give a pat to the dog for me. Claire let’s go.”

“Where do we go from here?”

“I want a copy of this photo. I’ll fax it to the lab boys at Police Headquarters. I want to know what the white dot is in the middle of the picture.”

Claire grabbed the photo. Her eyes zoomed into the white dot.

“Interesting don’t you think?”

“It could be anything or nothing.”

“It’s definitely something,” advised Kendal.

The detectives found the photoshop in easy reach of the customs area. Yellow photo pockets were piled ten high on one side of the counter; photo frames on the other.

“Twenty minutes, Sir,” reported the young man with a neat appearance. Grinning at Claire he proceeded to make a two-bit conversation.

Kendal straightened to full height. “Is it possible to have my photo sooner?”

“No.”

“That’s blunt,” whispered Claire.

“We’re in a hurry.”

“Isn’t everyone?”

“Thanks,” said Kendal. “I know you’ll do your best. A word of advice from one bloke to another, forget, the woman she’s older than your mother.”

Claire and Kendal walked out of the tiny shop leaving the boy red faced.

“You spoilt his day,” announced Claire.

“I was only helping.”

“I had everything under control. I’d have let him down gently.”

“I took a short cut.”

The two detectives sat at a small square table to wait. They heard a ruckus developing on the escalator. Kendal gave two security guards running to help their mate special attention. The guards grabbed hold of a man by the collar. He was wearing a long light brown almost caramel coloured duffel coat.

“Claire I sense the scene is trouble. Do you feel like some exercise?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” chuckled Claire.

“Let’s go take a closer look.”

They stood as one.

Riding the escalator to the top, Claire’s eyes sparkled. On the next level, the scene looked intense.

“Why are you loitering about?” barked one of the security guards, directing his question at the man in the duffel coat.

“The staff at the departure lounge has kept a close watch on you for some time,” added the second guard.

“I don’t know what you mean?” questioned the man.

“They’re not neat dressers,” mumbled Kendal in Claire’s ear, passing the half way point to the top. “Both guards look scruffy and unshaven. The first guard has double lines down the center of his trousers. His shirt is covered in wrinkles.”

The man in the caramel coloured duffel coat glanced at the two detectives riding the escalator. Neither was in the right position for a positive identification. The offender seemed to nod. The man king hit both security guards, spun on his toes and was on the run. Both Kendal and Claire blinked at the other before sprinting after the man.

The security guards were trying desperately to scramble to their feet. One overweight guard limped down the corridor. The other lay on the ground nursing his head. He groaned into his two-way radio, giving a rough description of the offender and two others, a man wearing a black duffel coat and a woman wearing black leathers.

A tall thin guard ran up to take on the pursuit.

A wave of people swarmed the corridor on their way to the departure lounge. Kendal and Claire were caught up in the current and made slow progress against the flow.

Kendal pushed on. He caught a glimpse of the man rounding a corner. He shouldered the wall. Looking around the corner, he watched the man running into the men’s toilet block ten metres further on. The moment Claire arrived she pulled her gun from her ankle strap.

Somewhere behind them, a woman screamed.

Both detectives sprinted for the toilet block. They entered cautiously.

The doors to the four cubicles were closed.

“Find the security guard and direct him here,” whispered Kendal.

Claire housed her gun and ran off.

The first cubicle door opened. A clean-shaven businessman wearing a black-pinned striped suit stepped out carrying a laptop computer case. He said hello in a calm voice. He washed his hands before walking out.

Kendal focused on the next cubicle. He checked for shoes. There were none. He walked into cubicle three and took a punt.

“Are you in cubicle four?”

Silence was the reply.

He repeated the question.

“I’m here,” said a whispered voice.

“Why are you running?”

“Security thought I might be trouble.”

“Are you?”

“Not exactly,” replied the man.

“What’s your name?”

“You can call me GP.”

“I knew it. How am I going to get you out of here?”

“Have no fear. I’ve a plan.”

Kendal heard footsteps on the tiled floor. In seconds all he could hear was silence. He walked out, stepping into cubicle four. He shut the door when he heard the security guards entering the toilet block. Grabbing the long brown coat off the back of the door, Kendal stepped out of the cubicle.

“Freeze sucker,” screamed the guard. His handcuffs were ready to snap over the offender’s wrists.

Kendal raised his hands. “Take it easy.”

“Lie on the ground, placing your hands behind your head.”

“I’m not hitting the floor. It’s putrid.”

“You’ll do as you’re told.” The guard squared his gun, pointing it at Kendal.

“I’m a cop.”

“Prove it.”

“Don’t get nervous. I’m reaching into my coat and fishing for my police badge.”

“Do it very slowly, if you don’t, metal will fill you.”

Kendal slowly slipped his hand into his coat pocket, pulling out his badge.

The guard inhaled a deep breath, housing his gun.

“Did you see anyone else in here?”

Kendal felt thankful he didn’t have to lie. “No. I found this coat hanging in the cubicle. I did see a man walking out carrying a laptop, but I reckon he’s too short and thin to be the man you’re after.”

Claire burst into the men’s toilet block.

“Partner, I hate to break up a party, it’s time to pick up our photo.”

“Better luck next time.” Kendal grinned, slapping the guard on the shoulder.

Both detectives marched towards the photoshop.

“You look like someone owning a problem?” probed Kendal.

“Yes. You made me walk off in another direction while you searched the toilet block.”

Kendal knew where the statement was heading and braced himself for the onslaught.

“You and the offender were the only ones in there, yet you let him walk away. Why?”

“I’ve a simple explanation.”

“Talk,” snarled Claire.

“The man we were chasing happened to be GP.”

“How did you know?”

“He told me.”

“You saw his face?” quizzed Claire. A sparkle filled her eyes.

“No. Right from the start of the chase, I thought the man might have been GP.”

“He’s quite a good escape artist.”

“He left a black envelope on the toilet seat.”

“What does it say?”

Kendal ripped open the top edge of the envelope, pulling out the note. He read it out loud. Thanks for letting me go, friend; GP.”

“Ballsy,” said Claire. “I’d like to see this bloke face to face. He sounds like a catch.”

Kendal entered the photoshop shaking his head. He paid for the picture, called the police lab and found a fax machine in the news-agency they had walked past earlier.

“By the time we arrive back at Police Headquarters the lab boys will be finished their work on the picture and my question will be answered.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

CAPTAIN HUGHES’ office overlooked the police garage. After knocking on the sturdy wooden door the two detectives were called into the office.

“Kendal and Claire Ambroso how wonderful it is to see you again. How long’s it been since our last encounter?”

“Two days,” answered Kendal.

“I hope you can tell me who the culprit is, the one who’s doing all the house burglaries?”

“I have a theory.” Kendal studied the tall heavy-set man with the booming voice. “Nice glasses Cap. Have you lost weight? If my eyes aren’t deceiving me I think you’ve trimmed at least seven pounds.”

“I’ve seven pounds of ulcers thanks to you.”

Claire burst into uncontrollable chuckles.

“What’s the joke?” bellowed Captain Hughes. The veins on his neck surfaced, threatening to explode through his tough skin.

Claire’s giggling suddenly ceased.

“I’m waiting,” jeered Captain Hughes, drumming thick stubby fingers on the desktop.

Kendal’s words spewed out of his mouth in a rush.

“I don’t want to table my theory too early. All the facts aren’t in.”

“Okay, if it’s what you want? I’ll change the subject. I want to know about the woman in the park.”

“Forget the woman,” urged Claire. “Weakom owns a house in the Cambodian jungle.”

Captain Hughes lifted his hand, interrupting her. "I have the commissioner on my back because the woman's husband has made a formal complaint about you two. I must stress a very serious complaint."

"Cap."

"Kendal, stop calling me that name. Have you any idea what I've had to endure lately? The media are hounding me like a fox running away from a pack of dogs and the only thing you want to say is you don't want to table your ideas. And you, Ambroso want to talk about Weakom's house."

"I apologize for calling you Cap," mumbled Kendal. "It's a force of habit. Nicknames are hard to break."

Hughes shook his head. "If only my predecessor hadn't been an ex-army soldier I wouldn't be taunted by you or anyone else. I've managed to silence the media for twenty-four hours. I'm sure there will be a feeding frenzy over the woman you nearly arrested in the park by this time tomorrow?"

"Let's start again," hinted Kendal. He dropped a copy of the photo he confiscated from Weakom on the desk.

"What's this?"

"Sir, Claire and I have come from the lab. They discovered the white dot in the center of the photo is a house. It's nestled in the middle of the Cambodian jungle."

"So?"

"Weakom owns the house."

Hughes briefly studied the photo before slamming it down on the desk. When he looked up he didn't look any happier. "It doesn't look like a house."

"The lab boys say it is."

"Again I ask. So?"

"I think Weakom is up to no good."

"Ever since I promoted him to help the police clean up the streets of Melbourne, you've got something against the man. Have you any proof to back up your accusation?"

"No."

"I thought as much. Forget the man. He's in deep cover. If you start poking your nose around trying to find something against him which isn't there and the thugs find out?"

"I know," interrupted Kendal. "He'll end up dead like Little Mike."

Both detectives sat, staring at Captain Hughes. Using his wheeled chair for a skateboard Hughes scooted to the window and studied the impound yard. Eventually, he scooted back to the desk.

"I want you both to explain to me why you were considering arresting the woman in the park?"

"Mistaken identity," confessed Kendal. "She looked to be a dead ringer for Pat."

"I hope your wife and kids have been moved to a safe place?"

"Not yet."

“Kendal, stop delaying and get your family away. You need help. I’ll take charge from here. A couple of quick phone calls will more than double the efforts of the whole police force. By the end of the day, the arsonist will be back where she belongs. Now go find the person committing those house robberies.”

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

CLAIRE AND Kendal sat in his car looking up at Weakom’s window. The few people walking past were either going out or trying to get home. Four female teenagers giggled at a joke one of the girls said. They glanced at the two occupants sitting in the car, strolled across the street wearing uninterested expressions and sprinted off.

A small stone skidded off the car’s roof and slid down the windscreen.

Claire jumped.

“Interesting,” whispered Kendal. He turned his head so he could look out the rear window.

A shadow crossed the street, entering the nearby lane.

“Partner, stay here I won’t be long.”

Claire’s gaze bore into his back as he went after the shadow. She quietly opened the car door, following Kendal. She grabbed him by the arm before he got to the lane.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she quizzed.

“I could ask you the same question?”

“The same place you are.”

“No, you’re not.”

“If you try and stop me I’ll-”

“You’ll what?” he interrupted

“I’ll scream.”

“Come on. You keep to the shadows on your left; I’ll keep to the right. If nothing else, it’ll stop you from screaming.”

Claire grinned, pulling the gun from her ankle strap. She moved to within millimeters of the wall before slowly walking towards the end of the lane. She could barely see the outline of a doorway at the other end. Kendal copied her journey.

From behind a dump bin situated halfway down the lane, a voice whispered.

“Why did you bring the feisty one?”

“GP?” questioned Kendal, his voice low.

“Correct.”

“I couldn’t stop her. You know she’s a sticky nose.”

A whispered laugh echoed from a doorway.

“Claire Ambroso it’s nice to meet you.”

“I’d feel the same if I could see you?”

“You know it’s not an option. We discussed the idea the last time we met,” whispered GP.

“You were standing behind us. You took away our choice.”

“It’s exactly the way I like it to stay.”

“What’s the stone act on the car for?” moaned Claire.

“I thought we might try for another meeting. The lane is dark, no one will see or hear a thing,” announced GP.

“For a thug, you act like you’re scared of your own shadow,” hinted Claire.

“The last bloke who gave me lip service like you just did was discovered underwater in Port Phillip Bay.”

“I don’t recall being informed of the find,” stated Claire.

“Me neither,” added Kendal. “Is there something you need to share?”

“Come to think of it, I don’t think the person has been discovered. The day will come.”

“I have a right to see your face,” insisted Claire. “So be a man and step out from behind the bin.”

A deadly silence descended on the lane.

Another group of girls walked past the entrance. Seeing three shadows they acted like the first group and sprinted off across the street.

“Are you going to step away from the bin or am I going to have to fight you?” questioned Claire.

“To answer your question detective; I have to decline your persistent nagging. I hope it won’t be a problem?”

GP pulled out a razor sharp scalpel from his pocket. Twisting it slowly in his hand he studied the metal blade. It glistened in the only light coming from a naked globe above the rear doorway of a shop. He angled the knife so the point of the blade was level to Claire’s heart.

“You can address me as Detective Sergeant Ambroso.”

“I’m happy she’s not my partner,” commented GP.

“She’s okay. Give her some time to warm to you.”

“Why the secrets?” asked Claire.

“I’m a thug through and through.”

“What brings you here at this precise moment?”

“I could ask the same question myself,” replied GP.

“Somehow I believe you know the answer, you just won’t say,” jibbed Claire.

“You’re a bright and attractive woman. I don’t want any harm to come to you.”

“I take what you’ve said to be a threat.”

“It’s not meant to be. I couldn’t sleep. Nice night for a walk, don’t you think?”

“You sound like a smart arse.” Claire took a step closer to the voice.

Again the scalpel reflected light from the incandescent light globe.

“I’d prefer it if you’d take a step back. Anyone seeing my face will die. There are no

exceptions to my rule. I don't want either of you hurt. I'm asking you, please, stay away."

"Claire, respect the man's privacy," insisted Kendal.

She took a step back, fingering her gun.

"Don't be nervous," blurted Kendal.

"Killed anyone lately?" asked Claire.

"No. Unless I've been sleep walking." The whispered laugh returned.

"I don't understand the humour."

"Kendal, she is a feisty one."

"Cut the crap," snarled Claire.

"You can throw in pendulum mood swings for good measure. Better you than me," announced GP.

"Why are you here?" growled Claire.

"Like you, I'm here to watch."

"Watch what?" asked Kendal.

"Weakom's place," replied GP.

"Why?" Claire asked.

"He's been complaining of a night visitor."

"Do you know what the messenger wants?" questioned Kendal.

"The visitor is only a small fly in this web of mystery. You need to find the answer to the puzzle."

"Which is?" asked Claire.

"Discover the heart of the spider."

"Do you know who it is?"

"I can't say. Before you get all overcome sweet knees, I have my suspicions, I just can't prove it."

"Tell us what you know."

"No."

"Why not?" asked Claire.

"I deal in facts. When I discover more we can compare notes. Besides, I have to let you cops figure something out on your own. Shame about Little Mike, he was a good bloke. Give my condolences to the family."

Kendal started to walk back down the lane.

"If you're like a fox you might see the visitor's shadow," whispered GP.

Claire glanced at her partner. Both sprinted towards Weakom's door. Glancing over his shoulder, Kendal spied GP walking in the opposite direction.

Both detectives were outside Weakom's door before GP finished walking to the end of the lane. The apartment door was locked. Kendal pulled two splinter-thin metal tubes from his coat pocket. Inserting the tubes into the lock, he heard a faint click. Housing the illegal entry kit in his coat pocket he twisted the door handle. He smiled as he remembered how Little Mike showed him how easy it was to open a locked door.

A new moon helped to mask the entry of the two detectives. They slipped undetected inside and squatted behind a half wall. Whispered voices could be heard coming from the bedroom at the end of the hall. A small light from a lit cigarette convinced Kendal the place wasn't kosher. The night visitor Weakom desperately tried to convince him of appeared to be back. A cloud of remorse swept through Kendal's body. He shook his head, burying the feeling.

Both detectives watched the faint red glow from the lit cigarette rise and fall several times. Kendal signaled Claire to be ready. She returned a decisive nod.

"Weakom doesn't smoke," she whispered. "The one holding the cigarette must be the night visitor."

Kendal knew GP happened to be right on the money. A large clock hanging on the wall geared to strike. Kendal readied himself to move on the first strike of the pendulum. He looked at Claire. She seemed to know what he wanted to do. Horrific thoughts of his first partner dying in his arms flooded his consciousness. He was supposed to have known too. At least Claire wasn't drunk. Drinking on the job, to her, was a definite no. The shoot-out cost his former partner his life. Thanks to Marg and Claire he actually stayed away from the whisky bottle. He now proudly displays the un-opened bottle on the desk in his study.

Kendal's spine tingled. He shut out the feeling and the memory of his last partner. In a split second, he re-focused on the lit cigarette in the hand of the uninvited visitor.

The clock struck the first of twelve strikes. On each strike, both detectives moved closer to the lit cigarette in the bedroom at the end of the hall. Their masked presence seemed to go un-noticed.

Two metres from the door chaos erupted.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

"CAP HUGHES I'm not sure what tipped off the visitor," reported Kendal. "The twelve hammer strikes made by the clock should've drowned out any noise we made as we crept up the hall. On the seventh strike, a pepper of bullets ate into the wall to our right. By the time the bullets got close to where we were hiding, we were again squatting behind the half wall. Claire fired first. She aimed low. I went high and retaliated by squeezing off four shots. At the climax of the firefight, both Claire and I fired a total of six bullets."

"Didn't you consider Weakom might have been shot?"

"If he was alive I knew he'd be cowering under the bed."

"It sounds like a huge gamble?"

"Not really. I've known Weakom for a while. He's a coward, afraid of his own shadow. I don't know what Claire ever saw in the bloke. He's not her style."

Captain Hughes pointed to a constable who'd been one of the first to arrive as backup.

"I want this place locked down. Get a statement from Weakom. I want a description of this night visitor he's been mumbling about in my hand in five minutes. I also want somebody to tell me how the mongrel visitor escaped?"

The constable marched off to find Weakom.

"Kendal, I don't suppose you were successful in achieving a positive ID on the visitor?"

He shook his head. "We weren't close enough and the room was too dark. The only light in the room came from the visitor's lit cigarette."

"If you were both hiding behind the half wall explain to me how Claire got shot?"

In a moment of silence, Kendal recollected his thoughts, organizing them in the exact order.

"I started to reload. Before I could say no, Claire dived over the half wall. I saw a laser light tracking her as she crawled for the safety of the sofa. Both myself and the visitor must have fired at the same time."

"How certain are you?"

"Ninety-nine, point nine percent positive."

Captain Hughes narrowed his eyes.

"I heard only the one shot. Claire went down and so did the visitor. I rushed to Claire's side. By the time I dragged her behind the sofa, the night visitor had vanished."

"Hey Sugar, I'll be up and running by morning."

"Fellas, take her to the hospital," ordered Captain Hughes to the two ambulance officers. "Be there yesterday."

The ambulance officers looked at each other, frowning.

"Go, go."

"I'll be at the hospital soon," declared Kendal.

Seeing Claire beginning to sit, one of the ambulance officers forced her back down onto the trolley.

"I'm thankful she only suffered a nick in the leg," jeered Kendal. "Things could've been a lot worse."

"I agree. The ambos reckon she'll be okay. Two days using a walking stick and she'll be just like new. For once I'm thankful I won't hear any of her complaints," added Hughes. "Before you ask, I'm on leave for five days."

"Lucky you," said Kendal.

"What of the visitor?"

"He was definitely wounded," advised Kendal. "There's a spot of blood where he'd been sitting near the bed. I believe he might have been a professional hit man."

"Where's Weakom?" asked Hughes.

"Right where I thought he'd be; cowering under the bed."

"Do you know anything about the murder in the lane?"

Kendal looked Hughes in the eyes. His usual friendly expression turned cold.

"What murder?"

"Come, I'll show you."

Captain Hughes led Kendal outside. They skirted the media who were scrambling for their camera equipment. They ducked under the police tape and entered the lane.

“You,” yelled Hughes, pointing to a rookie cop in uniform. He was trying to stop the media from entering the lane and looked to be losing the argument. “I must stress no one walks down the lane.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Both detectives marched to the end of the lane. There were two locked doors and three teenagers. The throats of the three youths were cut.

“The lads barely look seventeen,” admitted Hughes. “The instrument used must have been razor sharp. It looks like an execution-style murder.”

Kendal nodded. “It was a scalpel.”

“Lucky guess or do you know more than I think you do?”

“I’m thinking out loud.”

Hughes pushed his fingers through his receding hairline. “Go to the hospital. When you have a written report on tonight, drop it on my desk. If you want to add anything, put it in the report. I’m going home to pack.”

“There’s one thing I need to ask. I’d like Claire to go undercover as an assistant school teacher.”

“Is there any particular reason?” asked Hughes scrunching his nose.

“I think the houses are burgled by kids. I’m thinking this might be the perfect opportunity to find a strong lead seeing how she’ll be on light duties for a few days.”

“I agree. Let her know.” Hughes hesitated before walking off. “On second thoughts, order her to.”

“She probably won’t listen to me.”

“I’ll swing past the hospital. Bring the idea to my attention in front of her. I’ll act like I’ve never heard of it before. If she kicks and bucks I’ll order her to do it.” Hughes added. “While I’m on a short break, watch your back, Patrick might be planning his revenge on you.”

Kendal followed Hughes out of the lane. It had been a hell of a day; the funeral of a friend, Claire being shot, and now this. He suddenly felt drained. He closed his eyes as he walked. His mobile phone sounded. Kendal instinctively yanked it from his pocket.

“Al, are you ok? There’s a news flash on the TV saying there’s been a murder in a lane and a cop’s been shot dead. They said there’s a serial killer on the loose.”

“Marg, there’s no serial killer and there’s no dead cop. Claire received a nick in the leg. She was lucky. Fortunately, she’s at the hospital and can’t hear me. I’ll let you in on a secret. She whined something fierce about her new leather pants being ruined.”

“How can you say the streets are safe if there’s been a murder? I heard the term execution style.”

“I’ll meet you at the hospital. Be warned, Claire’s not in a good mood. As for the execution-style murder, I wouldn’t go that far.”

“I suppose you know who the murderer is?”

“I think he was GP. The only hassle is I can’t prove it.”

“Just because you’re good at these murder mystery parties doesn’t mean your right every time.”

Kendal chuckled. “Tegan runs rings around me. I’ll explain everything when you arrive at the hospital. Love you.”

He hung up and dropped the phone back into his pocket. Slipping behind the steering wheel of his car Kendal closed his eyes again. A screech of tyres forced them back open. He focused on two uniform cops running his way. He saw them pull their guns from their holsters. Before they shouted, Kendal scrambled for his police badge, shoving it under their noses.

“Sorry Sir, we thought you might be the murderer,” stated the first Constable. “You do fit the description.”

“It’s a simple mistake. Inform me of the description you were given?”

“Tall male; similar build to you wearing a black three quarter length duffel coat.”

“GP; what a bloke,” mumbled Kendal.

“Did you say something, Sir?” asked the first cop.

“I was only thinking out loud. Let’s take a look at the lane before Erving arrives.”

“Who?” asked the second cop.

“One of the forensic boys,” replied Kendal.

“I’m all for it,” yelled the second cop. “I’d like to be a detective some day. The experience will be priceless.”

“Do you think it’s a good idea?” the first cop asked. “The lane is a crime scene. We might accidentally destroy precious evidence.”

“Make sure you don’t touch anything. Observe everything,” suggested Kendal.

The three cops walked to the end of the lane. In the doorway at the east end behind the large dump bin, Kendal showed where the murder took place. The faces of the two constables quickly turned paper white three seconds before they both vomited.

Kendal took four steps backwards and squatted. He was enjoying the moment. He had his doubts the first rookie cop would ever amount to anything more than a Senior Constable, but the second rookie might just make detective. He appeared determined the feeling of being nauseous wasn’t going to beat him.

The second constable mimicked Kendal’s squat while the other seemed comfortable standing at a distance. They were looking at a particularly gruesome scene. Teenagers with their throats cut never portrayed a pretty picture.

Kendal showed the two Constables how to find evidence without destroying the area. He felt sorry for the two men but as one of the Constables put it, ‘the experience was priceless.’

“It appears the deceased boys ran up the lane chasing someone,” Kendal started. “He or she came to this dead end, turned and faced the three teenagers. In defense of the victim ‘come murderer,’ slashed the three deceased teenagers. The murderer must have been a male. He’s the one you were looking for.”

“Why do you think the murderer could be a man and not a woman?” asked the second rookie.

“When I tell your idea to my female partner she gets a little upset. The victim, come murderer, could have been a woman, but I don’t think it’s possible. She would have needed to be physically strong enough to defeat three strong late teenage youths. Further observations to back up my decision are: there’s no apparent bruising. No noses are broken. Except for the knife wound across each of the male throat, there’s no blood anywhere else. It was a quick clean triple murder. If you study the lane, nothing has been disturbed. The garments hanging on the rusty metal line above our heads are spotless. That represents a message the victims didn’t have time to put up much of a struggle.”

“They must have been totally surprised,” advised the second cop.

“Exactly,” said Kendal. “The few windows overlooking the lane, not one are broken or cracked. No glass fragments litter the lane which tells me no bottles were used in the seconds leading up to the murder.” Kendal walked over to the large dump bin. “This bin hasn’t been emptied yet and exactly as I said before, this murder looks like an execution.”

“Hey, you three, clear off.”

“Erving, good to see you,” called Kendal, looking in the direction of the voice.

The big man grumbled and started marching up the lane. “It’s not good to see you.”

“I was teaching the two rookies what to look for at a crime scene.”

“I don’t care if you were playing marbles, get out of the lane. You’re messing things up.”

“Don’t be nervous, Erving always talks like that.”

Kendal slapped Erving on the shoulder as he escorted the two rookies out of the lane. He bid the rookies a goodnight and slipped behind the steering wheel of his car. Just before he closed his eyes he spied a black envelope sitting on the front passenger seat. He swiped it up and read the note.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

A SMALL group consisting of a woman, two kids, an old lady, a man in a duffel coat and an older man in a grey suit, stood on either side of the hospital bed.

“This isn’t a wake. I’m not dying,” giggled Claire.

Kendal grinned, slapping her on the shoulder. He handed over the black envelope he’d been holding and watched Claire pull out the note.

“Compliments of GP,” he said.

“It’s a get well card!” exclaimed Claire.

The shortest of the group jumped onto the bed, giving Claire a bear hug.

“Hi there Tani, I’m happy you and your sister came to visit.”

“We brought you a bunch of flowers,” said Tegan.

"I'm glad you're okay," whispered Marg. "I have to take mum home. I'll see you later."

The old woman waved as she shuffled out of the room.

"Short stuff you take charge and escort your mum and Grandma to the car. I'm okay. I'll see you at home," insisted Claire.

Tani folded her arms, pouting. "I'm no short stuff."

"You sound more like your father every day." Claire ruffled her hair, hugging her tight.

Both kids followed their mother and Grandma out of the room and down the corridor to the lift.

Claire handed the note to Captain Hughes. He remained silent, studying the card. Kendal gave him the watered down version of who GP is.

"Continue the game he's playing. We'll see where it leads. You never know, he might be on the level."

"I've a request?" asked Kendal, facing Captain Hughes.

"I'm listening."

Claire raised her eyebrows, fidgeting in her bed. "I'm listening too."

"I think the burglaries in the local area are made by kids," started Kendal. "Furthermore I think whoever sprung Patrick out of the nut house is blackmailing the kids into committing the burglaries."

"That's it?" bellowed Captain Hughes. "You want me to go into a meeting this afternoon and tell the commissioner of police the burglaries are done by kids. Give me something more. I wouldn't want my few days off to be cancelled."

"Don't forget to mention the idea the kids are being blackmailed into doing the robberies."

"Do you have a name of the person responsible?"

"Not yet."

"Any new leads on finding Patrick?" asked Hughes.

"No, but I believe I'm close."

"I feel a headache coming on."

"Sir, if I may suggest. I think Claire might be able to get closer to finding out the kids' identity by being a student teacher at Bluevale Secondary College."

Captain Hughes glared at the two detectives in turn before settling his gaze back on Kendal. He stood military style before folding his arms.

"Claire, do you go along with Kendal's thoughts?"

"Captain, I have to protest in the strongest possible way. I'm not a teacher."

"I'll make a special note on your concerns. Kendal, make the arrangements at the school."

"Captain, I have to protest," urged Claire more firmly.

Hughes looked Claire in the eyes. "The plan sounds good."

She mumbled incoherent words under her breath.

Kendal snickered, escorting Captain Hughes out of the room.

"You can drop the smirk," yelled Claire.

"Kendal, tell her good luck."

He nodded and watched the Captain walk down the corridor towards the lift. Re-entering the room Kendal didn't feel brave enough to get too close to Claire's reach.

"You'll make a fine assistant teacher."

She glared at him through black eyes. "I won't do it."

"It'll be the perfect cover."

"No."

"You'll heal quicker."

"No. Besides, I'm thinking of retiring. I've Peter's insurance money to spend. A million dollars will go a long way. I'm sure if he was still alive he'd agree."

"I'm sure he'd want you to finish the case first. Come on. The case needs you."

"Who needs me?"

"Ok, I need you."

"I'll agree only if you let me kiss you."

It was Kendal's turn to say no.

"If you won't kiss me, I'll refuse your request."

Kendal rolled his eyes. He leaned over the bed as Claire puckered her lips. She wrapped her arms around his neck, reeling him in close. He turned his head allowing her lips to sweep his cheek. He grinned at her pouting expression.

"I'll leave you alone for ten minutes to change your thoughts."

Glancing over his shoulder he saw Claire burying herself under the blanket as he walked out of the room.

A few minutes after the group left Claire alone, a shadow entered the room. The man hovered over the brooding woman.

"I thought you were going to give me ten minutes to think," jeered Claire. She rolled onto her back, fixing her stare on the man.

"It's good to see you're alive."

"If you were so polite you'd take off your hat and lower the flowers you are carrying so I can see your face."

"It's not possible. You know this to be true."

"GP?" quizzed Claire.

"In the flesh, so to speak," he replied.

"Ballsy. What if you're caught here in my room?"

"Don't concern yourself. I've already checked the corridor. Kendal is on his way to the canteen to buy his wife a coffee. The nurses are attending to other patients. I thought I'd take a moment to find out first hand how you're feeling?"

"I'm feeling fine, thanks for asking."

"Seeing how it's safe to be here, maybe we could have a friendly chat. To get to know one another a little more?" suggested GP.

"Why?"

"The woman in you intrigue's me."

"I've never heard that pickup line before."

GP stepped closer. "Do you want to see my face?"

"Maybe and maybe I want more."

"I'm a thug, you're a cop. They can't mix."

"One can change," hinted Claire.

"Not me."

"Why?"

"It's too late." GP gently took hold of Claire's hand, stooped and kissed her knuckles. "Is that what you want?"

"Maybe?" she replied.

"Curiosity is a dangerous thing."

"Only if one isn't careful," whispered Claire. "Can I ask you a question?"

GP nodded.

"Why can't I have your permission to see your face? Is it disfigured? Were you in a fight and badly scared? Burnt perhaps?"

"If it makes you happy, I have to confess my face has never been disfigured."

"Then why the disguise?" asked Claire.

"If you see my face I have to rob you."

"Rob me of what?"

"Your life," blurted GP.

"I don't believe you."

"I have taken a vow. If anyone looks at my face and knows what I do for a living they must die."

"What about the woman at the café, she saw your face?"

"She does not know me." GP stepped closer. He spoke in a gentle whisper. "Shut your eyes."

"Why?"

"You ask a lot of questions."

"It's the cop in me."

"What a bad trait."

"Seeing how you've threatened my life, can I trust you?"

"If you were in any danger I wouldn't be standing here talking to you."

"Where might you be?"

"I'd be out of this building. You'd be at the morgue."

Claire gulped. "Okay," she whispered, closing her eyes.

GP placed the flowers on the bed and slipped both his hands out of his black gloves.

"What are you up to?"

"No more questions. You'll know soon enough." GP placed one hand over her eyes and lowered his head. He started to whisper in Claire's ear. "Is this what you were hoping for?"

"Maybe?" she whispered. "I've never felt a warm breath in my ear. It tickles."

"You didn't answer my question."

“Maybe,” whispered Claire, her voice faltering.

“I sense you’re a little nervous.”

“How?” asked Claire.

“Every muscle in your body has tightened.”

“Understandable don’t you think? You have mentioned you’re a thug.”

“I was a thug.”

“You turned your head. I can feel your breath sweeping my cheek,” whispered Claire.

“What about now?”

“Your lips are tickling my ear.”

“Do you like it?”

“Yes.” Her single word came no louder than a weak whisper.

GP grinned.

“I’ve never felt a smile.”

“There’s always a first time for everything.”

GP brought his lips close to Claire’s then he froze.

“You’ve gone quiet. What’s wrong? What are you up to?”

“I was listening to the noises in the next room. I’ve read the woman’s chart. She’s not doing so well.”

“Did you read mine?”

“Yes.”

“What did it say?”

“You’ll live.”

“It’s a comforting thought.”

For a fleeting moment, GP’s lips scraped Claire’s before moving away.

“Who’s worried now?” whispered Claire.

“Not me.”

“What are you waiting for? You’re not scared to kiss me?”

“Of course, I’m not. I’m not scared of anything or anyone.”

“Why didn’t you continue? The reason can’t have anything to do with me being a cop?”

“I’m waiting for the right moment.”

GP had hesitated as if he was devouring her words to analyze them. He brought his face in close for the second time. His eyes stared at her face.

“Moment?” echoed Claire, her eyebrows angling to a point.

“When I know you’re ready,” explained GP.

“I’m ready. I promise I won’t arrest you even if I think you’re a lousy kisser.”

GP created a whispered chuckle.

“You’re not going to leave this room without kissing me. If you do I’ll hunt you down.”

“You’ll never find me.”

“What if I say I surrender?”

“Maybe the time is ripe.”

GP gently brought his lips close to Claire's so they could touch. Her body lurched upwards allowing their lips to weld. They were interlocked for several moments. Claire squirmed under the weight of the man as he applied more pressure. She raised her arm, draping it over his shoulders, pulling him down. They were locked together in an extended pash for what seemed an eternity.

GP finally broke free. Scooping his hat from the bed, he stood.

"I'm breathless," whispered Claire.

"Good. You needed that kiss," said GP. "I have to go. The nurse has finished in the next room. She'll be here in moments. We'll catch up again. It's been a pleasure to have kissed a woman like you. It's been a long time."

"How long?" asked Claire.

"Some things should remain a secret."

"I think it's only fair you confess your real name."

"For now, you know me as GP."

The door to the room started to open. The man stepped backwards towards the toilet door. In a blink of an eye, he vanished behind the closing door. Claire caught sight of a scalpel blade glistening in the light from the overhead fluorescent tube.

"Care for something to eat?" asked the nurse, stepping into the room.

"Yes thanks," replied Claire. She sat upright, straightening the blanket.

"I'll ring the kitchen to see what they can scrounge up. While I'm here I'll go see if the trainee nurse left you fresh towels."

"She did," blurted Claire. "She was extremely thorough."

The nurse stuck her nose into the air, mumbling something inaudible on her way out of the room.

GP opened the bathroom door. He dipped his hat before following the nurse.

"You're welcome," whispered Claire. She watched him sneak down the hall before disappearing down the stairs.

In the convex mirror hanging off the wall, Claire saw a distorted view of GP's facial features.

"I know your face was half hidden by your hat and distorted by the mirror, but I think you're a handsome man," she mumbled. "Yes, handsome indeed."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

MR. UPP walked into the hotel through the revolving door, marched towards the lift and pushed the call button.

The doors opened on the fifth floor. Stepping up to the hotel room's door, he swiped the electronic card on the side of the wall. When he heard a click he shouldered the door. He stared at

a woman standing at the window. Her hourglass figure appeared to be a mere silhouette against the evening sky. She lifted and lowered her hand seductively while slowly consuming the cigarette.

"I was just wondering when you'd show," she said, continuing to look out of the window. "I like the way people rush around at the end of the day. Do you agree?"

The man marched across the carpeted room, flinging his coat onto a chair.

"How did you know it was me coming into the room?" he snarled, folding his arms.

"No one else knows I'm here."

"Try not to draw attention to your presence. You need to stay out of sight. Stop going for walks and there will definitely be no more outings for a coffee." He slammed the evening newspaper onto the coffee table. "I found out about your little stroll in the park by reading the front page."

The woman exhaled smoke, crushed out her cigarette in a bowl and faced Upp.

"Don't ever talk to me in an angry tone of voice again. Being bored puts me in a foul mood."

"Tell me, when's the next robbery?"

The woman moved away from the window. She seemed to float across the floor towards a two-seater sofa.

"Straight to work, I like that in a man."

"You haven't figured anything out yet have you?"

"It'll happen when I'm ready."

"I can have you back in your shoe box size cell I dug you out of inside an hour. You'll never see daylight again."

"Upp, calm yourself."

He kicked the glass coffee table, upending it.

"I demand my money. I have people ordering me to pay for the drugs. I overheard a man calling himself Weakom was given a message last night. Fortunately, I moved out of the room. The sucker has been placed in deep cover. The cops now rent the room from me." He chuckled dryly. "The rest of the cops have no idea."

The woman sat straight-backed on the sofa, crossing her legs.

"Are you listening? Are you at least curious about my problem or are you so spaced out in the brain nothing sinks in?"

"I'm listening to every rambling word your saying. The fact is I don't think you have a clue as to whom you're dealing with? Inside your pea brain, you think you've got one over me. Let me inform you of the flip side to all this mischievous shenanigans."

"Quit using words you don't understand," jeered Upp.

"Just as I thought, you have no ideas on why I exist?"

"Are you going to tell me or just sit there gloating?"

"I must have my revenge on Detective Kendal. The fire is hungry for human flesh."

"I don't give a shit about your revenge."

"What I have to do is crystal clear."

"I'm not interested in what you want."

“You’ve discovered the crux of the problem,” spat Pat sarcastically. “What was the message from the night visitor?”

“He said the ship is on its way.”

“Are you sure the visitor was a male?”

“The paper reported him to be a man.”

“Interesting,” whispered Pat.

“Why?”

“No reason. I’m only thinking out loud.”

“Stop thinking,” barked Upp. “What are you going to do about getting my money?”

Pat strolled back to the window. Extracting another cigarette and match from their respective boxes, she struck the match, igniting the magnesium coated head. She stood watching the flame dance.

“Answer my question,” bellowed Upp.

“I love the way the flame dances. Its attractiveness reaches into your soul. Come closer and see for yourself.”

“Answer my bloody question.”

Pat blew out the flame before walking back to the upturned coffee table.

“Calm yourself. Tomorrow night I’ve organized a robbery which will net you the rest of the money you need. I also know exactly where the money is hidden. Tell me again how much you’re short?”

“One-hundred and fifteen thousand dollars,” barked Upp.

“It’s in the bag. When do I get what I want?”

“The moment I get my money,” blurted Upp. “Don’t forget if you double cross me I’ll make the phone call and you’re history. Understand?”

“So you keep saying.”

Upp picked up his jacket on the way towards the door. Holding the door handle he stared into the eyes of the woman.

“One phone call is all it’ll take.” He pulled the door open and was gone.

Pat whispered at the closed door through clamped teeth.

“Upp you can hide, but you can’t run. After Kendal’s death, you’re next.” She produced another match, lit the red magnesium tip and stared again at the flame. “Don’t you concern yourself little flame. You’ll have your chance to grow into an enormous fire. I promise, soon you will devour human flesh.”

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

KENDAL PARKED his car outside the Bluevale Secondary College a full nine and a half minute walk from his home. Claire stepped down from the car. Halfway to the main doors, she turned, folded her arms and waited by pointing her walking stick at her partner's face.

"Come on old man. You cooked up this brilliant idea of me being a teacher, the least we can do is to arrive at the principal's office together."

"Don't play the part too well. In a few days, the case will be over. You'll again be running without the walking stick."

"I'm going to play this stick like it's a golden harp."

Kendal stepped next to Claire, frowning. "You're acting chipper. What happened yesterday?"

"I don't know what you mean?"

"Yes, you do." He grabbed her arm. "Tell me?"

"What will you do if I refuse to disclose any information? Stop me from being a teacher for the next two days?"

"Thanks for confessing something did happen."

"Okay, if it'll stop me from being nagged. GP visited me in the hospital."

"And?" questioned Kendal.

"We kissed. Satisfied party pooper?"

"Yes." Kendal swiveled on his toes and walked off. "Come on partner, we should arrive at the principal's office together."

Walking down the corridor towards the reception desk Claire's cheeks were a fuming red colour.

"I hope you're not waiting for me to explain the details of the kiss?"

"The idea never entered my mind." Kendal sent her a pacified look. "I suppose Marg might want to know."

Claire's grin widened. She stopped walking, looking lost in a daylight fantasy. Kendal waited for her to come back from wherever she went.

"It happened to be the best kiss I've ever tasted," she whispered. "It was as though I had been teleported into the world where only the two of us existed."

Kendal stood shaking his head.

Claire sighed deeply. "What a thought."

"I'll be sure to pass the details onto Marg when I get home tonight."

Claire still wore the out of this world expression on her face when they entered the school's anti-room. Large hardwearing white tiles were glued to the floor. Grey carpet covered the floor in the offices. Kendal walked up to a small sliding window. He tapped on the glass to make known his presence. A middle-aged woman looked over the top of one of the five computer screens in the room. She stood, waddled over to the window, sliding the small glass screen open.

"May I help you?" she asked in a high pitched voice.

"Yes. We have an appointment to see the principal; Jillian Wentworth at ten this morning. Is she available?"

"You're fifteen minutes early. Miss Wentworth is attending to a couple of troublesome

students. She won't be long. You can wait in her office." The big woman frowned. "You aren't Mr. and Mrs. Stevenson or the Heathemonts?"

"No," replied Claire.

The woman pointed a finger at a door opposite where they were standing. Kendal read the name on the door.

'Principle J Wentworth'

Kendal led Claire into the room, shutting the door. Instinctively he quickly completed a preliminary search.

He strolled around a large stained Mahogany coloured desktop. A phone, laptop, notepad, a coffee cup full of pens in assorted colours, a broken ruler, and a yo-yo were strewn over the desk. He grunted before turning his attention to the yard outside the window. Two thirteen-year-olds, one blonde male, and a brunette female were in the middle of a lengthy kiss. Kendal watched a tall woman wearing a cream button up top and a light brown skirt sneak up behind the two kids, grabbing hold of the girl by the jumper. She dispersed the lovebirds by ordering the pimple-faced boy to move back three large steps. He shuffled back two. The woman raised her fist into the air, yelling. The lad shuffled back again. Staring timidly at the woman he shuffled back even further. From the window Kendal couldn't make out what the tall woman might be saying, however, her body language cemented the fact she wasn't too thrilled over the open air scene of affection.

The woman led the girl by the collar towards the main office. The boy followed by dragging his feet. When the group of three disappeared from view Kendal marched to a chair and sat.

Eventually, he heard a commotion outside the closed door. Then silence. Kendal started counting the seconds before the office door opened. The woman walked into the room glaring at the two detectives. She straightened her skirt marching to the desk.

"Did you happen to see the love scene outside?" She sat staring at Kendal, waiting to hear his response.

"I wouldn't name the moment a love scene," announced Kendal.

"What do you call it?" she snarled, fiddling with the buttons on her shirt.

"Is it a bad habit you have or are you upset over the kids doing what comes naturally, at their age?"

"You'd change your tune if the girl happened to be your daughter."

Kendal sat non-committal.

"Now I've calmed down a tad, I'm Jillian Wentworth, principal of Bluevale Secondary College." She thrust her hand forward. "You must be Alan Kendal?"

"Detective Sergeant," he added. "Sitting next to me is my partner, Claire Ambroso."

"You're partner?" Wentworth quizzed. "I thought Tegan said her mother's name is Margaret?"

"Detective Sergeant Ambroso and I are work colleagues."

Claire extended her hand. The three pressed the flesh.

"You didn't answer my question I asked before. What would you say if I caught your daughter kissing a boy?" asked Wentworth.

“It’s your school. You run it the way you feel fit,” answered Kendal.

Strolling to the window Jillian emphasized her walk. For a long moment, she studied the quiet schoolyard. She straightened her skirt a second time before walking back to the desk. She sat crossed legged gazing at Kendal through azure coloured eyes. Except for two escaping strands of dull red hair from her long ponytail she could have easily passed as a model. For a brief moment, he wondered if she might be flirting. Kendal pushed the thought to the back of his mind. He half shrugged a shoulder before deciding the straightening of her clothes and playing with her shirt buttons every few seconds might be nothing more than a bad habit.

“I see where you’re coming from over the love scene,” blurted Kendal.

“Is there something urgent you want to discuss?” Jillian asked in a business type voice. “I’m sure you’re not here for a social chat.”

“If I may be blunt, I’d like to place Detective Ambroso in your school undercover?”

Jillian opened her mouth to talk. Kendal quickly interrupted.

“I’d like my partner to be a substitute teacher for a few days. I believe we’ll be able to discover the identity of the burglar who is robbing houses in the area by then. I’m sure you’ve read about the robberies in the local paper or at the very least heard it on the news. It’s the death of an elderly couple which has altered the whole case. I need to find the person or persons, responsible before someone else dies.”

“I haven’t read today’s paper. I did hear about the old couple’s murder on the radio this morning,” said Jillian. “What makes you so sure the death was caused by a student at my school?”

“Who said anything about a student?” questioned Kendal.

“I took it for granted you’re thinking the burglar is a student.”

“Miss Ambroso and I have our suspicions.”

“Male or female?” asked Jillian.

“I’m not at liberty to say,” answered Kendal.

“I’m not sure if I approve of your idea. A cop replacing a teacher might disrupt too many classes.”

“I’m sure we can wrap this case in plastic inside a few days,” Kendal reassured.

“Detective, let me finish. You don’t understand.”

“Enlighten me.”

“If so much as the wrong student smells something and starts a rumour things can get ugly very quickly. Rumours spread like a bush fire in a strong wind.” Jillian slumped back into her chair, clasping her fingers together. “What assurance can you give this idea of a temporary teacher will only be for a few days?”

“Reasonable.”

“What about you detective Ambroso, will you be able to cope? I see you need to use a walking stick.”

“I resent your attitude,” grumbled Claire. “You view the walking stick to be a hindrance. I can hold my own. After all, they’re only kids.”

“Only kids!” Wentworth blurted. “You view them to be only kids?”

“They are twelve to thirteen-year-olds.”

“My children are at a difficult age. You witnessed what happened in the schoolyard. I now have to ring the boy’s parents to talk to them about his behavior.”

“I’m sure phoning parents over children who, according to you, misbehave at school, is not a rarity?” hinted Claire.

“I’m not intimidated by you,” growled Wentworth. “I’ve been up against the best. Nothing surprises me. My children have tried everything.”

“Stick or no stick, I can out run anyone in this school.”

“Speaking of which, how come the police force allowed a woman like you to graduate when she is dependent on the use of a walking cane?”

“Miss Wentworth, if I may suggest something?” interrupted Kendal.

“Hold on partner,” said Claire. She stared at the woman sitting opposite her in the eyes. “I want to respond to the wild accusation.”

“Please do,” blurted Wentworth.

“I was shot helping to arrest an intruder.”

The woman’s smug look immediately fell. She lifted her hands to massage her temples.

“I apologize for being so rude. I didn’t know. It’s been a trying morning.”

Kendal inched his chair closer to Wentworth. “If Claire is introduced as only being a student teacher any disruption to the class should be minimal.”

Showing an awkward smile the woman stood and straightened her clothes.

“I’m still not in favour of the idea, however, I’ll agree,” said Jillian. “Welcome aboard Claire.” She extended a bony hand. “I’ll talk to the teachers. I’m sure I can smooth the idea over. Please be discreet and accept my apology.”

“I’m sure your fears will be unwarranted,” hinted Kendal.

“Do you have a class in mind?”

“Yes I do, my daughter’s; Tegan Kendal. I’d like her to be undercover too.”

“I’m not happy about the idea,” replied Jillian, shaking her head. “It’s against everything I’m trying to oversee in this school.”

“If I may suggest something?” cut in Claire.

Both Kendal and Wentworth froze in mid conversation.

“Tegan will be a great asset to the case. I can guarantee her safety. Secrecy will be my number one priority.”

“I’ve been principal of this school for seven years. I thought I’ve heard and seen it all. Nothing has surprised me more today than you two. My mind wants to say no. My heart wants to say yes. I’m in a bind.” Finally, Wentworth sighed. “Very well detectives, I will trust your judgment. Detective Ambroso can start this afternoon. Claire, I know you’ll only be part of my staff for a short time, on behalf of the teachers, welcome to the team.”

“Thanks for your confidence, Miss Wentworth,” said Kendal.

“Please, call me Jillian. One of my office staff at reception will inform you where Tegan’s class will be the first period after lunch.”

Kendal eyeballed the woman. He brought forward the idea she was again flirting with him. "I'm sure we'll be out of your school in a few days, four at the outside."

"There's one thing I forgot to mention. The elderly couple's death was an accident," reported Kendal, in a matter-of-fact voice.

"I heard on the news they were murdered," stated Jillian.

"You told me the same thing earlier. I don't listen to the radio so I can't comment on what they report." Kendal herded his partner out of the office, closing the door. "Claire, I want Tegan to help find out what she can about the kids in her class, especially the new girl, Kobe."

"Okay."

"What's this, not even a smart remark about your assignment?"

"No, although I do have one question," said Claire.

"Speak."

"Did the idea ever occur to you Wentworth was flirting?"

"The thought never entered my mind."

Kendal marched over to the office. He slid the glass window open. After receiving the first angry stare he asked for a timetable. Studying the sheet of yellow paper for a moment he looked up, smiling.

"What are you grinning about?" questioned Claire.

Re-checking the data, Kendal dug his nose from the sheet.

"You're first teaching grade will be in the gym."

Claire groaned. "I can hardly wait."

Kendal handed over the yellow sheet, turned on his toes and marched towards the main entrance, his long black duffel coat swaying in time to the music of the PA system.

"Music and not a bell, interesting concept," he called.

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going to catch up on paperwork."

Claire raised her middle finger at him just before the students flooded the yard outside.

"Don't forget the teacher's name," Kendal called. He pushed the main door open. "His name is Underwood. Henry Underwood."

CHAPTER THIRTY

"SLIPPING NAKED out from between the crimson silk sheets I walked across the carpet to the window. It was a clear night. The stars were shining bright. The full moon appeared to be just lifting itself above the tree line. Alan, wearing his usual black duffel coat stood under the nearest streetlight square to my window. His weight looked evenly distributed as he looked lustfully up at

me. I know he'll be happy when I tell him the news my husband was dead. It will take years for me to get over the smell of his stinking drunken breath slapping my face.

I glanced over my shoulder at the closed cupboard where my suitcase was packed. I focused on the man in my bed choking to death. I threw the empty bottle of sleeping tablets at him waiting patiently for him to drown in his own vomit. He pushed on the wall in an attempt to get out of bed. The almost empty bottle of whisky toppled off the bedside table and onto the floor. He looked directly at me through scared eyes. I heard him exhale his last breath. I grinned triumphantly. At last Alan and I can go away to a solitude location where our love affair could blossom and grow unhindered. Finally, I'll exchange my chained and hopeless life to one of fun, love, and excitement.

Kobe stared directly at Tegan Kendal as a multitude of chuckles erupted from the students.

"Class, you have to agree Kobe has written a good start for her final assignment. Let me remind you, there are only ten weeks left of this term. Your short stories must be on my desk by the last day of term. There will be no exceptions and no extensions. I shouldn't have to remind you each writing piece must have five thousand words. Not one word less. Are you listening, Thomas Gallagher?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Tegan Kendal by the distracted look in your eyes I can tell something is amiss. How is your short story progressing?"

Peeling her far-away stare from the window, Tegan glanced at her classmates who were trying to muffle their laughs. She glared at Kobe who sat in the front row grinning sarcastically.

"Miss Kendal, please answer my question."

"It's coming along," she answered hurriedly.

"Good to hear. I know for some of you English is not your strongest subject. My advice is keep trying, especially you, Amanda Peterson."

"Yes Sir," she whispered on a sigh.

"You all have the choice of writing separate stories. If you choose not to have a partner you will receive an extra ten points. If you wish the person sitting next to you can be your partner, if he or she agrees. I suggest you visit each other's homes to finish the task. Tegan, you can place Kobe under your wing if you like. Together I expect a great short story. If everyone is clear on this, I believe your next class is about to commence in the gym. Don't be late."

Tegan walked next Kobe, giving her dagger eyes.

Kobe stepped into her path forcing Tegan to stop.

"What's the look for?"

"Your story sucks."

"Jealous?" probed Kobe.

"The main characters are you and my father."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know Alan is my father's name. You're fantasizing you and he plotted to kill someone then run off together."

“Sounds to me you’re picking a fight.” Kobe threw her bag to the ground and raised her fists. “Come on, have a go.”

Tegan copied Kobe. They started to circle each other. Kobe looked steel faced. So did Tegan. A whistle blew. Both girls remained in a boxer’s attack stance.

Claire heard the same whistle shrill and limped faster towards the gym. Hobbling into the room she witnessed a bald wiry built man trying desperately to herd twenty-three teenagers into two lines; girls in one line, boys in the other. He appeared to be having little to no success. Claire stepped up behind the man, tapping him on the shoulder. He jumped, spitting the whistle from his mouth. Twenty-three kids burst out laughing.

The short man turned around. “Did you have to scare me?” His words trailed off into a breathless whisper. He inhaled and raised his eyebrows. “Hello, beautiful. Where have you been all my life?”

“You must be Mr. Underwood?”

“Please, call me Henry.”

“I’m Miss Claire Ambroso. I’m a student teacher.”

The kids broke out into chants. Underwood’s face changed from crimson to tomato red. He groped for and pushed his whistle into his mouth, making it shrill.

“Right you kids knock off the noise,” yelled Claire, over their roar. She reached out, yanking the whistle from Underwood’s mouth. “Kids if you want the principal to come running, keep chanting.”

Instantly the gym fell into library whispers. One girl standing at the rear of the group clamped a hand over another girl’s mouth to muffle her giggling.

Henry Underwood faced Claire. “Thank you so much. Once the kids start making noise I find it so difficult to make them stop. I’m at my wits end. Every day this particular group tries to upset me. I’m convinced they fall asleep at night conjuring up new ideas just to make my life miserable.”

“Excuse me for one moment.” Claire walked to the tail end of thirteen girls. “You, tell me where Tegan Kendal is?”

The two girls burst out laughing.

“Which one of you two young ladies is brave enough to answer my question?”

One of the girls pointed to the nearest portable.

“She’s having a private word to Kobe, the new girl.”

“Thanks now go get changed.” Claire glared at the second girl. “Stay right where you are; you and I will have a chat the minute I return.”

“Over what?” asked the girl.

“I want to find out what’s so funny?”

The girl looked at her feet. Instead of speaking, she nodded vigorously.

“Hurry and change, I have a surprise for this group today,” croaked Underwood.

The moment Claire walked around the side of the portable she spied the inevitable fight. Screaming at the top of her voice she waved her walking stick into the air.

“Knock it off.”

The two girls circling each other glanced at Claire. Both gulped, sidestepping away from the other.

“What’s the meaning of this confrontation?” jeered Claire limping up.

Stepping closer Kobe raised a clenched fist, shoving it under Tegan’s nose. “This argument will be settled later.”

“Any time you’re ready.”

“Knock it off,” yelled Claire. She reached out, grabbing Kobe by the shirt collar.

“Don’t touch me.” The girl managed to twist Claire’s hand off.

“Get yourself to class,” roared Claire. She exhaled her anger, watching Kobe run off. When she was out of sight Claire immediately turned her attention to Tegan. “What’s going on?”

“Personal.”

“Under normal circumstances, I’d order you to stay away from the girl. However, any lead is a good one. Has your father told you of his plans to place you undercover?”

“He did last night.”

“Good. Try and stay out of trouble. Come on we have to get to the gym before we’re too late.”

“I didn’t know you could yell so loud.”

“Someone has to put you kids in line, besides, what a perfect way of breaking into my cover.”

“I’ll do my best to watch the kids,” said Tegan. “I’ve known the whole group for years. I can’t see any of them wanting to rob houses.”

“Your father informed me the kid who burgled one of the houses is a girl.”

“Not the ghost thing again?” asked Tegan.

Claire shrugged. “A lead is a lead.”

“Is that why he’s particularly interested in Kobe?”

“Probably,” replied Claire.

Standing at the gym doorway Tegan and Claire found three girls loitering in the corner.

“If you girls don’t hurry, you won’t have time to participate in any rock climbing. Now move it.”

“Yes Miss Boso,” they chimed.

“We’re a little frightened about abseiling, you’ll have to show us,” called Kobe.

“There’s an expert in today. She’ll bury your fears. You have nothing to worry about.”

Kobe joined the tail end of the line of girls as they walked past the main building to the oval. Except for the crag-mire in the middle of the oval due to the last football game, the ground looked to be in excellent condition.

“I hope this wall is safe?” quizzed Underwood, sounding doubtful.

“I can assure you the wall is in perfect condition,” replied a tall athletic built woman.

Addressing the class her face took on the appearance of stone. “Let me begin today by introducing myself. I’m Ms. Chalice and I am a professional rock climber. To relax your fears over the wall, I’ll inform you of my credentials. I have led a team of climbers to Halls Gap countless times. If

you don't know where the area is those mountains aren't far from Melbourne. I've climbed Mt Everest and K2. I am an SES volunteer and have walked the Kokoda trail twice." She pushed out her chest, looking proud of her achievements. "Which young person in the class might like to go first?"

"I will," called a boy pushing his way forward. His grin widened the closer he got to Ms. Chalice. "I'd love to go first."

Claire focused on the boy's physique. "What's your name, son?"

"Timothy Warncken, Miss."

"Go ahead, the rest of us will watch and learn, won't we class?"

The teenagers crowded around the front of the wall.

"Claire, Timothy is a computer nerd," whispered Underwood. "Take him out from behind the computer and he's like a fish out of the water, a baby bird which has fallen out of the nest."

"I get the picture. I believe everyone should have a chance to emerge from under their comfortable rock at least once in their lives. You might be surprised. He could be a natural."

"You were saying?" questioned Underwood.

Claire shook her head, watching the lad plummet to the mat.

"At least he reached the second-hand hold before falling."

"I'm next," yelled Tegan over the roar of laughter.

"No, you're not," bellowed Claire glaring shark eyes at her.

"I'm not afraid of the climb, Miss. Ambroso." Tegan walked to the wall and was immediately strapped into a harness.

Kobe stared wide-eyed at Claire who watched Tegan clamber up and over the wall in record time. Kobe sprinted to the wall so she could be next and quickly slipped into the harness. She too made up and down the other side of the wall at exactly the same time as Tegan.

Except for a few, the class managed to struggle over the wall. Ms. Chalice ordered the whole class to run three laps of the oval before calling it a day.

Back in the gym change rooms, Kobe cornered Tegan, slamming her shoulders into a locker door.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"Hey yourself; what was the ugly eye contact at the wall for?" growled Kobe.

"What eye contact?"

Using both hands, Kobe grabbed Tegan by the shirt collar and again pushed both her shoulders into the locker. Tegan remained expressionless.

"You were eyeballing Ambroso. Ms. Boso."

"Fight, fight, fight," chorused several of the girls. The group circled Tegan and Kobe, locking them into a makeshift ring. One girl slipped away to lock the gym door.

Tegan managed to push Kobe away.

"Get out of my face. Ambroso probably felt nervous over me wanting to climb the wall. She's staying at my place for a few months."

"Liar," screamed Kobe, swinging her fist. It connected in the center of Tegan's eye. The

impact forced her back into the locker. A second fist hit her in the nose. Blood gushed over her cheek.

Tegan looked about the locker room. The mouths on the sea of faces were screaming and cheering over the fight. Refocusing on Kobe, Tegan stared at her through half-shut eyes. The third pounding in her stomach forced Tegan to drop to her knees. The air felt stifling, the chant from the group of girls sounded deafening. Kobe was being victory slapped on her shoulders as she hovered above Tegan. Kobe readied herself to lash out using a white-knuckled fist. Instead of swinging the final blow she stepped back.

“Say goodnight, Kendal.”

Kobe spat at her hair. Kicking out, her foot came hard and fast. Tegan acted at speed. She grabbed a hold of Kobe’s foot and twisted. The teenager crashed to the floor. A look of terror swept Kobe’s face as Tegan scrambled to her feet, bracing herself for round two.

Kobe stood unsteadily on one leg and raised her fists. One of the girls pushed Tegan towards her attacker. Limbs and fists flew in every direction. Both girls fell over the low bench, crashing to the cork covered floor. The crowd of girls tightened their circle. The gym echoed their chant.

“Fight, fight, fight.”

Both girls wrestled on the floor rolling through the legs belonging to the other girls in the class.

Tegan successfully delivered five expertly placed punches. She heard a crack. Kobe grabbed her ribs. Her breathing sounded fast and shallow. Both girls stood facing each other swaying for a moment. Approaching footsteps forced the circle of girls to quickly disperse. Tegan reacted and kicked out, dropping her opponent into a puddle of water. Kobe cradled her nose and her ribs. She screamed. Blood changed the puddle to red. Strong hands grabbed Tegan by the collar, pulling her away.

“What’s going on?” yelled a man. His voice boarded on baritone.

The crowd of onlookers quickly vanished, leaving the two girls to face the music. Through slits Tegan watched a woman grab hold of Kobe, forcing her to sit on the low bench. Kobe screamed in agony, trying to fight her off. Tegan was ordered to sit at the opposite end of the bench. Both girls glared at their warden who stood towering over them.

“We fell over this bench we’re sitting on,” whimpered Tegan.

“Yes,” croaked Kobe. “It happened exactly the way she said.”

“Both of you are bloody liars,” yelled Claire. “Kobe, take your jumper off.”

“I can’t, I think I broke a rib.”

“Now’s not a good time to argue.”

Kobe didn’t move.

Claire reached for her jumper, yanking it off her head. A blood-curdling scream filled the room.

“Do you think I give a shit about a fake scream?” Claire bellowed. “The jumper test was to see if you’re lying about your rib. It’s not broken. You’ll live.”

“Both of you should thank the school maintenance man for unlocking the side door. If it

wasn't for him, one of you girls might have died," yelled Underwood.

"It wouldn't have been me," advised Tegan.

Displaying a murderous look Kobe concentrated on her opponent. She spat blood at her. "It wouldn't have been me."

"I'll leave this situation in your hands, Underwood. I've got to mow the oval," announced the maintenance man, walking off.

"He's a strong bloke," blurted Claire, watching him leave.

Underwood grinned. "He's stopped many a fight in this school. His bloodline is Apache Indian. A few years ago he broke an amateur weight lifting record. They crowned him Mr. Natural."

"I wondered why I felt weightless?" grumbled Tegan, managing to chuckle.

"This is no laughing matter," warned Underwood. "Both of you finish changing and report to the principal's office. You have one minute."

Pointing a finger at Tegan, Kobe slurred her warning.

"This isn't over Kendal, not over by a long shot."

In the space of three minutes, Claire stood outside the office waiting for Wentworth to return. She could hear giggling and laughter coming from the schoolyard. Underwood joined the wait by pacing the floor in circles.

An attractive office lady wearing a low-cut top leaned through the office window, clicking her fingers.

"The principal has sent me a message. She won't be long?"

"Thank you," said Claire.

"Your face has a slight crimson look," mentioned Underwood, stopping his dizzy circles of the anti-room. "Don't be too embarrassed. I've needed to explain to Principal Wentworth many times how and why a fight started."

"I'm so angry at being tricked into stepping outside the gym I could scream. Claire picked up a chair, looking ready to drop kicked it along the hall.

"Don't," whispered Underwood. "The students might see you. We must set a good example at all times."

Claire sent the man a forced smile before gently replacing the chair.

"How many years have you been teaching at this school?"

"Fourteen. How many years have you been studying to be a teacher?"

"This is my first crack at the job."

"I see."

Underwood started to pace the room again. He looked at his watch after completing each full lap. Seven minutes quickly ticked off to twenty minutes.

Claire tapped her foot on the tiled floor, glaring at the two girls. "I hope you're proud of yourselves?"

Kobe looked up. She grinned before grimacing in pain. She gently patted her nose then looked sideways at Tegan's closed eyelids. Through narrow slits, Kobe re-focused on Claire and

Underwood. When they weren't looking, she inched her way closer to Tegan.

Hearing a noise, Claire eyeballed Kobe. "I'd look the other way too if I were you. I hope you're planning which school you'll be attending tomorrow. After I've talked to Principal Wentworth you'll be out on your arse."

Kobe stared into the woman's eyes. Claire walked off towards the office window. Underwood followed close on her heels. Kobe watched him closely licking Claire's shadow. She dry retched several times behind his back before turning her attention to Tegan. She seemed to be oblivious to any noise Kobe made sliding slowly along the bench seat towards her.

At the start of her stealth moves the gap measured four metres. After each sideways slide, Kobe surveyed the area. Her faint smirk changed to a widening grin which changed to a horrid snicker as the gap narrowed between herself and her sleeping target.

Then the gap looked no more than a metre.

Claire tapped on the glass office window twenty feet from the girls. "What is taking Wentworth so long?"

The middle-aged woman glanced up shrugging her shoulder.

"Could you page the principal again?"

"Miss. Ambroso, Principal Wentworth has been paged. She's gone to talk to Miss Shelton over a private matter. She's one of our math teachers."

Claire grunted, checked her watch and whispered to Underwood. "Kendal isn't going to like the news about Tegan." Turning around she stood gob-smacked.

Kobe hovered in a boxer's stance. Grinning, she launched another scathing attack.

Tegan opened her eyes and found two fists flying directly at her face. She managed to duck, but her left shoulder lifted. One fist hit her shoulder. The second fist hit Tegan in the ear. She screamed as she fell to the floor. Kobe stepped back, setting herself for a football kick to the ribs. Tegan brought her arm up at lightning speed trapping her aggressor's foot under her arm. She rolled sideways. Kobe hit the floor. Tegan landed a series of hard punches to her opponent's torso.

Kobe screamed, managing to push Tegan off before jumping to her feet. Both girls stood facing each other ready for another round. Tegan didn't hesitate for long. She stepped in to deliver a hard punch to Kobe's shoulder.

"Hey, what's all this," yelled Underwood, from the office window. He banged the glass. It cracked before shattering. Blood poured from a cut knuckle.

Claire stood grinning. "Let them fight," she whispered, holding Underwood at bay. "It's been a long time since I've witnessed a school fight."

Underwood glued a sullen gaze on the woman standing next to him. He pulled a clean handkerchief from his pocket, wrapping it around his bloody knuckle.

"I remember my last day of school. Joanne Priestly, the number one tough chick. We were behind an expanse of freshly scraped dirt. It was a good fight. I received a few scratches and two black eyes. Joanne Priestly, what a mess. Broken nose, two cracked ribs, a bruised hip, she limped for a week." Claire sighed. "Five years after our fight we met again. She died in my arms from an ecstasy overdose."

Principal Wentworth came strolling around the corner holding a mug of hot coffee in one hand, a manila folder in the other.

“Students,” she screamed.

Her face instantly changed from friendly to a murderous look. Puddles of coffee formed on the floor as she ran towards the two fighting girls. Underwood and Claire were snapping at her heels.

“Stop this fight now,” yelled Claire.

“Yes, yes, you must stop,” urged Underwood in a meek voice. “I implore you to stop.”

Tegan finally looked to be winning. She only just managed a light right hook to Kobe’s cheek as she was dragged away by the scruff of her shirt collar by two hands.

“Kobe, my office right now,” screamed Jillian Wentworth.

Kobe’s feet were glued to the floor. She stood glaring at Tegan.

“Mr. Underwood, escort Kobe into my office,” bellowed Jillian, “I will be there the moment I replenish my coffee. Miss Ambroso, take Tegan into the small room on the other side of reception. Pray, I don’t call your superior.”

Claire straightened her French cap, waiting for Tegan to complain before fulfilling Jillian’s orders.

The room resembled an unoccupied office, consisting of two tables and two dusty chairs.

“Tegan, sit down,” said Claire.

“I refuse.”

“Do you want to straighten your clothes?”

“No. The fight wasn’t my fault. Kobe should be made to pay for my ripped uniform. Dad’s going to flip.”

“You got that right, kiddo.”

Tegan touched her swelling cheeks and eye sockets. “The monster gave me two black eyes.”

“You ought to see the other girl.” Claire let out a low whistle. “I’m sure Kobe won’t be at school tomorrow.”

“Why?”

“By morning she’ll be covered in so many bruises she’ll be unable to walk. I’ll be amazed if she’s not carted off to the hospital for an overnight stay.”

Tegan was still giggling when the principal walked into the room.

“The fight is no laughing matter,” warned Jillian Wentworth, slamming the door.

“No Miss,” replied Tegan. “I apologize.”

The principal marched to the window. After a few sips of her coffee, she turned to face Claire.

“This is exactly why I’m against detective Kendal’s request to have you here. I have nine hundred and thirty-seven students in this school. I do not, and will not tolerate fighting. Tegan Kendal, I have a sound reason to expel you and Kobe. Do you understand?”

“Yes Miss,” whispered Tegan quietly. “Please don’t.”

“Give me one good reason why I should listen to you?”

“I’d like to give two reasons.”

Jillian's cheeks looked anger red. She glared a cold stare at Tegan. "I'm listening. Convince me."

"I didn't start the fight."

"Go on."

"When I leave school I want to be a detective."

"Just like your father?"

"Yes, Miss."

By the time Jillian finished the coffee her shoulders slumped. The stress lines on her face had almost disappeared.

"I'll take your request into careful consideration. Now clean yourself up and get to your next class. I believe it is science. If you hurry you'll still make the class on time."

Tegan trotted out of the office and shut the door. Claire sat on a seat casually looking at Jillian.

"Are you any closer to finding out the name of the suspect you are supposedly chasing?"

"Not yet."

"Please, do what you can to speed up the search. I don't want any more violence in my school. Now if you will excuse me, I have to go speak to Kobe."

Claire watched the principle pull the door open and marched towards her office. Opening the door Wentworth found Kobe pacing the floor.

"Now young lady, what is your mother going to say when I tell her what sort of day you're having?"

Kobe flopped onto a cream plastic chair. "Don't tell her."

Jillian walked to her office window to stare out onto the school grounds.

"Do you understand how difficult it was to get you into this school? How hard it was to convince your last school principal to let you come here?"

Kobe stared at the carpet.

"Girl, what am I going to do?"

"I don't know."

Jillian turned from the window and sat opposite Kobe.

"In Tegan's defense, she told me you started the fight. Is what she said true?"

Kobe slowly nodded.

"Do you realize Tegan's father is not just a cop, he's a detective?"

Keeping her eyes transfixed on the carpet the girl continued to nod.

"Did you know Miss Ambroso is also a cop? She's Kendal's partner."

Kobe raised her trembling head. Her eyes relayed the horror in her mind.

"I didn't know. I've been informed she's a pen friend of Tegan's mother."

"Somehow I'll bury this incident. I want you to act like today never happened. I want you to stay away from Tegan and her family. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Yes."

"I hope so," said Jillian.

“Could I request to be picked up and taken to the hospital? I think I’ve a broken nose and a cracked rib.”

Jillian’s face turned suddenly friendly. She stood, walked around the desk, slinging her arm over Kobe’s shoulder.

“I’ll drive you myself.”

“Thanks,” she whispered.

“Everything will be fine,” advised Jillian.

“Thanks, Aunty.”

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

KENDAL WAS pacing the driveway of his home when he caught sight of a small car turning into his court. To look casual he sprinted for the letterbox, snatching up the letters and filing through the bills when the car pulled into the drive.

“Sorry we’re late Sugar, we were stuck in traffic.”

Not bothering to look up, he gave a casual wave of his hand.

“You were pacing the concrete waiting for us?”

Kendal pulled his nose from the phone account.

“Tegan, I think you’ve been ringing too many friends. This bill is way too high.”

Claire slammed the car door shut. She marched up, grabbing her partner by the arm.

“Confess. You were pacing the driveway. Don’t try to deny it.”

Kendal burst out laughing. “Okay, you’re right. Guilty as charged. Now tell me how you went? Any leads? We sure could use a couple.”

“You have to promise not to yell,” warned Claire.

“What happened?”

Tegan stepped down from the car, showing off her bruises.

“If you think your daughter looks bad, you ought to see the other girl,” blurted Claire.

“I take it you have no leads.”

“In one word no.”

Kendal gave his daughter a flippant wave of his hand before walking off to study the height of the lawn. “I must cut the grass,” he mumbled.

“Don’t you move,” threatened Claire.

“I’ll be fine,” spoke Tegan. “Thanks for asking.”

“Which girl wanted to fight?” asked Kendal, giving his daughter an uninterested glance.

“Kobe.”

“She’s the new kid.”

“Good way to create enemies,” grumbled Tegan. She started to walk off. “I’m going to soak in the bath.”

Kendal flicked Claire’s cap off her head and sat on the brick letterbox.

Claire swiped her cap from the ground, placing it back on her head. “I think the new kid at the school knows something about the burglaries.”

Kendal raised an eyebrow deep in thought.

Margaret came strolling up. “To ascertain what transpired at the school today Tegan and I will have a talk after tea.” She lifted her finger to her husband. “For once, I’ll have the chat, you can stay away.”

At the dining room table, Tegan sat opposite her father, brooding. Tani eyeballed her sister before kicking her in the shin.

“Why did you kick me?”

“To get your attention,” said Tani.

“Don’t do it again,” spat Tegan.

The kids’ grandmother stood, leaned over the table, sticking her nose in Kendal’s face. He looked up at having his personal space invaded.

“What are you going to do about Tegan and the fight?”

“Yeah dad?” said Tani sarcastically. “You should stop Tegan from watching TV for a whole year.” A grin swept her face. “On second thoughts you should say no when she asks to go to the movies tonight. Zac, the school football player asked her out on a date.”

“Quiet,” growled Tegan. She reinforced her comment by kicking her sister in the ankle.

Instead of washing the dishes, Claire and Margaret were in the kitchen listening behind the closed door.

“I think Tegan and I should’ve finished our talk before tea,” whispered Marg.

“Too late now, the volcano is about to erupt,” giggled Claire.

“Partner quit your listening behind the closed door,” yelled Kendal. “Get in here.”

Grandma herded Tani into the kitchen and closed the door.

Claire waited a few moments before entering the dining room.

“What’s wrong? You stopped me in the middle of doing the washing up.”

“If you’re telling the truth why aren’t your hands wet?”

She shrugged.

“Do you have another dishwashing excuse or is it the only one you can conjure up at short notice?”

Marg walked into the room and hovered over her husband. “We need to have a chat in the study.” Without looking over her shoulder she walked off.

Kendal followed like a puppy expecting to be fed.

“Take it easy on Tegan. Claire gave me a brief explanation on the fight. It wasn’t Tegan’s fault.”

“I know.”

Kendal called Tegan and Claire into his study. After a precise explanation on the fight, he sat

back in his leather chair.

“Claire, I think you’re right.”

“Don’t tell me we actually agree on something?”

“Yes. I think Kobe knows about these burglaries. It wouldn’t surprise me if she was mixed up in all of this. The only thing we have to do is prove it.”

“It might take some planning, Dad,” mentioned Tegan.

“I have yet to ask, how do your eyes feel?”

“I’ll live,” she replied.

“You sound exactly like your father,” moaned Claire, shaking her head.

The phone jingling the receiver off the hook drowned Kendal’s comment. He grabbed it on the second ring.

“Yes?”

“Captain Hughes here, I’ve been informed by an anonymous tip off there’s a double storey house fire. The fireys are in attendance. An off-duty cop was on the scene in seconds. Kendal, I think Patrick has found some matches. The fire is on the other side of town. Unit two Dandelion Street Frankston.”

“Claire and I are on our way.” Kendal stood, swiped his keys from the desktop and dropped the phone back in its cradle. “Marg, there’s been a house fire. Captain Hughes thinks it might have been started by Patrick.”

Marg fumbled for a chair. Kendal squatted, looking into her eyes.

“Don’t worry. If Patrick started the fire, and I’m swayed into thinking he didn’t, the fire is nowhere close to here.”

“In case you’re wrong, I think I should pack a couple of suitcases.”

“Good idea. Place them in the car for a quick exit. We’ll think of a location if the need arises. At the worse, we can stay in a hotel in the hills. Make sure your mum packs a case too.” Kendal kissed his wife, stood and faced Claire. “Let’s go.”

Through narrow slits Marg watched the front door close.

Claire looked at her partner the moment Kendal navigated the car into the traffic flow.

“Do you actually believe the words, ‘don’t worry, Patrick didn’t start the fire?’”

Kendal raised an eyebrow, giving her a flat stare.

CHAPTER THIRTY TWO

THE FIRE looked almost out when Kendal parked his car behind the fourth fire truck. People still dressed in their night attire had spewed onto the street to watch the commotion. Kendal spied Fire Chief Bradwood and marched Claire over.

“Kendal, Claire, what a pleasant surprise.”

“The feeling is mutual,” said the two detectives simultaneously.

Claire wandered off to view the damage to the house close up. She was beckoned over to one side by a young rookie cop pleading for help to barricade the scene from the throng of people converging too close to the action.

“Chief you’re a long way from home?” quizzed Kendal.

“Yes, the Frankston Fire Chief is crook. The big brass asked me to fill in for a few days.”

“What’s the Goss on the house fire?”

“A closer look at the inside of the house in the daylight will determine the cause.”

“Any guesses?”

“I think the fire started in the kitchen. Don’t count on my accuracy it’s just my opinion.”

“Not a problem.”

“What I just said is off the record. My opinion means nothing. The house has to be examined first.”

“Naturally,” replied Kendal.

“Hey, you sure made me a happy man when you caught that pyromaniac bum. I’d grown tired of Patrick’s house fires. Same date every month, what a jerk.”

“Glad to help,” chirped Kendal.

Bradwood shot his hand into the air, giving a casual wave. “I’ve just completed a rough shift, I’m going home.”

Claire managed to reassure the rookie he was doing a fine job at keeping the neighbours away. Walking over she stood facing Kendal.

“Sugar, do you want to warn the Chief he might be busy soon? We haven’t caught Patrick yet.”

Kendal shook his head. “He has enough problems. Besides, I still believe the burnt house wasn’t of Patrick’s doing.”

“How do you figure?”

“Four reasons. If Patrick started the fire why did he let the cops know he was in the area by burning a two storey house? Second, GP talked to Pat, or should I say Ashlee Clarke at the café across the other side of town. Every cop in Melbourne is looking for her. They’re eager to make an early arrest and get her back behind bars. Third, she’s after me. She was hell bent on revenge when we were playing Fire Games. I can’t accept anything different now. The fourth reason is there’s no way to escape. The boys in blue were on the scene in seconds thanks to an off-duty cop. Which reminds me, where is the cop?”

Kendal spied an ambulance parked behind his car. Both he and Claire started to walk towards it. A TV crew spotted them. The anchorwoman quickly finished grooming her hair and straightening her clothes.

“I don’t suppose you’d like to say something to the camera, detectives?” she asked, her voice full of sarcasm.

“Not particularly,” replied Kendal.

“What brings you here at this time of night? Don’t both of you work in the Melbourne CBD area?”

Kendal snatched the microphone from the woman. “Listen to my advice. Don’t show any part of this off the record interview on TV. Understand?”

The woman twisted the microphone out of Kendal’s hand. She back stepped before walking off in the direction of the fire. She caught sight of the rookie cop on guard duty and made a beeline for the constable. She spoke a dozen words into the microphone then started to interview the man.

“I feel sorry for the woman,” declared Claire.

“I don’t,” moaned Kendal. “I feel sorry for the cop.”

The two ambos were assessing a middle-aged man in the back of the ambulance when the two detectives looked in. The man’s clothes and hair appeared singed and his face was blackened from the smoke. He sat with closed eyes, breathing through the oxygen mask. A Senior Constable busied himself writing information on the back of a medical form.

“How’s the patient?” asked Kendal.

“Who are you?” questioned the constable.

“It’s a fair question,” replied Claire. She flashed her Police badge, introducing her and Kendal.

“This man is lucky to be alive. I happened to be in the adjacent house saying goodnight to my girlfriend when I heard an explosion. I sprinted into the burning house, saving the man from certain death. He claims he switched on the gas stove and forgot to ignite the pilot light so he could cook his dinner. He informed me he’s a shift worker and is tired all the time. He fell asleep at the kitchen table. When he woke he lit a cigarette.”

“Good work,” announced Kendal, switching his attention to the man. “Sir, is what the constable said true?”

The man opened his watery eyes, managing a slow nod before coughing several times.

“It’s true. Don’t bother to search the house for anyone else, I live alone.”

Kendal shook the man’s hand before leading Claire back to his car.

“At least I happened to be correct. The house fire wasn’t started by Patrick’s hands. Come on, it’s time to go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY THREE

KOBE SQUATTED behind a medium sized bush, noting the quiet court full of two storey houses. She watched the last light from a house four doors down from her hiding place go out. She waited patiently for the car parked in the drive to be backed out and driven off before making her move.

Making sure her shoes hung securely from her belt she ran from her hiding place to the brick wall of the house. She quickly pushed small metal cleats onto her toes and thumbs and started to climb up to the bathroom window on the second level.

The knife-like implement Kobe held between her teeth glistened in the moonlight. She easily etched a small circle in the glass window and pushed the middle of the circle. The cup-shaped piece of glass fell onto the tiles, shattering. Kobe carefully reached in through the sharp edged hole up to her elbow and slid the window open. Quietly she climbed into the bathroom, pushed her feet into her shoes and stepped onto the broken glass.

Kobe stepped over to the door, swinging it open. In her hurry to get to her goal, she gashed her arm on the protruding door lock. She winced in pain. Biting into her tongue she waited for the pain to subside. Studying her arm, the cut looked deep. Tears filled her eyes.

Blood flowed at speed, dripping onto the floor. Her eyes bulged. Grabbing a small pink towel from the rack and a pocket knife from her jeans she ripped a narrow strip and tied the material around the wound.

Kobe pulled a small piece of paper from her shirt pocket and quietly read the note.

“There are two safes in this house. Both are upstairs. There is one in the guest room and the other is in the main bedroom. You’ll find a wall safe behind identical paintings which have the initials ‘M.S.’ printed in black capital letters in the bottom right-hand corner. After you have emptied both safes of the cash and jewellery roam about the house looking for anything of value.” She rolled her eyes, adding. “What an original idea!”

Kobe walked towards a bedroom. Spying a diamond-studded gold watch sitting neatly in the middle of the bed she swiped it from the felt box and slipped it onto her wrist.

“Even though it’s a male’s watch I should be able to pawn it for at least a thousand dollars. It’s my severance pay for working for Pat.” She spat on the carpet before continuing her search.

Kobe easily found the guest room and the painting exactly as it was written on the paper.

“Pat, I wonder how you knew about of the safes?” she mumbled. Turning the piece of paper over, she read the combination to the safe.

‘Left 7 Right 22 Left 57’

Kobe punched in DBKL on the security panel, turned the handle and opened the small metal door. She reached into the safe, taking out the large blue wallet full of one hundred dollar notes. Staring at the money, her eyes shone. She placed the wallet in her small black bag slung over her shoulder.

The main bedroom came next.

Right,11 Left 74 Right 33 then tapped the letters FDHN on the security panel.

Kobe opened the small metal safe door and again extracted another wallet full of one hundred dollar notes.

“Happy birthday,” she whispered, kissing the wallet. She slipped the leather pouch into her small bag next to the first one.

Kobe roamed throughout the house searching room after room, grabbing any jewellery she came across. She certainly didn’t notice the small droplets of blood on the cream coloured carpet.

Walking back towards the main bedroom, she spied a pink coloured purse sitting on a small wooden table and dropped it into her bag.

In the excitement of her find, Kobe didn't hear the sound of a key being inserted into the front door lock. She definitely missed the noise the person made turning the doorknob and opening the front door. Even the car's engine idling in the driveway went unnoticed. She failed to hear bare feet sprint up the stairs or enter the room at the other end of the hall, but she did hear the click of the light switch. Kobe started to back step away. She heard the distinct female's voice cursing and swearing as the woman rummaged through draw after draw. Opening the palm of her hand, Kobe found what the woman was probably searching for. She gulped. Reaching out her hand she felt for the wall. She stared at the door, whispering.

"This isn't the bathroom, my only means of escape."

"We have to go, Honey," called a deep voice from the front door. "We're late. Forget the earrings and your purse. We have to go."

The man standing at the front door threw his cigarette into the front garden and bounded up the stairs. He met the woman in the hall, glaring.

"Dimitrios I have to find my favourite earrings and my purse is missing," the woman explained.

"Did you look in the bathroom?"

"No, I didn't. Could you be a gem and help? I'll finish searching downstairs for my purse."

"Seeing how I've forgotten my watch I'll go check in the bathroom before swinging past the bedroom. My watch must be on the bed."

When the owner of the house walked into the bathroom he stepped on the broken shards of glass. He looked down and found the ripped towel and a few splatters of blood. He followed the trail from room to room.

"What the hell is going on?" Dimitrios whispered, reaching for the light switch.

Kobe glanced around the room. She stepped to the window, sliding open the glass. She managed to zip her bulging bag closed and threw it over her shoulder. She placed the cleats on her toes and was preparing to climb through the window and down the wall.

She heard a click. The hallway light came on.

In seconds Kobe reacted. She slid out of the bay window frame and only just fitted under the bed. From her hiding place, she watched the bottom edge of the door. She saw big black shoes walk about the room. Several times they stopped at the bed before moving on.

The shoes headed for the door. Instead of leaving the room they stopped and came back to the bed. Watching the shoes closely, Kobe gulped. They looked expensive and appeared to have an almost mirror shine. The shoes walked back to the door then were gone. The door stayed open and the hallway light remained on making the bedroom semi-lit. Hoping to hear the front door close she began to perspire.

The noise didn't come.

Kobe began to fidget.

Without warning, the shoes were back. They looked to be staring at her from the doorway.

Kobe watched the shoes for half an hour. She heard the front door open and heavy footsteps trudged upstairs. Then there were three pairs of shiny black shoes in the doorway.

Two pairs of shoes stayed at the door, their toes pointing towards the bed while one pair walked about the room.

The en-suite door opened.

Kobe froze as the first pair of shoes stopped at the foot of the bed. Someone dropped a broom onto the floor. A pair of hands reached down sweeping the broom back and forth underneath the bed, hitting Kobe in the head. Clasping her hand over her mouth she muffled her scream.

“Come out,” growled a voice.

Kobe didn’t move.

“If you don’t come out by the time I’ve counted to three, I’ll shoot my gun.”

The girl’s eyes widened from fear of being shot.

“One,” said the voice.

Kobe cowered towards the bed head.

“Two,” called the voice.

The shoes stepped closer. Kobe saw a gun being placed onto the floor. She noted the short pause before a police badge was dropped onto the carpet.

The girl whispered a squeal and banged her head on the underside of the bed. She screamed.

“I’m coming out.”

The gun and police badge were swiped up from the floor. Kobe crawled from under the bed. She stood staring directly at the face of smiling man in a black duffel coat.

“Hello, Kobe. My suspicions were correct all along.”

“Detective Kendal, I can explain.”

“Good. Be my guest. Start talking.” Kendal spun the girl around and handcuffed her wrists.

“First, I’d like to say I’ve done nothing wrong. The man standing at the door tried to attack me.”

Dimitrios snorted.

“It’s true. I ran into this room and hid under the bed to get away from him.”

“Are you going to stand there, listening to those lies?” barked the man. “How can you take a common thief seriously?”

“Sir, please, could you wait downstairs?”

“If you’re so innocent, girlie, tell me why you’re wearing my watch. Take it off carefully, the watch is worth five grand.”

Kobe scrunched her nose. “Dimitrios, you gave it to me for a present, remember?”

Kendal raised an eyebrow at the cost before refocusing his attention on Kobe. He raised his hands to stop the bickering.

“Give it over now,” yelled the man. He marched over to the bed and held out his hand.

“I’d like to comply, but I’m a little tied up.”

Dimitrios reached across the bed, wrenching the watch from Kobe’s wrist.

“Girl, the handcuffs suit you.”

“Sir, I’ve heard enough bickering. This is your last warning,” insisted Kendal. “Hand me the watch and wait downstairs. If you don’t leave this room at once I’ll have to arrest you too.”

The man handed over the watch, pushed his nose into the air before marching out of the room. He spied his wife pacing the floor downstairs and sprinted to her side.

“Now the third party has left the room, start talking,” said Kendal.

“About what?” Kobe asked.

“Why did you choose this house to burgle?”

“I don’t know what you mean. The man invited me. He gave me the watch for a present.”

“Why would he do such a thing?”

Kobe shrugged. “A gift for doing whatever act he could think up.”

Kendal dropped to his knees to search under the bed. Reaching in, he pulled out the small black bag, unzipping it. He tipped the contents onto the bed in front of Kobe. His grin never waned the whole time.

“What’s so amusing?”

Kendal extracted the bullets from his pocket and re-loaded the Smith and Wesson.

“The gun wasn’t loaded?” shrieked Kobe.

“Do you think I’d be foolish enough to place a loaded gun at your fingertips? I’ll give you some advice, change your plea.”

The shattered look on Kobe’s face was enough to know Kendal won the easy way. He dialed Claire’s mobile phone number, mumbled a quick sentence then scooped the bag and its contents up in one hand and marched Kobe down the stairs.

“I don’t want to hear a word from either of you,” he calmly said to the owners of the house. Kendal forced Kobe to sit on the floor before walking to the coffee table. He scattered the contents of the bag over the glass top. “Do these things belong to either of you?” he asked, looking at the distraught woman and the fuming man.

The woman hovered over the jewellery and money. “Everything’s ours.”

“How did you know the combination to both of my safes,” questioned the man.

Kendal focused on Kobe. “It’s a good question. Care to enlighten us?”

“I don’t know what the word means.”

“It means to tell me, to confess, to spew your guts on how you knew the combination to, not one, but two safes.”

“The man who owns this house wrote the numbers on a piece of paper.”

“It’s an utter lie,” bellowed Dimitrios.

Kobe sat straight backed. Staring directly at Kendal she spoke in a matter of fact tone of voice.

“It is one hundred percent true.”

Dimitrios paced the floor switching his stares between his wife and the thief. Finally, Kobe’s shoulders slumped. Kendal heard her exhale. She even flashed the man a snappy smile.

“Okay, I’ll tell the truth.”

“At last, we’re getting somewhere,” jeered Dimitrios.

“My mother and Dimitrios are having an affair. It’s been going on for months. He gave me the combination to the safes. He said to pick up the money and all the jewellery in the house after he’d taken his wife to the party. Then I was to go to the airport and buy two plane tickets. We were going to leave the country at midnight tonight. My mother and brother will be at the airport in France to meet us when we land.”

Dimitrios instantly stopped pacing the floor so he could stare at his wife.

“I know what you’re thinking. I can swear on a stack of bibles what she said is not true. Can’t you tell she’s lying? The girl can’t be any more than fifteen.”

The woman’s expression looked cold and heartless. It bore into Dimitrios.

“You planned this all along,” she jeered. “You forced me into having a last romp in the powder room before we left the house tonight and all the while planned to drive me to the party, say some stupid excuse about you left your watch behind and leave me for her. I foiled your plans due to the fact I wanted to wear my favourite earrings. No wonder you were on edge when I made you turn the car around and drive me home. You knew she’d be in the house. You used her to steal our money and my jewellery. How could you be so callous?”

“Honey, none of what you and the girl have said is true.”

“Don’t you Honey me. I discovered your evil plot. Now you’re trying to worm your way out of the mess by placing full responsibility on a child. What a deplorable act. Ten years of living together and you leave me for another woman. How could you?”

Kobe sat smirking as she watched the spat volley between the man and woman. Before the argument progressed to the next level the doorbell rang.

“When it rains it pours,” whimpered Dimitrios. He opened the door to a grinning woman.

Kendal looked up. “Dimitrios, the person you’re looking at is Detective Ambroso.”

Claire scooted past Dimitrios and his wife and stood next to her partner.

“Did I miss a party plan?” she asked admiring the jewellery on the small table.

Kendal shook his head.

“I’m innocent,” Kobe stammered.

“Every criminal says the same thing,” mentioned Claire.

The owners of the house moved to opposite ends of the room. Neither faced the other. Kendal looked dismayed at the fictitious reason for a domestic.

“I have a sound theory,” he stated confidently.

Dimitrios and his wife turned to face him.

“Let me see if I’m correct. Kobe, the real reason for this mess is that you were informed of the house in which you were to burgle next. The combination to both safes was given to you, not from Dimitrios, but by someone else. The person knew exactly how much was in each safe on any given day. Feel free to interrupt if I’m not correct at any time. You’ve never met Dimitrios or his wife before you were caught. In fact, you’ve never been inside this house before.”

“If what you said is true, name the person who told me where to look for the money?” grunted Kobe, sarcastically.

“The person I’m referring to is Patrick, alias Pat, alias Ashlee Clarke, alias Doctor Ashlee

Clarke. Does the last name ring a warning bell Mrs. Spencer?” asked Kendal looking at the woman.

“I’m Ms. Alison Spencer. Dimitrios and I aren’t married. And yes now you’ve helped me to recollect the scene. How could I have been so careless or even think Dimitrios would have an affair? He’s a wonderful, honest man. Dimitrios, I’m sorry for doubting you. Can you ever forgive me?”

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “I can understand. He walked across the room to cradle his fiancé in his arms. Tears were rolling down both their cheeks. “I think we should skip the party and start talking about our wedding plans. How would you like to get married tomorrow?”

“Sounds like a wonderful plan,” Alison answered. “Let’s put tonight behind us?”

“I’ve one more statement and one question left before you’re given a ride in a police car,” announced Kendal focusing on Kobe. “I want you to tell me where the safe combinations are written?”

“There’s a piece of paper in my back pocket.”

“Claire, please find the paper.”

She walked over and dug her hand into the girl’s back pocket. Her fingers extracted the paper. She unfolded it, handing it to Dimitrios. “Are these the exact numbers to both safes?”

“Yes. I’d like to discover how she actually obtained them? Nobody knows the combinations except me and Alison.”

Alison’s face turned red. Lowering her gaze to the carpet at her feet she whispered the explanation.

“About four months ago when I was sick in bed from burning my hand, I called for a doctor. To pay for the visit I scribbled both combinations to the safes on a piece of paper and handed it to Dr. Ashlee Clarke. When she returned she handed me both wallets and the paper. I thought nothing of the matter. It never entered my mind she’d try to rob us.”

Dimitrios lifted Alison’s chin and gave her a reassuring kiss.

“It’s okay. All’s well.”

“Detective Ambroso, let’s give Kobe a free trip in an unmarked police car. It will be the climax of her short crime days,” barked Kendal.

Kobe glared at him through scornful eyes.

“I thought you said you had one last statement to make or have you said it?”

“I wasn’t going to bring it up, but since you insist.” Kendal walked over, removing Kobe’s earrings. “As you can see they are both different. Where’s the pair to this plain old silver earring with a mother of pearl in the center?”

“I lost it at the beach last week.”

“Would you like to change your explanation?”

“Why? I’m innocent. You’re not going to pin any crap idea I stole it. I love wearing it. I was hoping to find the other at the beach. I’ve been searching constantly for days.”

“I’ll give you one last chance to change your mind.”

Kobe half turned her back.

“Okay, if it’s the way you want to play?”

Kendal reached into his coat pocket and lowered his hand to the tabletop, placing the identical earring next to the other.

“You found it.”

“Yes, I did. It happened to be in a house you burgled. I’m arresting you for at least thirty houses you have broken into and robbed. It was only a matter of time before you were caught.”

Kendal slipped behind the wheel of the unmarked police car. Claire looked at him through slits.

“How did you know about the Doc?”

“Just a lucky guess,” he replied.

“Did a ghost happen to tell you?”

He shrugged. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

CHAPTER THIRTY FOUR

“INTERVIEW STARTED at eleven in the morning. Please state your full name.”

“My name is Kobe Moylan.”

Kendal looked at Claire standing in front of the door. They were at Police Headquarters in interview room one. Kendal’s smug look intensified.

“Do you know anything about the death of Ernest Brown?”

Kobe slowly nodded.

“Please speak instead of nodding. Do you want me to repeat the question?”

“No.”

“Please continue.”

“The man’s death was an accident,” mumbled Kobe, her stare transfixed on the recorder.

“You’ll have to speak clearer. Please don’t mumble.”

Kobe leaned into the recorder. “I was discovered when I broke into the house. The old man must have heard the glass breaking.”

“Who discovered you?”

“Ernest Brown.”

“I don’t understand how it was possible?”

“It’s the truth. I broke into the house the way I usually do. Somehow I must have disturbed the man. I heard him moan. I hid in a side cupboard so he couldn’t see me. He rubbed his eyes and his chest. He shuffled to the bathroom and shut the door. When he eventually got back to bed he was already dressed. I saw him lean over and wake his wife. He convinced her they should go for a walk in the warm morning air. I watched them through the bedroom window walk off holding

hands.”

“You’re telling me the last time you saw them they were alive?” questioned Kendal.

“Yes.”

“So both Mr. and Mrs. Brown died of natural causes.”

Kobe slowly shook her head.

“What’s wrong? Is there something else you want to add?” questioned Kendal.

She hung her head. “It’s a relief all this business is coming to a close.” Kobe flicked hair from her eyes and started to cry.

“As I have already stated when I arrested you, my suspicions were sitting in the center of the money,” probed Kendal.

“You don’t understand,” advised Kobe.

“Enlighten me,” urged Kendal.

“The death of the old man and woman was my fault.”

“Why do you think so?”

“The man suddenly appeared in the doorway watching me with those eyes.”

Kendal leaned closer to Kobe. He lifted his finger to stop her from continuing.

“Are you trying to tell me Ernest was standing in the doorway watching you ransack his room?”

“Not only his room the whole house. When I wasn’t looking he’d vanish then reappear.” Kobe’s hands started to tremble. “It’s his eyes.” Clasp ing her hands hard against her stomach she stared at Kendal. “Please, you have to help me. You have to help me and my brother.”

“How do you think I can help?”

“Put a stop to this nightmare. I want to wake up in the morning and be able to smile. I want to believe all this is only a nightmare. I want to wake up, go to my old school and see my friends.”

“It’s not possible. This life you decided to choose isn’t a dream.”

“I’m forced into this; this horrible nightmare,” Kobe blurted.

“How and by whom?” Kendal quizzed.

“Please, you have to believe me.”

“Convince me by spilling everything you know. You can start at the beginning. I want to know about these so-called eyes you saw.”

Kobe glared at Kendal. She appeared to be half out of her mind.

“It was his eyes. I can’t get the picture out of my mind. They were watching me search every room.”

“I need to get this perfectly clear. You saw only eyes?”

“No. Every time I looked at his face his eyes were staring at me as if I wasn’t there. At one stage I stopped searching his room and copied what he was doing. He didn’t move or say a word. He just stood staring at me. After what seemed like hours of staring at each other. I conjured up enough will power to raise my hands and placed them on my hips. He raised his hands and copied what I did.”

Kendal sat soaking up the girl’s terror. She was slowly convincing him she just might be

telling the truth.

“What did you do then? Did you speak?”

“I raised my fist and shoved it under his nose, yelling at the top of my voice. ‘Screw you.’”

“What happened next?”

“He vanished. The moment I decided to leave the room he reappeared in the doorway. He was relentless in his staring, watching my every move.”

Kobe doubled over and dry retched on the floor. When she had composed herself she again sat glaring at Kendal.

“Please, how can I make the eyes stop looking at me?”

Kendal shrugged. “I’m not a psychiatrist.”

“Stuff you coppa. I’m not crazy. This was real. Thanks to him I have nightmares every night. Please, it’s not my fault. Please, make it stop.”

“I’m not actually following what you’re talking about. You’ll have to explain what it is you’re frightened of?”

“Shit,” jeered Kobe. “When I close my eyes I see his face. I see his eyes looking at me; his ghostly un-blinking haunting eyes.”

“Whose eyes are you talking about?” Kendal questioned.

“Ernest Brown. He’s the man I’m talking about.”

“He died in a park.”

“I don’t care where he died. I’m telling you he was the one watching me in the house.”

“So you’re trying to tell me you saw the ghost of Ernest Brown?”

“Yes.”

Kendal looked directly at Kobe.

“You don’t believe me?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“The way you’re looking at me I can tell you don’t believe a word I’ve said.”

“I believe you think you’re telling the truth.”

“Which part don’t you believe?”

Kendal ignored the taunt. “I’d like you to clean up a few loose ends.”

“Ask away.”

“What sort of goods did you find in Ernest Brown’s house?”

Kobe fell silent, deep in thought. Claire slowly and quietly walked closer to the table. Kendal leaned back in the chair hoping she’d confess what he was waiting for.

“I found jewellery, rings, and earrings; four and a half pieces to be exact. I also raided the fridge for a midnight snack.”

“Was there anything else?”

“No nothing else. Disobeying the orders I’d been given I let my brother choose a ring. He drooled over two rings for ages.” Kobe chuckled. “I yelled at him to make his mind up. He picked out a nice large diamond and azure sapphire encrusted ring and swiped up a diamond necklace. He said he wanted to give the necklace to his girlfriend. He confessed he might get lucky.”

Kendal heard almost everything he was waiting for. Kobe talked about the ring on the kid's finger when he saw him at the supermarket. She confessed to taking the necklace he saw the girl wearing. There was only one more piece of the jigsaw puzzle left.

"Do you want to add anything else?"

"I didn't find any money if that's what you were thinking?"

"I was hoping you'd explain the four and a half earrings?"

"I searched the house for the other one, but I didn't find it."

"I'm amazed you didn't."

"Why?"

"I found one earring in a desk draw in the main bedroom."

"I searched every square metre of the room and every draw. It wasn't there."

"Explain how it was so easy for me to find it?"

"Either you're lying or you planted it."

Kendal's face turned to stone as he pushed his hand into a side pocket of his duffel coat. "I'm not lying." He studied the girl's face as he placed the one earring with the three diamonds set in a bubble of gold on the table.

Kobe glared at her accuser through narrowed slits.

"You've already shown me you have the pair. You must have planted it in the room."

"I didn't."

"If you didn't, then it was Ernest Brown's doing."

"A ghost?" probed Kendal.

"Yes."

"I don't believe in ghost's Miss Kobe Moylan. Maybe it was your accomplice playing a practical joke."

The girl looked startled."

"You did have an accomplice?"

"How did you know?"

"The bag I found in your possession isn't big, and you just confessed you have an accomplice."

Kobe bowed her head. "Okay, okay, my brother is the look out. I text him when the bag is full. He fills his newspaper box with the contents of the bag and I start a new search."

"You lower the bag to your brother through an open window then you haul it back again?"

"Correct. He delivers the morning newspaper. He uses a box to put the papers in. It's the best portable place to hide the goods and it's the perfect cover. If anyone comes around asking questions he tells them he's the paperboy." Kobe stopped talking to gaze about the room.

"Don't stop. I want you to keep talking."

"My Aunt was the boss of the burglary business."

"What's the name of your aunt?"

"Jillian Wentworth," blurted Kobe.

"The principal at Bluevale Secondary College?" questioned Kendal.

“Yes.”

“Interesting confession, please, continue.”

“A few days ago there was a knock on the door. A man calling himself Pat walked into the house. He said he’s taking over.” Kobe stared Kendal in the eyes. “Do you know he’s a woman?”

“Yes. We’ve met before.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“It’s a long story.”

“I think I’ve all the time in the world.”

“It’s police business. Some things don’t need to be shared. I want you to start talking about Mr. Upp.”

“I don’t know anyone called Mr. Upp?”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It’s the truth.”

Kendal leaned forward. “Tell me about Upp.”

“Strange name,” replied Kobe.

“Miss Moylan, to set the record straight, you and I have met. Three months ago you were sitting in class. I will suppress the name of the school for fear its good reputation will be dragged through the mud. I was invited to give a class discussion on what it takes to be a detective. There were thirty-seven students in the room. You, Kobe Moylan, were sitting in the second row back from the front and three rows in from the door. You had tied your hair back into a ponytail. You used a green and red hair tie.”

The girl sat unresponsive hearing the exact information.

“Do you want more convincing I suspect you know Mr. Upp?”

Kobe clasped her hands together. Swinging her feet back and forth under her chair she stared directly into Kendal’s eyes.

“After Pat was in the house for five minutes the front door opened. A man going by the name of Upp announced his presence. He said Patrick is the new heart of a spider. My brother, aunt and I were to take orders only from him.”

“I need a description of Upp. I also want you to explain what the heart of a spider is?”

“I’ve no idea what Upp looks like.”

Kendal raised a doubtful eyebrow.

“I swear I don’t know what he looks like. He wore a disguise.”

“Where can I find him?”

“I don’t know. He finds us. He shows up at any time.”

“You informed me you don’t know the man, but it’s not true, is it?” snarled Kendal.

“I thought you wanted to know his real name.”

“Do you know his real name?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“How long have you known this Upp character?”

“For a while,” mumbled Kobe.

“How long?” questioned Kendal.

“I can’t remember.”

“One year? Two? Three? Ten?”

“One year.”

“I take it he has a hold over you and your brother?”

“And my aunt,” confessed Kobe.

“What’s his beef?”

“My aunt is drug dependent. They had a chance meeting years ago. They grew very close.”

“How close?”

“Too close and I told her so.”

“Did they marry?”

“No.”

“The drug story, tell me more.”

“They went out one night. They came home two days later.”

“Did you report your aunt’s disappearance?”

Kobe shook her head. “The phone was in my hand when Upp carried her into the house. He confessed she drank a little too much. I could tell she was well and truly whacked.”

“What do you mean; whacked?”

Kobe rolled her eyes. “She was OD.”

“It’s only your opinion. Did you obtain any proof your aunt overdosed?”

“Shit coppa, I read the hospital report. It read she almost died from an ecstasy overdose. After being released I knew she’d be hooked on drugs. Before you ask, till then she refused to take a single tablet. She even refused to swallow the contraceptive pill. My aunt would boast at least twenty times a year she’d never taken medicine of any kind in her entire life. She was deep into natural herbs for any kind of healing.”

“This Upp bloke, in your opinion, was he on the scene for good?”

“No. My aunt kicked him out one night. She warned him never to come back. Next day she felt sick. She rang him, and he’s been sweeping the air three times a week since.”

“Licking his shadow,” snarled Claire.

Kobe nodded.

“I’m not sure I follow. There’s a link in the chain missing?” advised Kendal.

Using the palm of her hands Kobe banged the table.

“I was upstairs one night when Upp arrived un-announced. Neither my aunt nor he knew I was spying on them. He gave my aunt a note and a small clear plastic bag full of white powder. He pointed to the stairs before leaving. My aunt read the note then threw it in the bin. I snuck downstairs and read the message.”

“What was written on the paper?” Kendal asked.

Kobe stood, extracting the crumpled piece of paper from the inside of her sock, dropping it on the desk. Kendal picked it up. He read the words out loud.

“If you want the kids to live, you will convince them to work for me. You will not fail. I need more money, lots of money. I have a shipment of drugs headed my way. They expect payment. The kids will steal money and jewellery. I have ordered special cleats. When I obtain them I will give them to you. The cleats will help them climb a brick wall of any two-storey house I order them to rob. No money, no drugs. I look forward to us working together. I will call you a heart of a spider. Secrecy is of the utmost importance. One word to the cops and one of the kids will cease to breathe. I will be in touch; Upp.”

For a few seconds, Kendal sat in the silence, his mind filing the information. “Is there anything else you want to add?”

“I think I’ve covered the lot.”

“You’ll be spending time in a cell. Your brother and aunt will join you shortly.”

“Will I receive a lighter sentence, seeing how I spilled my guts on what I know?”

“It’s up to the Judge.” Kendal switched off the tape recorder and looked at Claire. “Escort Kobe to a cell, I’ll sprint upstairs to bring Cap Hughes up to speed on what’s occurred. I’ll meet you back here in ten minutes.” Focusing on Kobe he said slipping her a pen and paper. “I want you to write your mother’s phone number.”

Kobe did without hesitation. She stood allowing Claire to take her out of the room.

In exactly ten minutes Kendal collected Claire.

“You look like someone deep in thought?” she said.

“As a matter-of-fact I am.”

“Do you want to share your thoughts?”

“I’m thinking about what Marg said last night.”

“I don’t want to hear anything about your private life.”

Kendal sent Claire a stern look. “I asked her does she know a medium.”

“You’re joking?”

“I’m serious. What’s extremely interesting, she believes Jillian Wentworth is such a woman.”

“Our Jillian, the principal of Bluevale Secondary School; the woman we’re about to arrest? Kobe Moylan’s aunt?”

“The one and the same,” said Kendal.

“You made Kobe confess about seeing and talking about this ghost subject and now you’re searching for a medium, when in fact, you said you don’t believe in ghosts.”

Kendal studied Claire’s smiling face.

“Let me get this straight. Do you honestly believe anything Kobe said other than the details of the burglaries?”

“No.”

Kendal led Claire into an office. He sat at the desk before dialing the number Kobe gave him. He sat back in his chair, listening to the rings. Eventually, a woman answered. Her voice sounded

croaky as if she'd been woken from a deep sleep.

"Hello," groaned the voice.

"Are you Christine Moylan?" asked Kendal.

"Do you realize what time it is in California?"

"No."

"It's three in the morning?"

"I apologize for waking you. I'm Detective Sergeant Alan J Kendal."

"Sergeant, I've almost finished a long night. I'm tired. I'm sure whatever you want to talk to me about can wait until noon."

"If you'll spare me a moment, I think my news will be most concerning to you."

"When I turn my head towards the window I can see it's still dark outside. I don't like to be woken from my sleep during the night by anyone for any reason. Call me back in twelve hours. Do I make myself clear?"

"This conversation won't take more than a minute."

"Seeing how you insist on making me fully awake. Allow me to start your one-minute conversation. What does the 'J' in your name stand for?"

"Mrs. Moylan now isn't the time for idle chatter."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Mrs. Moylan, I'd prefer to come straight to the point for the reason over my urgent phone call."

"If you tell me your middle name, I'll listen to what you have to say."

"James. Detective Sergeant Alan James Kendal."

"Thank you for being so co-operative. I've a fetish habit about knowing people's middle names. I find it's easier to remember them."

"I've a fetish habit too about wanting to be right all the time," confessed Kendal.

"It's an interesting concept."

"Mrs. Moylan, I rang about your daughter, Kobe."

"Ms. Moylan. I'm not married anymore. I'm going to stay single for the rest of my life. Please, call me Christine."

"Ms. Moylan, your daughter Kobe, your son, and Jillian Wentworth have been arrested for robbing houses."

Silence marred the phone line. In the silence, Kendal sat drumming his fingers on the tabletop.

"Are you still there?" he finally asked.

"You have been misinformed," advised Christine firmly.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you the news over the phone."

"You're wrong."

"I'm sure of my facts. If you know a lawyer I'd be more than happy to ring him," said Kendal.

"Is this a prank phone call? Jack, are you trying to make me out to be a fool?"

“No, this isn’t a joke. Kobe is sitting in a cell at the St Kilda road Police Headquarters. If the Judge agrees, are you able to come and make arrangements for her bail?”

“You do sound serious.”

“I can guarantee this conversation is on the level,” insisted Kendal more firmly.

“I’m sorry, I just don’t believe you.”

“Ms. Moylan, I’m Detective Sergeant Alan James Kendal, Melbourne Homicide. I don’t know how else to convince you, except to suggest, now might be a good time to organize a flight home. Kobe might need you close. If it’s a problem, may I advise you to call a relative in Melbourne?”

“You are serious. This isn’t a joke is it?”

“To me, it’s not a laughing matter.”

“I’ll try to arrange a flight the moment I stop talking to you. I’ll ring my brother to ask him to arrange for her bail.”

“I’ve a few questions,” probed Kendal.

“Okay, I’m sitting on a chair, fire away.”

“I’m wondering why you need to fly out of the country all the time.”

“To be awarded my job, I needed to agree to travel overseas ten times in two years. Each stint could last up to four weeks.”

“Is the job worth it?”

“I’ve dreamt about a job like this my entire life. When it was dropped in my lap, how could I refuse?”

“What type of career would expect an employee to accept those conditions?”

“I wanted to be the best woman engineer to ever walk this planet. I told my kids it’s only going to be for two years. The company I work for have agreed to base me in Australia.”

“I hope the job’s worth it?”

Kendal hung up the phone and sat at the desk shaking his head. He wore a look of disappointment. Glancing at Claire he cleared his throat. Staring at the ceiling he called out in a serious voice.

“Ghost of Max or Ernest Brown, I have a few questions I need answering. Can hear me? A quick visitation will be good.”

Not even a cockroach moved in the room.

“That was a stupid idea,” he whispered.

Claire couldn’t help herself, she needed to say something. Even biting her lips couldn’t stop her from commenting.

“Do you really think a ghost will materialize just to answer your questions?”

“Of course not,” mumbled Kendal. “I don’t believe in ghosts.”

“So what did you think calling for the Max thing was going to achieve?”

Kendal slapped Claire gently on her shoulder.

“I thought I’d make an experiment out of the idea.” He grinned, walking out of the room.

Claire followed him out. She just finished closing the door when Kendal’s mobile phone

sounded. He answered it on the third ring.

“Captain Hughes here, there’s been another murder. Please take a look. Someone from a jogger’s group called to say they’ve found the body of a young girl.”

“Captain, something’s wrong? You asked too politely.”

“The murder happened at the park opposite the Bluevale Secondary College. Are Tegan and Tani safe?”

“Yes, they’re both at home. It’s not like you to care this much. Thanks, I appreciate it.”

“Kendal, shut up. Get your arse over to the park.”

“I’m on my way.”

Claire sat comfortably in the passenger seat while Kendal drove to the entrance of the park. A group of people wearing tracksuits buzzing information between each other looked their way when they stepped down from the car.

“Did anyone here report to police about finding a dead body?” asked Claire, walking over.

A short wiry framed man emerged from the middle of the pack. “I did.”

“Could you show us the exact location?”

“Sure. The girl’s this way.”

The man led the two detectives along a worn jogger’s path. The bush quickly grew thick making the track long and narrow. Claire brought up the rear. One hundred metres into the bush, Kendal signaled a halt.

“We can’t stop now we have a ways to go,” urged the man.

“Sir, I didn’t catch your name?”

“Ted.”

“Are you positive this is the right way? I saw a fork in the track before the last bend. It looked overgrown, but there were a few broken branches.”

“You think I’m lost because I’m a senior citizen. Shame on you; Even though I’m old I’ve got all my marbles,” growled Ted tapping the side of his head.

Claire snickered at Kendal’s raised eyebrows. “Lead on Sir,” she said. “I have complete confidence in your navigational skills.”

“Don’t patronize me, Missy. I’m having a lot of trouble believing both of you are authentic cops? Neither of you has coughed up a coppa’s badge. Believe me, when I tell you women cops aren’t so good looking as you. For all, I know you’re the murderers.”

Kendal and Claire reached for their badges.

Ted’s face flushed red with embarrassment. For a long time, he stood in silence.

“I apologize for my rudeness. The body isn’t far from here.”

The group rounded another three bends. The bush closed in on the track making their walk hard going. Kendal called a halt when he spied a picnic table in a clearing ten metres further on. Underneath the table a figure about the same size of a young teen lay motionless. Kendal slapped Ted on the shoulder.

“Thanks for your help; we’ll take it from here.”

Turning his back on the man, Kendal began to survey the area more closely.

The oval shaped clearing looked to be about the same size of a small room. The weathered table the figure lay underneath in a fetal position had been placed in the center. The scrub around the clearing looked to be a perfect spot for a picnic or a good excuse to get away from the world, or a murder.

Both detectives slowly closed in on the figure. Kendal looked for traces of blood on the churned up ground close to the table. He felt relief rise up from the inside. He couldn't find a single droplet of red, no woman's clothing, no school bag, nothing. He slowly walked towards the table, squatting at the girl's feet.

"What do you make of the area?" whispered Claire.

"Clean. If there were any footprints worth studying your old friend made them disappear. Judging by the growing crowd he's been inviting everyone to have a look."

"How did you come to that conclusion?"

"On the way here he tried to con me out of two bucks. There must be at least forty different footprints all around here. Ted, the sticky nose, has made a small fortune from sightseers."

Claire watched through bulging eyes, Kendal yanked the body out from under the table. She used her hand to muffle her giggles.

"This body is a mannequin. Judging by its structure, I'd estimate it's about the same length as Tegan and Kobe." Kendal turned the dummy over to search for the address of the shop it might have been stolen from. "There's nothing to ID the mannequin or even where it was manufactured. We'll place it in the lost and found. Hopefully, someone will ring to claim it."

Claire spied a loose thread hanging from underneath the mannequin's shorts. She yanked on the end. A small white piece of laminated paper fell to the ground. She picked it up and read the message.

"Does the mannequin remind you of the Fire Games we played? Wasn't it fun? Here's a warning, spring Kobe from jail or else the next body you find will be Tegan's, signed Patrick, alias Pat."

"It's time to put an end to Patrick's rain of fear," jeered Kendal. "This time, there will be no escaping."

CHAPTER THIRTY FIVE

UPP SQUATTED behind a car parked close to the main doors of a large concrete factory. Looking through the office window he studied the male mechanic's antics searching for something in a drawer at the desk. He was about to enter the office when the mechanic opened the door. Shutting it behind him he walked towards the café across the road, jiggling loose change in his hand. The man spoke briefly to a young girl behind the counter before following her to a small

table at the window.

Upp entered the factory. For a few seconds, he stood at the door of the shoebox size office staring at the interior of the garage full of un-roadworthy cars. He snorted before entering the office, making a beeline for the cash register. He easily opened the money drawer. Spying not more than a dollar in small change he angrily swept the small machine from the grimy benchtop. He immediately turned his attention to the plaster-clad wall behind him and started kicking holes in the wall. Still not satisfied he pulled his gun from his shoulder holster and walked into the work area. The forty-four-gallon drum of stagnant water was catching drips from the ceiling. He aimed and shot six bullets into the drum. Smiling at seeing the instant fountain he reloaded and waited for the mechanic to return. He wanted more money and he intended to get it any way he could.

Growing bored he re-entered the oblong office. After ransacking the room he again watched for the mechanic.

Finally hearing boots scraping the loose stones close to the double main doors to the workshop, Upp froze. He slowly turned and faced the noise square on. He lifted his gun to chest height.

The mechanic entered the office. His whistling abruptly ceased the moment he saw the gun pointed directly at him. In slow motion, the mechanic raised his hands above his head and slowly back stepped towards the safety of the outside world.

“If I were you I wouldn’t take another step.”

“What do you want?” questioned the old mechanic.

“You’re dumber than I thought. I want you to give me all your money.”

The man wearing bib and brace overalls started to tremble.

“The day’s been slow. By the state of the office, I can tell you found nothing in the cash register.”

“Wrong, I found a dollar. Where’s the rest?”

“It’s in the safe?”

“Lead on,” growled Upp.

The mechanic brushed past Upp and walked behind the desk. He stooped, moved an oil soaked rug to the side and pulled on the handle of a small trap door in the floor. In seconds he opened the door to the safe, grabbing a few one hundred dollar notes. He stood slamming the money down on the counter.

“That’s it?”

“Like I said before, it’s been a slow day.”

Upp grunted, swiping the notes from the counter. He eyeballed the man through narrowing slits.

“You’ve got your money, now leave.”

“I believe you’ve been lying to me.”

The mechanic shook his head. “Please, let me live. I’m an honest man. Besides, I certainly wouldn’t lie to a man holding a gun. A lousy few hundred dollars is not worth losing my life for.”

“If it’s been a slow day, how do you explain those cars sitting in your workshop? They’re

money.”

“They aren’t finished. The green one, she’s busted and needs a new engine. The yellow one needs a new front end. The white one needs a new transmission. The gold one needs a wheel alignment and I have to order the parts. They won’t be here before the middle of next week. Now get out of my garage.”

Upp snickered before pulling the trigger of his gun four times.

“Mr. Mechanic, you’re dead for not talking nice.”

Upp yanked the door to the office open and marched off towards his car. In a cloud of dust, he drove away still fuming at not finding enough money.

When a small supermarket came into view Upp swung his car into the carpark. He switched off the engine. For nearly ten minutes he watched women shoppers coming and going. Out of sight he re-loaded his gun and grabbed a box of bullets from the glove compartment in front of the passenger seat. He slipped his weapon into a shoulder holster hidden under a leather jacket and pocketed the bullets. He stepped down from the car and casually entered the short mall which leads into the supermarket.

A man in a long duffel coat walked deliberately through the carpark. He dipped his large brimmed hat at a woman struggling to control her shopping trolley and her three kids. Before entering the mall he turned and found the woman already safety at her car.

“Impressive,” he whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spied a man leaning against the wall near the registers. The man wearing the wide brimmed hat drilled a cold stare into Upp’s back as he stared at the checkout chicks scanning groceries and dropping money into the registers.

Upp quickly started to walk down the first aisle. A woman, two girls; one eight the other twelve, and an old woman, followed him in.

The man in the wide-brimmed hat shadowed the four females as they collected the weekly groceries. He scribbled words on a blank notepad. When he walked past the group he palmed the note into the hand of the mother of the two girls and kept walking.

The woman could only manage a cursory glimpse of the man’s hat before he turned right at the end of the aisle. She opened the note and started to read.

“Margaret Kendal, gather your family and leave the shop, now, GP.” Horror swept her face. “Kids we have to leave.”

“Mum, you said if we don’t buy food we have nothing for tea,” Tani whined.

“We only just arrived,” added Tegan. “What’s the rush? It’s not as though the place is going anywhere.”

“I’m not sure. According to this note, we have to leave, now.”

“What note?” questioned Grandma.

Marg opened her hand to reveal the note. “A man in a wide-brimmed hat palmed it to me when I reached for the bread.”

“Mum, I think we should leave and call dad,” advised Tegan.

They turned tail and marched back up the aisle towards the front when all hell broke loose.

“Give me all the money,” yelled Upp, sweeping his gun between three checkout girls. “Make it quick.” He pointed his gun at the roof, pulling the trigger three times. “Come on,” he yelled again. “Hurry it up.”

GP snuck back down aisle three. He glanced at Marg and the kids. He waited longer than he should have. Upp spied him, aimed and fired two bullets. GP dived for the floor. Marg, Tegan, and Tani were as quick. Grandma ran for the end of the aisle. She was shot in the thigh for trying to escape. Screaming in agony the old dear tried to hide in the narrow gap under the wire shelving. GP shot two bullets at Upp before grabbing hold of the old woman, dragging her to safety. He fired over the heads of Tegan and Tani. Upp dived behind the magazine rack and reloaded his gun. Everyone in the store screamed.

GP flipped open his mobile phone. He tapped off Kendal’s phone number.

“Speak,” answered a deep voice.

“Are you busy at this point of time?” GP’s voice sounded ice cold.

“Who is this?” questioned Kendal.

“I’m at the local supermarket, the one closest to your house. How fast can you get here?”

“One minute?”

“Good. In fifty-two seconds I’m leaving. If you’re here by then, you might catch Upp or whoever it is in the act of shooting up the place. Make it fast. Marg, Tegan, Tani and your mother-in-law are in here dodging bullets. You’ll need backup and an ambulance. The old dear has been shot. Before you ask, don’t panic, she’s a strong old bird, she’ll live. Her wound isn’t life threatening.”

Kendal heard five more shots through the phone. He clicked his fingers at Claire. She sprinted after him and only managed to slide onto the front passenger seat before the engine was screaming. Smoke billowed from the back tyres.

“Where are we going?” asked Claire, calmly.

“Shopping,” replied Kendal.

“It must be a fantastic special. Let me try and guess; dog food?”

Kendal yanked hard on the steering wheel. He entered the traffic, speeding past each car.

“Bad guess. Call for back up. Marg and the kids are mixed up in a robbery.”

Claire yanked her mobile phone from her pocket.

“Dispatch, I need back up at the supermarket in Traygon St. I need it here in twenty seconds, robbery in progress.”

“Roger,” replied the voice.

Claire opened her ankle zip, plucking out her Beretta. Instinctively she switched the safety off.

“We’ll be there in twenty seconds. GP called, he said he’s keeping the gunman at bay. He stated the man might be Upp.”

All was quiet at their destination by the time Kendal screeched the car to a stop on the sidewalk. The area looked like a war zone. Windows were shot out and glass littered the carpark. Shopping trolleys had been rolled onto the road. Cars were parked haphazardly and abandoned.

Inside the mall looked the same. Glass covered café tables, chairs were upended and drops of blood dotted the polished tiled floor.

Hugging the closest wall, Claire viewed the inside of the supermarket. People were scattered like ten pins in a bowling alley. Those who couldn't find refuge under the wire shelving were hugging the floor in a fetal position. They might have been strangers, but they all had one thing in common. They were doing what they could to stay alive.

A few groans met the two detectives as they dived behind the sales enquiries counter.

Kendal surveyed the front of the shop. No one looked game enough to be walking about. He dived in front of the cigarette booth. His voice came no louder than a whisper.

"Is anyone on the serving side of this counter?"

"Yes," replied the voice of a female.

"I'm Detective Kendal. My partner is Detective Ambroso. Do you have any idea where the gunman is?"

"I think both left just before you arrived."

Kendal nodded at Claire. He squatted and made himself ready to stand. Claire prepared to cover her partner. At the same time, Kendal dived over the counter Claire half stood and pointed her gun. She swept it from left to right and back again. Her eyes narrowed. From the other side of the counter, a scream filled the graveyard quiet store.

Kendal lifted a finger to his lips to warn the young female shop assistant to stay quiet.

Claire slid over the top of the counter and joined the girl and Kendal.

"All seems quiet. I have a gut feeling the gunman's not here," she reported.

"We'll begin a sweep of the store," said Kendal. "I'll start on the right, Claire you begin on the left. We'll meet in the middle." He looked at the girl. "Are you hurt?"

Nervously she shook her head.

Outside, five more police cars arrived. The dog squad was the last to enter the carpark.

Kendal pulled his mobile phone from his pocket to bring the boys in blue up to speed. They took up positions behind cars. Their guns were aimed at the main exit.

The media arrived. Kendal spied them hurriedly setting up their cameras at the far side of the carpark.

"Are the other exits in the supermarket alarmed?" asked Kendal looking at the girl.

She managed four quick nods.

Kendal squatted, placing his hand on the girl's shoulder. He looked her in the eyes.

"I want you to stay put and out of sight. No matter what happens, don't move. I'll collect you when it's safe."

Again the girl nodded. She appeared to be scared out of her mind.

Both detectives started their search.

Kendal shouldered the display at the end of each aisle and gave everybody he could see a cursory glance. He needed to find GP. Somehow he must get him out undetected. He was almost certain Upp had fled the scene. As for GP, he suspected he might be lying in a pool of blood.

Kendal and Claire searched aisle after aisle. There wasn't a dead body or a drop of blood on

the floor anywhere. Even Upp and GP weren't around.

The two detectives met in the middle of the large supermarket. Kendal lifted his mobile phone to his ear.

"Send in the dog, hopefully, he'll pick up a scent."

Claire started walking down the many aisles helping people to their feet and telling them to march outside.

"Don't scream or stop to pat the dog," she warned.

Kendal stood in aisle four, scanning the several scared faces of the shoppers.

"Partner, get your arse to aisle one, ASAP," whispered Claire through her mobile phone.

He ran for her voice, skidding to a stop. His eyes bulged at seeing Claire on the floor cradling an old woman. Kendal dialed 000 at the same time his wife spoke.

"The kids and I are fine," advised Marg. "Mum doesn't look so good."

"The ambulance will be here in five." Kendal gave the old woman a quick check over before staring at her in the eyes.

She snorted. "Looks like you'll finally rid me from your life."

"You'll be fine."

The old dear feebly raised a fist. "Liar," she spat.

"I'm not. You'll be fine. A week or two in the hospital will see you right." Kendal focused on his wife. "Marg, I have to continue. There's a gunman somewhere close. I have to find him. I think his name is, Upp."

She nodded, made herself comfortable on the floor, dragged Tegan and Tani down then waved him away.

"Where's the manager?" asked Kendal. He was staring at a young man who looked to be panicking over what to do next.

"I'm here," called a young man stepping up from behind.

"Sir, your name is?"

"I'm Emrie Turner."

"Do you have any idea what happened to the gunman?"

"Both left before you arrived."

"What do you mean; both?" quizzed Claire. "I've been led to believe there was only the one."

"Who told you such rubbish? You weren't here. I was. There were two men. One seemed hell bent on robbing the supermarket. The other, I thought at the time, was his partner or backup. Halfway through the robbery, I changed my view when I realized the second bloke seemed hell bent on shooting the first one."

"Can you give a description of either?" asked Kendal.

"The first man, the one demanding the check-out girls place the money from the tills into the bag, wore a mask. If I could get my hands on the mongrel I'd give him a knuckle sandwich."

"It's not advisable," hinted Claire.

"Why? The maniac pointed a gun at my girlfriend."

"I can see why you're a trifle toey," said Kendal.

The man lifted his hands, coiling his fingers into fists.

"You betcha I'm toey. I'm angry inside and out. What I'd give to see the bloke again?"

"The second man, can you describe him?" quizzed Claire, watching her partner shaking his head.

Excitement seemed to overshadow the manager's anger as he spewed the description.

Claire looked excited too. Kendal's frown deepened.

"The second man wore a large wide-brimmed hat and a long brown coat. I swear on my girlfriend's grave if he stood in a doorway his shoulders would've touched both sides. He looked tall too. He must have been well over two meters in height. If I was made to guess, I'd say he might be a professional hit man."

"Why do you think so?" asked Claire.

"I've a gut feeling. He acted exactly the same way a villain does in a movie."

"Not a lot of meat, however, your statement is quite informative," said Kendal. "At a guess, I'd say you've been studying up on detective work."

"Yes, I have. I've enrolled in forensic science. At the moment my thesis is on how to correctly relay information, no matter how trivial it is to the police and the media. Give the journo's what they think they want without informing them of any facts which might hinder a police investigation."

Kendal's eyebrows shot skywards.

"What?" the man grumbled. "Was there something wrong in my descriptive report?"

"No, your report sounded good. Be warned, you haven't met Erving yet."

"Who's Erving?" the manager questioned.

Kendal snickered. "I can clearly make out you're not happy working in this place."

"Correct. Someday my dream is to work in the field of forensic science. Ever since I was a kid I have loved the idea."

Kendal's mobile phone shrilled. He lifted it to his ear. Spoke briefly and signaled Claire to follow.

"What's up?" she grilled when they stepped outside into the carpark. "I happened to be enjoying listening to the young man."

"You've got to be joking. Erving will slice and dice his arse then serve it up for breakfast."

"Give the guy a break. If he wants to live his dream, he'll survive whatever comes his way."

Kendal snorted, before looking at the dog handler. Claire squatted, beckoning the dog over.

"Excuse me Miss Ambroso, if I were you I don't recommend you pat the dog. Butch might bite your hand off. He's a little upset."

"Why?"

"He lost the scent."

Kendal frowned at the dog before refocusing on the Constable. "How come, the scent should've been fresher than a blooming flower?"

"He picked up a multiple of scents. One scent stopped at the road. Obviously, one offender entered a waiting car and drove away. The second scent stopped at where the car had been parked."

A third scent was leaking from a small plastic capsule which someone placed on the road. It stunk to high heaven. It must have been dropped to confuse the dog and mask the escape route. Butch and I searched the area hoping to pick up the scent, which we did. I believe we were gaining on one of the offenders. We approached a fence which led into the backyard of a unit in a block of twelve. A second canister was placed on the ground. We again scoured the area, but failed to locate the correct scent.”

“GP,” whispered Kendal.

“Pardon?” asked the Constable.

“I’m just thinking out loud. Good work all the same.”

“I’ll give my report to Cap Hughes sometime tomorrow in case you want to re-read the facts.”

“Thanks for trying.”

Kendal watched the dog leap into the police van. Kendal stood watching the van being driven off to their next case. When the vehicle turned the corner he focused on the ambos wheeling his mother-in-law towards a waiting ambulance. He marched over and stood next to Marg.

“You keep doing what you have to,” she whispered. “The kids and I will be at the hospital.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come?” Kendal asked, looking directly into his wife’s eyes. He felt torn between his job and being at the hospital comforting her in a low moment.

“I’m sure. You have to find this bloke.”

“If you need me for anything I’m only a phone call away.”

Claire gave Marg a hug. “If you need anything, we are only a phone call away,” she corrected. “We can be at the hospital in five minutes.”

“Thanks, I’m positive mum will be fine. The ambos have reassured me she’ll be okay.”

Kendal kissed his wife and his two daughters before facing Claire. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER THIRTY SIX

CAPTAIN HUGHS’ desk phone shrilled.

“Speak,” he growled, after snatching it from the cradle. Mumbling something incoherent he clicked his fingers at the man sitting opposite him. “It’s for you.”

Kendal grabbed the phone. Pushing it against his ear he gave the Captain a puzzled stare.

“Hello.”

“Hi there friend, I thought I’d give you a call. Shouldn’t you be at the hospital?”

“Who are you?”

“Guess.”

“I’m not into mind games.”

“Yes, you are.”

Kendal snapped his fingers together to attract Claire's attention. "GP?"

"Exactly," replied the voice.

"To answer your question about not being at the hospital, Marg will ring me if my mother-in-law made a sudden turn for the worst. The only news I'm concerned about at the moment is every member of my family is safe, thanks to you."

Kendal's voice sounded less confident than he wanted it to be.

"You don't sound too convincing."

The Captain looked up from his paperwork.

"Do you know where I'm sitting?" asked Kendal.

"I sure do."

"Prove to me you know?"

"You're sitting opposite Captain Hughs."

"You've got guts."

"Thanks," said GP. "I'll be sure to write the comment in my memoirs."

"Tell me why you think it might be safer to ring through the police station switchboard instead of calling me on my mobile phone?"

"I thought this way might be fun."

"I don't follow. You said the only way we could arrange a meeting to talk was the black envelope system. Any other way might be too dangerous?"

"I decided to be daring, to walk on the edge for a change. Besides, the conventional way we were communicating is too slow in this particular circumstance. I've some interesting news which should, I believe, stir you to the very core of your soul."

"Is the information about Sam, the missing kid?"

"No, however, I'm working on a lead."

"Do I have to guess the information?"

"If you want to," answered GP. A slight chuckle came through the phone line.

Kendal's eyes narrowed. "I think I'll say I don't want to guess and see where it leads me."

"Then I'll inform you directly. This is a moment you won't forget."

"You have my undivided attention."

"I've been given three contracts."

"To dispose of three people?" asked Kendal.

"I like that word. To put it more bluntly, I have to kill three people, two males, and one female. A pigeon pair, plus one, so to speak."

"What are their names?"

Kendal started to pace the floor under the watchful eyes of Claire and Captain Hughes. They both wore a puzzled expression.

"Before I answer I have some sad news."

"Okay, spit it out."

"Margaret doesn't know."

"Doesn't know what?"

The long pause came as static through the phone.

“GP, where is this conversation leading?”

“Do you want to start a trace so you can locate me?”

“I’m torn between yes and no.”

“Listen to your gut feeling.”

“Do I need to know where you are?”

“After what I’m about to say you might want to know. Correction, I believe you definitely will want to.”

In a heartbeat, Kendal knew he needed to have the trace started. He signaled Claire. At the end of the day, he’s a cop and GP is a dangerous thug who so far only hinted he wanted to turn good.

“I know the trace will be complete in three minutes. I’ll stay on the line till then.”

“You’ll be arrested.”

“Do what you have to. I’ll do the same. Do you remember the question I asked you in the park?”

“The scenario in whether I’d arrest you or not?”

“Exactly,” blurted GP.

“I’m not sure what to say at this point.”

“It’s decision time.”

Kendal signaled Claire to speed up the trace.

“What’s the news? I’m sure it’s not to taunt us cops, or whether you are good enough to avoid being arrested?”

“You’re right on both counts. Has the trace started?”

Kendal walked to the window to view the outside. This man, going by the name of GP, had the upper hand. He wasn’t the everyday run of the mill thug. He came across as a professional hit man. His gut told him the man should never be trusted.

“I can tell by your sudden silence the trace has started. I can understand your reluctance to say. If I were in your shoes I’d do the same.”

“Okay,” said Kendal. “You have the advantage, spill what you know.”

“I entered the shopping centre when all hell broke loose. There was a fire and a lot of bullets were flying about the place. Upp wanted to shoot me. I tried to shoot him back.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

“When your mother-in-law got shot, I dived across the aisle so I could get her out of harm’s way. There was blood everywhere. I snatched a nappy parcel off the shelf. I placed one over her wound. Fortunately, the bullet went straight through her body. You’re right, she’ll live. I wiped the area clean by using a second nappy. Bill me for the packet of nappies when you find me.”

“How can you be so sure the old dear will live? Are you a doctor?”

“I can’t say.”

“So you are. Have you been struck off the medical registry?”

“Let’s move on,” suggested GP.

“Have I poured salt into an old wound?”

GP gave a short sharp chuckle which sounded more like a growl. At last, Kendal found something to go on in finding out the man’s real identity. Maybe DNA on the nappy container might help to reveal who he is.

“My hat fell off when grandma opened her eyes. In a flash, I hid my face, but it was too late. She knows what I look like. Now she has to die.”

“Surely even you couldn’t be so heartless. She’s old. She can’t have too many years left. I can’t allow it.”

“It’s too late. It’s out of my hands.”

“Why? You have a choice. Walk away.”

“You don’t understand and you never will.”

“Turn your back on the incident and bury the moment,” ordered Kendal.

“No. In forty years I’ve never broken my vow. If anyone sees my face they die. I can’t start now.”

“Who will know?”

“Besides me; only you,” replied GP.

“Do yourself a favour, walk away.”

“No, it’s not possible.”

“I’ll have to stop you.”

“You can’t.”

“I don’t believe in the word,” jeered Kendal.

“You’re of strong character. If you come looking for me you’ll have an early grave. You’ll be so one-eyed in trying to hunt me down, it’ll eat at you. The only thing I have to do is stand in the shadows and wait for you to make a mistake. It will be your downfall. Believe me, people have hunted me before. I patiently wait then the hunter becomes the hunted.”

“I could take your statement for a threat. If you think you know let me remind you of the fact I never fail. How hard could it be to find you?”

“Impossible, besides, you don’t like the old woman, but I’ll keep your secret.”

“Maybe it’s true and maybe not. I don’t want her dead.”

“Condolences to your family,” whispered GP.

“She’s still alive. I know her wound isn’t life threatening. She’ll live.”

“She’s alive now. The old dear will leave the hospital in a coffin.”

“There must be another way?”

“No, her fate has been decided.”

“There has to be?”

“The discussion is closed.”

Kendal turned from the window to look Claire in the eyes.

“You have given me no option. I will hunt you down.”

“Hold on. I’ve a thought,” whispered GP. “Give me a moment to consider my idea.”

The phone line went graveyard quiet. Kendal waited patiently for GP to talk trying to think of

some way to save his mother-in-law. After several long moments, he broke the silence.

“Are you scared I’ll be able to hunt you down? Is it the real reason for your silence?”

“No on both counts,” said GP in a calm voice. “My feelings about you are right on the money. You’re a cop through and through. You were born to be a cop.”

“Your comments won’t change the fact I’ll hunt you down.”

“Tell me, have you spoken to the old dear about me?”

“No.”

“Good, leave it that way or she’s dead.”

“She might ask me to find out the name of the bloke who helped her?”

“Inquisitive little woman.”

“It’s a family trait. I can explain you were a cop.”

“Me, a cop, it’ll never work. I’d be a laughing stock.”

“Laughing stock according to whom?”

“The higher powers,” advised GP.

“So you do answer to someone?”

“Yes. When they give me a contract, I do it. If the old dear buys the alibi, I’ll accept your proposal. It’ll save both our bacon. Not to mention the funeral expenses. The price of flowers these days is an extravagance only the rich can afford.”

Kendal nodded at the phone. “Deal; now about the other two contracts you’ve been given. I want their names?”

“Fair enough; one is on Upp. The other is on Weakom.”

“How much money is on each head?”

“One million dollars will be paid for each contract when they see the coffin being lowered into the ground.”

“Who are they?”

“I’m not at liberty to say. If I do, you’ll be at my funeral. Believe me, when I say, the people above me never miss.”

“For a moment I thought one of the contracts might have been me,” said Kendal.

“Never,” replied GP. “I call you a friend.”

“Why is there a contract out on Weakom?”

“Everyone knows he’s in deep cover.”

“What do you mean everyone?”

“I’ll answer your question this way. The powers on high don’t like him.”

“Personally, I don’t either. I’m not about to see him being lowered into the ground.”

GP laughed sarcastically. “I love your sense of humour. It’s so dry.”

“Why tip off the police about what you’re planning? They’ll swarm the ground you’re standing on. There won’t be any escape.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Then so be it.”

“Maybe you don’t understand. The boys in blue will find you standing in a phone box. They’ll arrest you.”

“It’s a good strong comment. I’ve no inkling of been misinformed in any way.”

Kendal’s expression looked sullen. He began to pace the room.

“I’ll explain it this way. You don’t have long.”

GP checked his watch. “By my reckoning normally I’d have about two minutes left.”

Claire signaled the trace was having a slight problem locking onto the exact signal.

“What do you mean normally?” asked Kendal.

“If the trace happens to be working properly, by now I’d have two minutes before the police arrive.”

“This is a wild off the cuff guess. Do you know the trace is having trouble?”

“I suppose I’ll have to answer your question.”

“I’d appreciate it.”

GP chuckled. “If it’ll help to speed up the inevitable I’ll explain exactly where I am.”

“You don’t have to the interference has been filtered out. The trace is about to inform us of your exact location,” warned Kendal.

GP checked his watch again. “If you’re right, I’ve one minute thirty seconds left before the cops come running. They’ll have their guns drawn. I can imagine the scene. There’ll be confusion, amazement, and puzzlement.”

“I’ve a hypothetical question?” Kendal asked.

“Excuse the pun; shoot.”

“How do you know the trace was actually started?”

“I’ve already stated you’re a cop through and through.”

“Is there a hidden meaning to those words?”

“You did what you needed to do. Before the trace runs into overtime, the address you seek is on the corner of Swanston and Franklin streets Melbourne. When the cops finally arrive they’ll see a telephone booth. If you could do me a favour, please send a message asking them not to be too eager and to keep their testosterone in check. The phone company finished installing a new booth last week. If a bullet smashes a glass panel I don’t think they’d be too happy. A glass section must cost a fortune to replace.”

“I’ll let them know.”

Kendal’s mobile phone shrilled.

“You want to answer your phone?” questioned GP. “I’ll stay on the line.”

Kendal snatched the phone from his pocket, growling under his breath. “What?”

“Constable Baker here, we have the exact location on the vigilante who was in the supermarket shooting bullets into the walls.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the corner of Swanston and Franklin. The only suspicious thing in the area is a phone box.”

Kendal’s heart felt heavy informing Baker they had the correct target. He folded his mobile

phone, slipping it back into his pocket.

“That wasn’t too hard?” mentioned GP.

“Is dying the way you intend to leave the underworld?”

“I’ll answer your question in a moment.”

“You want to get caught, go to jail and be away from your past evil life?”

GP chuckled. “I can’t escape. I chose this life, it didn’t choose me. If I were to go to jail, before the sunset on the first day, someone will try to stab me in the back.”

“So why go through the motions of being caught?”

“I can’t answer your question. The cops are closing in, got to go.”

“You want to kill some cops?”

Kendal held the phone in a death grip as he heard shouting from the group of six cops, closing in on their prey. He played the scene over in his mind exactly how they’d arrest GP. The six cops will approach the phone box slowly with their guns drawn and levelled at chest height. They’d yell at GP to drop his weapons before ordering him to step away from the phone booth and lay on the ground. He’d be told to clasp his hands behind his head and interlock his fingers. One cop will straddle the man then handcuff and drag him to a standing position. They’d be patting themselves on the back over the arrest. If something was to go wrong, GP might shoot the six cops. They’d be dead before they knew it. Surely he couldn’t be that good.

Shouting through the phone forced Kendal back into reality. He whispered under his breath.

“What have I done?”

Glancing sideways at Claire, Kendal turned his back on her. Why did he condemn a man he’d never met? He slammed the cordless phone back on the hook. In a show of frustration, Kendal yanked the phone from the desk, hurling it across the room. The phone slammed into the wall and shattered.

Captain Hughes sat back in his chair. Claire dived for the floor.

Kendal kicked a chair and upturned the desk the Captain was sitting at. He paced the floor like a caged lion.

Hughes signaled Claire not to venture too close.

Somewhere a mobile phone shrilled. It rang eight times before Claire looked at her fuming partner.

“Sugar, answer your bloody phone.”

Kendal glared at the woman. It was as though she’d spoken words he didn’t understand. He reached into his pocket, swiping the phone out, lifting it to his ear. He sighed away his anxiety and slid down the wall to sit on the carpet.

“Yes?” he said calmly.

“Hi, there friend.” The voice sounded surprisingly charismatic. “I thought I should give you a ring to let you know they missed and whatever you do don’t throw a phone or a chair or upturn a table to vent your frustration.”

“GP?”

“Correct.”

“How did you know I threw the phone through the wall?”

“I know everything about you. Hello, Claire.”

“Hi GP.”

“To know so much about me you’d have to be a cop.”

“I’m not a cop,” cut in GP. “It’s not in my nature. Don’t be too hard on yourself. I won’t hold anything against you. The moment I hang up the phone I’ll not think about this phone call again. You did what you needed to do.”

“Explain to me why you’re still alive? You were surrounded by the boys in blue. There was no way on this earth you could have escaped.”

“Are you sure?”

“Obviously, I’m wrong.”

“Is it a good thing or bad?”

“It’s a good thing,” blurted Kendal, quickly.

“Before you ask, the cops were in the right place.”

“How did you escape?”

“I told you, I’m too clever to be caught. I’ll let the boys in blue explain it. There is one thing.”

“Yes?”

“The heroes didn’t get your message in time. You might want to square things with the phone company. Four glass panels need to be replaced. I’ll give the boys some credit at least they were accurate. I’m happy to announce no one got hurt in the shootout.”

“I take it there’s another reason other than publicity for the stunt you pulled?”

“To prove to you and the cops, I’m smarter than the whole police force put together. I’m too clever to be arrested. You and anyone else who try to track me down will never find me. No offense.”

“None taken,” said Kendal. “I’m happy you weren’t caught. Tell me, if you weren’t in the phone box, where were you?”

“It’s a secret. Though, if I were to inform you of where I am I won’t be at the location when you arrive.”

Opening his mouth to speak, Kendal decided silence might be the best option.

“If you can keep a secret and I know you can. Walk to the window. If you’re quick, you might see my hat sitting on the ledge opposite Captain Hughes’ office. I’m not saying it’s where I was the whole time, however, if you add one plus one you should be able to figure out the answer. I’ll be in touch,” said GP. “By the way, I still call you a friend.”

Kendal heard a click, terminating the conversation. He sprinted over to the window, looking out and up. He spied the figure of a man stepping away from the second-floor window. On the ledge, he saw a wide brimmed hat.

Captain Hughs’ mobile phone sounded. He swiped it from his pocket, answering it before the third ring. He huffed a few times before hanging up.

“The GP bloke had us dressed in clown outfits.”

“He sure did,” replied Kendal.

“Have you finished wrecking my office?”

“Yes, I’ve cooled.”

“Good,” grumbled Captain Hughes. “I’m fresh out of desk phones.”

Claire let a chuckle, slip. “What happened at the pay phone?”

“In short, the boys in blue surrounded the pay phone. They moved in and found the pay phone receiver and a mobile phone glued together using masking tape. GP was never there. He’s good. I’ll give him that much credit. If what he says is true, and it appears to be, we’ll be wasting too much of the taxpayer’s money in trying to track him down. I’ll talk to the commissioner about all this. In the meantime, try to keep tabs on the man. He’s not a ghost. He can’t just pop up then vanish any time he likes.”

Kendal raised an eyebrow.

“What?”

“Nothing at all,” he replied.

“Good. Get out of my office and do some work. Go find a crook. Better yet, go and arrest Upp. If lady luck is on our side, GP and UPP are the same man. While you’re at it, sweep Patrick up and throw him back in the nut house.”

“The mental institution,” corrected Kendal, moving towards the door. “Cap whatever you do don’t think too much about GP, your thoughts will send you loopy.”

“Spare me the psychological analysis and get out of here. Ambroso, get him out of my office and send in the maintenance man. For some strange reason, there’s a hole in my wall.”

CHAPTER THIRTY SEVEN

KENDAL AND Claire marched to the car. They took off at speed in the direction of the Bluevale Secondary College.

“I’ve called the school. The friendly office lady informed me Principal Wentworth is due in a meeting right about now. Every staff member will be present,” advised Claire.

“At least the robberies have been cleaned up,” replied Kendal. “We can pool our energy into finding Patrick. Be assured, she knows what’s going on. Soon she will be so hell-bent on finding me she’ll emerge from the rat hole she’s been hiding in. When she does, both of us will be there to escort her back to the nut house.”

“It’s a good feeling to finally have a major breakthrough in this case,” said Claire.

Kendal nodded, steered the car around the corner and parked behind two police cars. They stepped onto the road and walked up to the four constables who were opening their car doors.

“Thanks for arriving in record time,” said Kendal.

“Not a problem,” replied the four simultaneously. “So far it’s been a quiet day.”

“Don’t talk too soon,” jeered Claire. “I have a feeling things are about to get very busy.”

An old woman walking past on the other side of the road stopped to watch the group as they discussed their plan of surprise. A Constable wandered over and asked her to move along.

“Sonny, Australia is a free country. I can walk where I want and stop where I want. Before you say another word there’s no law which says contrary to what I just stated.”

“You’re correct,” he replied. “I have to advise you anywhere near the school for the next hour or so should be regarded as off limits.”

“Why?”

“Please, madam, move along.”

“What are you six cops up to?”

“We are conducting police business.” The young Constable tapped the old woman’s elbow before palming his hand down the road away from the school.

“Police business you say. It all sounds rather interesting.”

Kendal started to march over. He didn’t look happy. Watching him pick up speed, the old woman bid the Constable farewell and hurriedly shuffled off in the opposite direction.

Both the Constable and Kendal watched her leave. At the corner, he saw a small shiny rectangular shaped object being extracted from her handbag. He saw her lift it to her ear then she disappeared behind a hedge.

“Great,” mumbled Kendal. “I bet you twenty bucks she’s calling the media. They’ll have the school surrounded before we have a chance to escort the principal off the premises. Come on Davies, if we don’t arrive at the school before the media, Wentworth will have been tipped off and she would have done a runner.”

Three cars rolled to a stop near the front entrance to the school. Kendal led the charge, his black duffel coat swaying in his wake.

“This place is like a morgue,” mentioned Kendal.

“Pupil free day,” said Claire. “You need to read the school newsletters more often.”

“No pupils at the school might be a good thing,” whispered Kendal. “Time will tell.”

They entered the anti-room. The large office on their left looked abandoned. Kendal noted the name on the nearest door. ‘Jillian Wentworth, Principal.’ Not bothering to knock, he barged in. Five teachers and four-office ladies were standing, drooling over a large iced cake. Five candles were burning bright.

“Where’s Wentworth,” blurted Kendal, flashing his police badge at each of the disgruntled group. “The principal is supposed to be in this office.”

“Do you mind?” whispered a burly shaped teacher, standing. He folded his arms before stepping in front of Kendal.

“You’ve one second to move.”

“This is a private function. Police are certainly not invited.”

“I hope none of you in this room are thinking about obstructing a police investigation?” warned Kendal.

A second teacher folded his arms. The moment he stood Kendal looked his way which in turn

forced the man to quickly settle back into his chair.

“None of us will consider hindering the police.”

“Good to hear. Now I’ve your undivided attention, where’s Wentworth?”

“It’s Jillian Wentworth’s birthday,” confessed a female teacher in the midst of the group. “She should be here any moment.”

Footsteps approaching the door echoed down the corridor as if someone was wearing tap shoes. The door slowly opened and a plump woman slipped through the gap.

“Jillian’s coming,” she whispered.

The second wave of feet in stiletto heels echoed off the corridor walls. They abruptly stopped outside the closed door. A short pause followed before the door opened.

“Surprise,” yelled the group, breaking into the happy birthday song.

Kendal stepped up to the man guarding the door, pushing him aside. Over the final sentence of the song he snapped handcuffs on Wentworth’s wrists.

“Jillian Wentworth, you’re under arrest for aspiring to commit burglaries.” Kendal escorted the woman to the table, forcing her to sit on a chair.

One female teacher walked over, placing her hand on the principal’s shoulder. She glared at each of the police in turn.

“I thought you were joking when you said you’re here to arrest our leader. How dare you come in here and interrupt this special moment. Jillian is fifty-five today.”

“I don’t care,” blurted Kendal. “Constables please escort the teachers out of here.”

The group was quickly subdued and herded out of the office. Claire closed the door.

“Start talking,” bellowed Kendal.

“I’ve nothing to say,” replied Wentworth. “Once my lawyer hears about this I’ll sue the police department.”

“For what?” asked Kendal.

“False imprisonment is a good place to start.”

“Your case is full of holes.”

“Says who?”

“Me,” growled Kendal.

“We’ll see.” Jillian spat at her warden from across the table.

“I’m happy you missed. My partner doesn’t like it when I don’t look my best.”

Wentworth glared up at Claire as the door opened.

“Constable, escort this woman up the corridor. Make sure no teacher stops you. If they do, you have my permission to arrest each one of them. Detective Ambroso and I will search the school for the boy.” Kendal faced Wentworth. “Speaking of which, where is he?”

The woman anchored her feet around the chair legs. “I’m not saying. I refuse to leave my office.”

“Where’s the lad?” asked Claire, firmly.

“Which one?” Wentworth grumbled.

“You’re nephew, Sterling,” said Kendal. The tone in his voice sounded cold.

“It’s none of your business.”

“I’m making it my business. Where is he?”

Wentworth looked away.

“Tell me where he is or so help me you’ll have an express ride to the mental institution.”

“You won’t.”

“Try me.”

“He would,” added Claire. “I’ve seen him do it. It’s not pretty.” She gave her partner a wink.

“Sterling is in the library. I didn’t want him home alone especially when I know Patrick’s loose on the streets.”

“Now we’re getting somewhere. I want you to tell me the answers to some questions,” said Kendal.

“Why should I help you?”

“It’s your choice to answer. I want you to inform me of Patrick’s where-a-bouts?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Talk to me about Mr. Upp. Where does he live?”

“I don’t know. Don’t look so doubtful, Detective. It’s the God’s honest truth.”

“How can I find him?”

“He finds me.”

Kendal paced the room. He stopped at the window to look out towards the school oval. He turned and faced the woman. “I’ve been informed you’re a medium.”

“You’ve been misinformed.”

“Can you talk to the dead, yes or no?”

Wentworth looked up at her warden. The expression on her face portrayed her to be a tough woman. Her smirk widened.

“Surely an intelligent cop couldn’t believe in such things?”

“Try me. I have complete faith in the information.”

“Who told you this?”

“I’m not obliged to reveal my informer. Can you talk to the dead or not?”

“As a matter of fact, I can. If I help you will it lighten my sentence?”

“It’s not up to me.”

“I see.” Wentworth gave a distant look. She closed her eyes for a while. When she again opened them she stared at Kendal. “I’ve thought things through. It looks like I don’t have a choice. I’ve decided to take my chances and plead my case to the Judge. Please inform the court I decided to help in every way I could. What is it you wanted to know?”

Keeping a straight face, Kendal spoke confidently.

“To you, this might or might not sound strange. I’ve had a visitation.”

“You mean from a ghost?”

“Yes, in a manner of speaking.”

“What did this ghost say?”

“I was hoping you might be able to tell me. Seeing how you believe communication is possible on the other side. Is there a way you can help me verify my doubts?”

“Un-cuff me and I’ll see what I can summon up.”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea,” hinted Claire. She stared at her partner while closing in on the prisoner.

“Your concern is duly noted,” mentioned Kendal.

“I won’t try to escape,” said Wentworth. “I do what I say.” She lifted her cuffed hands, raising her eyebrows at the same time.

Kendal extracted a small key from his pocket. He leaned over so he could un-cuff her wrists.

“Thank you. Before I try to open the line to the spirit world, can you tell me where you saw the ghost?”

“We met in my study.”

Wentworth slowly clasped her hands together. Closing her eyes she quietly started humming. Kendal raised his eyebrows. Claire folded her arms.

“I believe the ghost of Max Brown and I have conducted a short conversation. He lived in a two-storey house. His death was accidental. He left behind a wife and two kids. They loved each other till the end. He spoke to me about never having to worry about money. He’s happy and content. He’s at peace.”

“Anything else?” asked Kendal.

Wentworth opened her eyes. “When the communication line between me and the other side is breaking, the spirit, in this case, Max Brown, starts to slur his words.”

Kendal stood at ease. He pursed his lips. He gave a few sharp nods.

“Once I’ve lost the connection there’s nothing I can do to reattach communication. I’m sorry. At least you know Max is happy.”

“Thanks for trying.” Kendal re-cuffed the woman and walked her to the door. “Before you’re escorted out to the police car, I forgot to say, happy birthday.”

“Thank you.”

“Constable, please escort Jillian Wentworth to my car.”

Kendal, Claire, and two uniformed police marched to the library. Kobe’s brother seemed to be busy reading. He looked up when they entered. He watched them talk to the librarian and stood as they approached.

“Is your name Sterling?” asked Kendal.

“My friends call me Slasher or Slash for short.” The boy dropped his gaze before mumbling. “Yes.”

“I’m Detective Kendal. This is my partner Detective Ambroso. We are here to inform you Kobe and your aunt, Jillian Wentworth, have been arrested. Please turn around. I am arresting you on suspicion for house burglaries in the local area. I’ve been given strong evidence you were assisting your sister, Kobe Moylan, in the burglaries.”

Kendal handcuffed the boy and escorted him to the car. The dozen or so reporters who were

gathered resembled a lynch mob.

“Here we go,” mumbled Claire.

“Davies owes me twenty bucks. I told him the media will be here before we left.”

The reporters sprinted towards the two detectives; microphones at arm’s length.

“Is this another mistaken ID like the last time?” questioned the first reporter.

“I don’t follow you?” answered Kendal.

“In the park, you arrested a woman thinking she was the escapee from the mental institution. Speaking of which, have you found her yet?”

“Why have you arrested a boy?” quizzed the second reporter. She thrust her microphone at Kendal waiting for a response.

“The woman you mentioned was allegedly the escapee from the mental institution. The woman in the park was a look alike allegedly planted by the escapee.”

“It sounds like a cop out?”

“You can think what you like.”

“What has the principal of a highly respected school which has a second to none reputation have to do in regards to an escape from the nut house? Everyone here can plainly see she isn’t connected to any wrongdoing?”

“Not to mention you’ve arrested a school boy,” added an anchorman pushing his way to the front of the group.

Kendal leaned closer to the bouquet of microphones. “Get out of my face or I’ll arrest the lot of you.”

“On what grounds?” the anchorman questioned.

“Interference by the media towards a police officer trying to wrap up a case,” warned Kendal.

“You didn’t answer either question. I’m sure the parents who are arriving as we speak will like to know why you’re arresting an innocent child, not to mention the principal of the school.”

The mob of people forming a barricade behind the reporter looked ready to condemn. They were starting to chant; ‘let Wentworth go.’ The dozen men and women who had enrolled their children in the school lifted their fists demanding the principal and the boy to be set free.

“Set them free,” yelled a short woman on Kendal’s left. “If you don’t, I’ll pull my children out of this place. My money is better spent on a decent school.” She raised both her fists, waving them in the air.

Kendal opened the rear passenger door to his car and pushed down on Wentworth’s shoulder. The boy was escorted to another car. Kendal turned and faced the closest anchorwoman. She immediately shoved a microphone under his nose.

“A full investigation is underway. Thank you.”

Kendal slipped behind the steering wheel of his car, glaring at the mob. Looking sideways at Claire a sly smirk creased his face.

“What’s the look for?” asked Claire.

“I’ve a brainwave idea.”

“Care to share it?”

He shook his head. "Give me a second to run the synopsis through my mind."

Claire watched her partner's broadening grin before focusing on the mob of people building rapidly. They were at least twenty deep and looking more like a cyclone every second.

"Claire, let's go give the media what they want."

"Do you think it's a good idea?"

"It sure is." Kendal stepped down from the car. "Coming?"

"I wouldn't miss this even if they offered me early retirement. Now I've said the 'R' word, I've something important to say."

"Can it wait till tonight?"

Claire shrugged her shoulders.

Both detectives started to walk over to the waiting media. One bright looking anchorwoman met them halfway.

"Changed your mind, Detective Kendal?"

"Can we have a word?"

"Sure."

"Lose the camera man and we'll go for a short walk."

"Alex, take five," said the anchorwoman.

The man placed his camera on the ground, reached into his pocket and proceeded to roll a cigarette.

"We're alone, start talking," whispered the woman.

Kendal stepped closer to the news reporter. "I'm asking you for a favour."

The woman's face changed to a full-blown disappointed look.

"You wanted a meeting so you could tell me to rack off?"

"No. What I want is for you to convince the TV station to air the entire ruckus here at the school on the news tonight."

"On prime time TV?" asked the woman.

"Yes."

"The whole take of you arresting the principal and a kid is somewhat boring."

"What if I guarantee you something which will wipe your frown away?"

The woman straightened to full height. She squared her shoulders. Her eyes gave away her excitement.

"I'm very interested in your proposal." She whistled for Alex to venture over. Glancing at the other news hounds she whispered. "Roll tape."

Settling himself into a comfortable stance, the man lifted the camera onto his shoulder. He nodded the moment he pressed the record button.

Kendal faced the camera.

"Patrick, you psycho pyromaniac arsonist, if you're listening and I believe you are, keep a watchful eye out and never fall asleep. You have no doorway, no Melbourne back lane, no place safe to lay your head and hide. I'm not only coming after you, I'm closing in. Can you smell my aftershave? You should be able to because I'm almost at your door. I've some timely advice.

Don't listen to Upp. He's not worth it. After I've sent you back to the nuthouse where you belong, you'll have a visitor, a permanent inmate. Mr. Upp will join you. Patrick, don't forget I caught you once when you were playing Fire Games. I'm on my way."

"That was great," chirped the anchorwoman. "I promise you will be on the evening news."

Claire watched her bounce along the school carpark towards her news van. "Sugar, do you think it was a good idea?"

"Sure. Leopold's party is tomorrow night. I'm almost positive Patrick, and maybe Upp will be there. Wear something you can run in."

Claire grinned at his plan. "I've a question."

Kendal gave her his undivided attention.

"Do you believe anything Wentworth said about Max and being able to talk to ghosts?"

"Not a word."

CHAPTER THIRTY EIGHT

KENDAL SAT opposite Claire eating dinner. She was sending him a cold steel look.

"What's on your mind, partner?"

Claire gently placed her cutlery on the table.

"There's no other way to say this so I might just blurt it out."

Marg and the two girls set their gaze on her.

Kendal stopped chewing, looking intrigued.

"After this case, I'm retiring. I've the one million dollars from Peter's life insurance in my bank account. I think I'd like to relax and enjoy the financial freedom."

Kendal pouted. He wanted to say something profound, but the sound of the phone ringing broke his concentration.

"Hold your thought." He stood and walked into the kitchen.

Claire, Marg, Tegan and Tani, watched him leave.

"Speak," said Kendal into the phone.

"Sorry to interrupt whatever it is you're doing right now," said the voice.

"Am I talking to Daniel Weakom?"

"It's me."

"What is it you want? I'm in the middle of an extremely tasty meal my wife has cooked."

"I won't keep you. I think I have a lead on the GP's where-a-bouts."

"Good news," replied Kendal, half-heartedly.

"You sound disappointed."

"I am. I'm not sure whether I should track him down."

"The man is a menace."

"I don't see him as a threat."

"I do. You should add to my warning he's a dangerous maniac who can't be trusted in anything he says. If I were you, I'd stay well away from the man."

"I can imagine the picture you're trying to paint."

"I can't stress the danger enough. I've come across his type many times."

"Have you, when?"

"Before I went into deep cover my previous job made me entertain certain undesirables."

Kendal rolled his eyes, mumbling a frivolous answer.

"Don't be so flippant in what I'm trying to convey here."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," snorted Kendal. "You're trying to protect me."

"And your partner Claire"

"I don't need protecting. Neither does your ex-girlfriend. Detective Ambroso can look after herself."

"You never know when you might need to rely on my services."

"If I do I won't call you, I promise."

"I can verify what I'm trying to convince you of."

"Go ahead. Convince me."

"I heard there's a contract on my head. The man calling himself GP is searching for me. You have to do whatever it takes to stop him before he finds me."

Kendal sat on his chair in the study staring at the blank computer monitor.

"What will it take for you to realize we're both on the same side?"

"Okay, I'll do my best," blurted Kendal.

"Thanks. I know I can count on you to keep me breathing."

"Have you got the address where GP is staying?"

"Not yet. I've heard he lives locally. Someone I can trust is checking out his house as we speak."

"Anyone I know?"

"No. It should only be a few hours before you can swing past and arrest the man."

"Get back to me when you have a street name and a house number. I'll be waiting for your call."

Kendal placed his mobile phone into his pocket. He walked back to the table, settling himself in his chair. Everyone else in the room watched him eat.

"What's the look for?" he asked, scanning the faces.

"Do you remember what Claire said before you were called to the phone?" asked Marg.

"Sure."

"Aren't you going to say anything?"

"No, why should I?"

"She's your partner. You've known her since school. You have to say something."

"Like, please don't. I need you?"

“It might be nice.”

“Everyone knows I prefer to work alone.”

“Al, sometimes your attitude stinks. You know I get wound up over something you dismiss as not important.”

“Marg, if Claire says she wants to retire, she’s already made up her mind. Nothing I can say will change her decision.” Kendal looked at the woman sitting on the other side of the table. “No offence, once you’ve something in mind you go for it.”

“Thanks for not trying to dissuade my decision,” said Claire.

The doorbell rang when Kendal filled his mouth with the last of his dinner.

“Why must everything happen at the same time?”

Kendal and Claire stood as one and walked to the front door. Claire stopped short. Reaching for her gun, she looked out through the lounge room curtains.

“All is quiet,” she whispered, joining him at the door.

“It’s probably the next door neighbour looking for their cat again. They reckon I hate the thing.”

“I don’t know why? Maybe they think the last time you scared it you did it deliberately?”

“Why would I deliberately shoot at a cat?”

Claire shrugged as Kendal opened the door. On the front step, they found a small red box and a black envelope.

“The envelope must be from GP. The box, I’m at a loss,” whispered Kendal, swiping both objects off the ground and carrying them inside.

Claire shut the door before following him into the study. Marg and the girls filed into the small room one at a time.

“I like presents!” exclaimed Tani, cheerfully.

Kendal grunted, starting to carefully study the box.

“I think everyone should clear the room.”

“Dad, I want to see what’s in the box,” complained Tani, jumping on the spot.

“I know you do sweet-head. Let me have a look first.”

“Promise you’ll show me?”

“I promise. Now out you go.” He watched his family walk towards the door. “You too partner.”

“I’m staying.”

“If Claire’s staying, so am I,” said Marg.

“I’d be a lot happier if I knew everyone waited in the other room.”

“Why?” asked Marg. “Do you think it’s a bomb?”

“I don’t believe so. To be on the safe side I want everyone in the kitchen.”

Marg hunched her shoulders before herding the two girls out of the room.

Claire shut the door, giving Kendal dagger eyes.

“Don’t you dare start arguing? I’m staying.”

“I thought you wanted to retire?”

"I do, so you better make sure I live."

Kendal set himself to open the box.

"Be careful Sugar."

"I intend to." He stopped his external examination of the box and looked at the ceiling.

"You're not scared?" Claire asked.

"No. Why?"

"You're stalling."

"I thought maybe Max might materialize to explain the contents of the box."

Claire started to giggle. "Max, if you're listening, please give us a sign?"

Kendal shook his head. "Do you know you're a stirrer?"

Claire eagerly nodded.

Kendal slowly began to open the box. It was a six inch squared red box which appeared expertly wrapped. The lid was made of standard cardboard and folded in the usual way. No tape had been used to fix the flap to the top.

"It's a standard cardboard box," Kendal reported.

Claire stood in silence watching Kendal slowly and carefully prized the lid up. When he tilted the lid he looked inside. In one quick move, he pulled the lid off.

Taped to the exact middle of the box he found a finger with a long red painted nail. What appeared to be blood coated the severed end.

"Why would someone waste their time?" questioned Claire.

Kendal reached in, pulling the finger out of the box. He shook his head. "This could be a good lead."

"I'll call local dress shops in the morning, maybe I'll get lucky."

"If we can find the shop, we might be able to find out the person responsible."

"The case of the missing mannequin finger," chuckled Claire. She walked to the door, smiling at Marg and the kids pacing the floor.

"It's okay," called Kendal. "Someone delivered a severed mannequin finger. Even the tomato sauce poured over the end look's fake."

"Let me see," moaned Tani, pushing her way forward. The moment she saw the plastic finger her face turned white. "It's horrible. Mum, I feel sick."

"Who'd send something like that?" questioned Marg.

"Dad, there's a note taped to the underside of the box," advised Tegan.

"Maybe GP and Mr. Upp, is one and the same person?" suggested Marg.

"They can't be," replied Kendal, unfolding the note.

"If it helps, I'm on your side," said Claire. "I don't think GP and Upp could be the same person."

"Thanks for the reassurance."

"Read the note," urged Marg.

"It says; To Kendal, I want you to free Kobe, Sterling, and Wentworth immediately. The mannequin you found in the bush belonged to me. I left it there as a preliminary warning. It was a

shame you didn't heed to it. Each morning starting soon if I haven't heard my demands have been met, the following will occur. A small box will be delivered to your home. In each box, there will be a real finger. If you can't guess who will belong to the severed limb take a look at Tani. She has nice small fingers. She can decide which finger she'd like to lose first and so on. When all her fingers are gone I will start on her toes. Then I will start on Tegan's fingers. Have a good night sleep, signed Mr. Upp."

Kendal glanced up at Marg. She looked nervous. His kids looked nervous. Hell, he felt nervous.

"Interesting," blurted Claire. "Upp certainly has guts."

Tani used her hands to cover her eyes. A blood-curdling scream filled the room.

"Mum, I don't want my fingers to end up in a box." She screamed again, hugging her mother tight.

"What are we going to do?" asked Marg.

"Don't panic," replied Kendal sounding calm. "It's only a threat. Between Claire and me, Upp won't get in Cooe of this place."

"It's exactly what I'm thinking," growled Claire, moving her gaze between her partner and Marg.

Kendal swiped the envelope from off the table, ripped it open and read the note out loud.

"Friend, we need to meet. I will be on the 7:57pm train. Board the fourth door from the front. Sit on the first row of seats. A man wearing a large hat will sit behind you. Our meeting will last for the duration of two train station stops. You can catch the next train back to your car; GP." Kendal looked up from the note. "Claire, stay here and guard my family. I won't be long. I have a train to catch."

He looked directly at Marg. She was staring through him, looking ready to faint. He waited only long enough to see her give a loving nod. He faked a grin before marching to the front door.

"Hold it, partner," growled Claire sprinting across the room. "Maybe I should come. You might need back up."

"No. Stay here. I want my family protected. Don't let them out of your sight. All this might be a bluff then it mightn't be. I just can't take the chance."

"Partner, everyone will remain safe."

Kendal tugged at her shoulder. "I'd like to say something," he whispered.

Claire faced him square on. "Yes?"

"If you've thought this retirement thing through, I'd like to say what a pleasure it's been to have you for my partner. I believe I'd be correct in saying, I'll miss you."

Claire's face reddened. "What about a kiss? A goodbye smooch." Stepping forward she puckered her lips.

"I've never kissed you and it's the way it'll stay."

"Alan James Kendal, you might look hard on the outside, however, I know you're mush on the inside." Claire curled her fingers into a fist and jabbed him in the arm. "You're just an old softy. One of these days you'll mellow then I'll get what I want."

“Everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion,” replied Kendal. He winked at Marg before sprinting for the car.

GP gave Kendal barely enough time to catch the train. He slipped onboard through the closing doors. Where he stood he could see the entire empty carriage. He found the correct seat and sat. The train stopped at the next station. Two men entered. One middle-aged man walked to the other end of the carriage, sat in a seat and began to text a message on his mobile phone. Not once did he look up. The second man wearing a large hat walked past him and sat directly behind.

“Greetings friend,” whispered the man, thrusting out his hand.

Kendal reached behind him. They pressed the flesh. “Evening.”

“Nice night for a train ride.”

“GP quit the small talk.”

“I thought it might help to break the ice. You’re right. I don’t have long. How’s the old dear?”

“She’s still kicking.”

“Good for her. Your mother-in-law is a strong woman.”

“I’m sure you didn’t want me to be on a train ride to ask how the old girl is fairing?” questioned Kendal.

“You’re right again. Time won’t stop for anyone, not even me. I saw you on the news. I liked what you said. I reckon it’ll upset Patrick good and proper. I’m more than positive it’ll smoke him out.”

“Do you know anything about a finger in a box? It belonged to a mannequin.”

“No. I must be slipping.”

“You’re envelope happened to be on top of the box.”

“I knew I should’ve stuck around.”

“If you did you might have seen who placed the box on my front door mat.”

GP dipped his hat lower. “Next time.”

“I have to be blunt,” said Kendal.

“Shoot.”

“Are you and Upp the same person?”

“How could you even consider such a horrid thought? If I were I’d have to shoot myself. The contract is never null and void. Once given, the job has to be accomplished.”

“Have you ever failed?”

“Never,” hissed GP.

“How many contracts have you been given?”

“In excess of one hundred,” he replied.

The train’s whistle sounded. Kendal heard the distant clanging of rail crossing bells.

“Time has gone,” instructed GP. “Watch your back at the party. You might have a guest who wasn’t invited. Nice talking to you. See you soon.”

The train stopped at the next station. The doors opened. GP walked off the train and into the night.

Kendal stepped down from the train at the next station and caught another train home.

CHAPTER THIRTY NINE

KENDAL AND Claire phoned shop after shop the next day. They scoured the city searching for the owner of a mannequin with a severed finger, to no avail.

“Let’s call it quits for today,” hinted Kendal glancing at his watch. “It’s four o’clock. We have a party to get to.”

“What’s the chance GP could be right about an unwelcome visitor tonight?” quizzed Claire.

“I hope so. I don’t know how GP figured out Patrick might show. I’m betting he will.”

“If GP doesn’t actually know, he made a good guess.”

“Either way, it doesn’t really matter. I’ll accept his warning just the same.”

Kendal stepped inside his home. Marg saw him raise his mobile to his ear while walking down the hall. She stopped to listen in on the short conversation.

“Yes, hello,” Kendal said. “I’d like to book a taxi for six tonight.” He gave the particulars and slipped the phone back into his pocket.

“I thought we’d be going in the same car?” questioned Marg on a sigh. She wrapped her arm around her husband’s neck, leaning in for a kiss.

“How come Marg gets a kiss hello and I don’t?” moaned Claire.

Kendal ignored the taunt. “Marg, to answer your question, I need to give Patrick every avenue of hearing about tonight. It is why I booked a taxi. I want him and Upp to know the address of the party. If GP is correct, I want to add fuel to the fire. Hopefully, they’ll turn up.”

“When they do we’ll nab them both,” added Claire, raising her fists.

Kendal nodded at her enthusiasm. He summoned his two daughters. They came running.

“Marg and you two have to keep a silent vigil on what’s happening at the party. For example; doors which were supposed to be locked are suddenly found unlocked or open. Anything unusual you see or hear I must know.”

Claire coughed into her hand. “We need to know.”

Kendal nodded. “At six o’clock a taxi will take you three to the party. Claire and I will follow in separate cars. If Patrick or Upp are watching the house he’ll think we’re somewhere else.”

“Solid plan,” whispered Marg.

“You can count on me to keep a watchful eye out,” added Tegan all excited.

“Me too,” echoed Tani. “I’m never letting anyone cut my fingers off.”

“What about back up?” asked Marg. “Shouldn’t you have a few police in plain clothes blending in amongst the guests?”

“I don’t want to tip Patrick off. He’s not stupid. He must think the whole of the police force is somewhere else. Too many plain-clothes cops will be a dead giveaway. I did invite an extra guest.

Erving. He'll be on guard. He sounded overjoyed at knowing he'll be able to watch Leopold having a good time."

Claire shook her head. "Those two are like magnets. Two South poles close to each other repel."

"Have a little faith," hinted Kendal. "This party ought to be the highlight of your career."

Six o'clock on the dot a taxi stopped at the house. The driver opened the door and stepped down. He was about to walk to the front door when he saw Kendal emerge.

"Detective, it's good to see you again," he called.

"Like-wise. How have you been Leonard?"

"Good. Is Claire Ambroso anywhere about?" The man's moustache twitched when he spoke. "I've fond memories I will treasure for the rest of my life thanks to you and Claire."

"She's in the house," stated Kendal. "You have the address where you're taking my wife and kids?"

"Sure do. Don't you worry about a thing Mr. Kendal they will arrive at the party safe and sound."

"How did you know they were going to a party?"

"There's no mystery. I've been dropping young women off at the place since three this afternoon."

Claire strolled down the front steps. She stopped short of the taxi, smiling.

"Hi there Leonard, how have you been?"

The man sprinted to her side, grabbing her hand. He stooped and kissed her knuckles.

"I'm fine. I'm happy to see you again. How have you been healing? You look wonderful tonight."

"I feel good."

Marg, Tegan, and Tani stepped outside into the cool air.

"I've heard a lot about you, Sir," said Marg.

"Mrs. Kendal, it's an honour to meet you. Tegan, welcome again to my taxi; everyone, shall we go?"

Kendal slapped the man on the shoulder. "I'll see you at the party. Stay if you like."

"Thanks for the invite. So far it's been a busy night."

"I understand. If by chance I need a taxi later, will you be around?"

"I will be. I'm on duty all night. I'll make sure I'm not far."

"Thanks," replied Kendal. "Since the first time we met when I was chasing the pyromaniac you've been a good friend."

"Thank you," replied Leonard. Focusing on Marg he added while opening the passenger door. "Shall we go?"

The party looked to be in full swing by the time the taxi arrived. The jukebox had been cranked up to its loudest and the dance floor looked almost full of young people jiggling to the beat of a modern song.

When Kendal marched into the large room Claire got busy making her way to the middle of

the dance floor, Tegan and Tani in tow. Claire acknowledged her partner's arrival. Kendal swiped a cup of water off a table. He watched Claire slap his daughters gently on the shoulder, walk to the jukebox, press several buttons on the control panel before walking over.

"Keep your eyes open. I'll go check the premises," said Kendal. "I've already checked the kitchen door to the outside. I found it open. I locked it. The only other doorway is the one you came through."

Claire gave her partner a blank stare.

"Lighten up for at least five minutes. If something is going to happen tonight it won't be for at least an hour." She grabbed his hand. "Come on let's boogie."

"There's no time," warned Kendal.

"I'm about to retire. A dance will be a good send-off."

"If I say yes, you'll nag me for a kiss."

"So what if I do? It won't kill you."

Marg walked over, giggling at Claire's pouting lip.

"Don't tell me my husband turned down a dance?"

"You got it in one. What a wet blanket."

"Not my scene," explained Kendal, studying the floor and the exits. He pointed upstairs at a small dark room overlooking the dance floor. "I want to take a closer look at the room."

The two ladies watched him walk towards the stairs.

Looking over his shoulder, Kendal called. "What?"

"Nothing," yelled Marg, giggling. She waved a hand at her husband before turning her attention to Claire. "He's so serious tonight. Surely we can have at least ten minutes of fun." She waltzed off to the dance floor to where Tegan and Tani were being talked to by a man who looked to be in his early thirty's.

Kendal climbed the fourteen steps to the office door. He turned the handle and stepped inside. The room looked to be no larger than a shoebox. A filing cabinet was behind the door. In the middle of the room, he found a table and an uncomfortable looking brown plastic chair. Ten cigarette butts were at the bottom the ashtray. Red lipstick covered the tip of two of them. The window overlooking the ground floor looked dusty and there was mould growing through the carpet in places where alcohol must have been spilt on more than one occasion.

The hairs on the back of Kendal's neck suddenly stood on end. He sensed something will definitely happen and soon. He wondered how GP could have known. It wasn't possible he and Upp were the same person. Kendal squared away the thought after running the facts through his mind. He cast his mind back to the dream. 'Surely his dream couldn't be related.' He snorted before studying each of the eighty young people bopping to the beat of the music. For a few moments, he felt distracted by Claire's expertise and Leopold's awkward dance moves.

Kendal stood swaying to the beat of a song he'd never heard before. He watched Leopold accept a gift then kiss the young girl. He grinned at another four girls walking his way and again he puckered his lips.

"Mr. Smooth," mumbled Kendal. "I've been distracted long enough."

Kendal took a step towards the door before freezing. He'd seen something out of the corner of his eye he didn't like. He faced the viewing window and stood gobsmacked. A guest took it upon himself to switch on the smoke machine and started the pyrotechnic light show. Thin laser beams were being swiveled from a black box perched on top of a stand. Kendal lost count of the different colours.

"A laser beam from a gun could be hidden too easily," he grumbled. "Both the laser and the smoke machine have to be switched off in double quick time."

Kendal sprinted down the stairs two steps at a time. The moment his feet touched the floor he sprinted for the power outlet. He was halfway to his goal when he spied Claire reaching for the switch. The laser light show instantly ceased. The billowing smoke started to disperse. Claire grinned as he stepped next to her.

"All's right," Claire giggled. "I'm one step ahead of you. Need I say I've been dancing?"

"Thanks," yelled Kendal over the loud music. "I'll continue my search of this place. You go back to dancing."

Claire nodded and rejoined Tegan, Marg, and Tani who were still dancing in the middle of the floor.

Kendal decided to circle the inside perimeter in an anti-clockwise direction for a change. He noted the two exit signs. One sign was hanging over the kitchen door. The other was fixed to the wall above the main door. It had been screwed to the wall slightly off center.

Marg left the dance floor and walked over.

"Find anything unusual?" she asked, stepping into his path.

"I'm not sure. It's what is troubling me."

"Relax, everything will be fine. I don't think Patrick or Upp will dare show their face. There are too many people. You've said many times Patrick needs a plan B. There's no way to escape."

Claire stared at her partner before waltzing over.

"I know the look. What's up?"

Kendal nodded at the smoke being sucked out of the door which led into the kitchen.

"The door wasn't open five minutes ago. If you watch closely the door moves."

"So?" questioned Claire.

"The outside door must be open. Let's take a look."

"It can't be. I made sure it was locked."

The crowd quickly swelled to near capacity. Kendal estimated around the one hundred mark. When they finally made it to the kitchen door, Kendal pushed it open. He immediately stared at the door to the outside.

A gorilla size man grabbed him by the shoulder. "What are you up to?" he growled.

Kendal clenched his fist, facing the man. "I could say the same thing."

Claire stood behind the big man giggling.

Marg stepped back, muffling her scream. Her eyes were bulging, staring at the two men almost ready to break out into a full-on brawl. She nudged Claire.

"You have to stop the fight."

“There’s no need to panic.”

“It’s good to see you made it,” said Kendal slapping the man on the shoulder.

“Do you want to tell me what the hell it is you’re doing?”

“Erving, my old friend, I’m checking out the kitchen. Want to help?”

“My specialty is forensic science. My job description is to arrive after you cops have desecrated the crime scene. I don’t like chasing a mystery. I only enjoy it when the mystery doesn’t move. I’m out of here. If you want me, I’ll be guarding the front door drinking a few bottles of Leopold’s booze.”

Kendal and the two ladies watched him march across the floor. In one easy move, he swiped a small bottle of beer off a table and sculled the contents.

Kendal grinned before stepping back into the kitchen. A cool draft was seeping through the outer door. He squatted, pushing the door wide open. The fresh air hit him head on. He scanned the area before watching the traffic.

“I thought you admitted to locking the door?”

“I did,” said Claire, stepping up.

“Then someone unlocked it.” Kendal turned and tried to study every face in the room.

“Nothing’s amiss outside,” reported Claire. “Play equipment isn’t moving. The bins are next to the back gate ready to be taken out for the rubbish collection. Nothing has been touched and nobody is out there.”

“There are too many people to study. The few I thought might resemble Patrick aren’t.”

Kendal strolled over to the back fence and stared at the park across the road. The descending fog was already helping the park to disappear. His swallow felt dry as he retraced his steps to the door. Kendal gave the area one last look before closing the door. A shadow in the office upstairs caused him to stop dead in his tracks.

“What’s got you so spooked, partner?”

“The dream I had detailed the park and the fog.”

“It was only a dream.”

“I’m not so sure. Something’s wrong. Something’s very wrong. I don’t know what it is. Somehow GP happened to be right. Our trap is about to be sprung. Be ready.”

“How do you know?”

“I can feel it.”

“The only thing I can feel is the music vibrating the floorboards. It sure is loud,” confessed Claire.

Marg walked over looking at her husband in the eyes.

“What’s wrong?”

Kendal blinked, watching the shadow move about the upstairs office.

“Music is the perfect disguise. I can’t hear a thing except thump, thump, thump. Claire, I think Patrick’s in the office. Marg, locate the girls and get them out of here. Get to Erving and call Leonard the taxi man. Here is his phone number. I want you and the girls out of here in the next ten seconds.”

Someone took it upon themselves to switch the smoke machine back on then the laser lights crisscrossed the room. Both Kendal and Claire watched as a rogue red beam seemed to travel across the faces of the crowd. It settled on Leopold's forehead before moving to the next person.

Zigzagging his way through the crowd Kendal sprinted for the stairs. Claire was in hot pursuit. Marg searched the floor, found her daughters and sprinted for them.

A white flash and a bang came from the office window. A glass shower saw the two detectives dive for cover. Kendal reached for his Smith and Wesson, switching the safety off.

"Keep up the dreams," whispered Claire. She reached down to her ankle, unzipping her leather pants to reveal a snub nose revolver strapped to her ankle.

Kendal studied the dance floor. Pandemonium replaced the excitement of the party. He saw Erving starting to herd the sea of people outside.

A second bang from the office downed the big man. Screaming from hysterical girls drowned the music. Claire covered her ears. Kendal aimed his gun at the jukebox and squeezed the trigger. The music instantly ceased. A fresh wave of screaming took its place. He aimed his gun at the office window and fired. The shadow shrunk back from view. Kendal sprinted for the top stair as two hurried shots in rapid succession came from inside the office.

Claire pulled her mobile phone from her pocket and tapped '000.' A couple who were squatting in the middle of the dance floor lay in a pool of blood.

Marg collected the girls and had almost reached the main exit. Erving staggered to his feet, shielding them as they ran outside.

He needs a medal, thought Kendal, reaching the office door. He wasn't about to wait for Claire. He knew she'd be by his side in moments. He twisted the door handle only to find it locked.

Claire nudged his shoulder.

Kendal leaned back before glancing at his partner. She looked ready. He didn't have to resort to idle chatter to discuss a plan of action. She seemed to know his thoughts and every move he was about to make. He wanted desperately to let her know she was a good cop before, maybe, it was too late. He wished he had the time to announce to the party group of her impending retirement. He'd force everyone in the room to sing, 'she's a jolly good fellow.' He could kick himself for not finding the time. Now it might be too late. He should've found the time. Claire deserved it.

Kendal sent her a sharp cursory nod. Only last week in the police practice games they were close to receiving a perfect score. The only thing that went wrong he and Claire were shot in the arm. He felt happy it was only paint. The scenario they were about to commence seemed almost identical.

Kendal extracted a pen size torch from his coat pocket, slipped out of and rolled his duffel coat into a ball then wedged the torch into a sleeve. He lifted his foot and booted the door. It violently swung open. He tossed his coat through the air, deep into the room.

Claire looked in, sweeping the area. Holding her gun at arm's length she looked ready to shoot anything she saw moving.

Kendal tumble rolled behind the filing cabinet and re-checked the room. Claire clicked her

fingers, pointing to a manhole cover in the roof.

In the light of the small torch, Kendal could see the gaping hole. He thought it might be a red herring and shook his head.

A dark figure jumped up from behind the desk, sprinting for the door, pushing Claire into the wall. Kendal groped for the figure, only managing to touch the dark figure's clothing as it ran past.

The figure leapt down the stairs four steps at a time.

Kendal gathered Claire. Both left the office in hot pursuit.

Tracking the figure to the kitchen, the two detectives stopped at the doorway, shouldering the wall. Kendal didn't question the fact Patrick or Upp had the advantage.

The backyard to the property was shrouded in fog. Somewhere outside near the fence, he saw a bright flash. A split second later he heard the bang. Mortar dust flicked onto Kendal's face. He dropped to all fours and crawled towards a thin tree near the sand pit. Mortar from a second bullet sprayed Claire in the face. She flanked Kendal's right and closed in on the plastic wheelie bins.

"You're under arrest," yelled Kendal.

Patrick climbed the fence and sprinted into the park. The fog did a great job to swallow him.

"Patrick, give up," yelled Kendal.

His reply was another bullet. Kendal dived for a large concrete pipe used as a short tunnel by pre-school children. He and Claire reached the fence. In unison, they jumped over. Sprinting across the road, the pair squatted behind a tree at the edge of the park.

"Can you hear the sirens Patrick," yelled Kendal. "You've nowhere to run."

"You'll never catch me," yelled the stabbing reply. "If you want me you'll have to come find me."

A shot rang out. The bullet ricocheted off the electric barbeque five metres to their left.

Kendal whispered to Claire. "Patrick's given up the mystery of his hiding place. Go right, I'll go left. Patrick has kept to the path hoping it might lead to a gate on the other side of the park. It's a big mistake. The gate's always locked. He should've remembered the fact from the last time I chased him through the park."

"Don't remind me. Fire Games wasn't too exciting. Partner, stay off the morgue trolley, they're cold and hard."

Kendal snorted before running further into the park. He sprinted from tree to tree growing along the edge of the path. The trees looked like tall creatures in the fog. Their branches took on the characteristics of evil grotesque monsters waiting for another victim. He came across a pile of leaves which someone raked into a pile. He knew he was close to Patrick. Of the distance, he couldn't be sure.

Claire's light footsteps crunched pea stones as she ran across the path. She also quickly moved from tree to tree.

"Hey coppa, you're slowing down," taunted Patrick.

Kendal ran to the next tree. He heard a bang. A second later he heard a groan and a thud. His eyebrows angled to a point. Kendal closed in on a figure lying in a fetal position in an expanding pool of blood behind a two-seat metal-framed bench.

Half stooped Kendal aimed his gun at the figure. He kicked the gun from his hand.

“Patrick you’re under arrest.”

Pat looked up through half closed eyes. “I don’t think I’ll live long enough to be handcuffed.”

“Why did you shoot yourself?” asked Kendal, squatting.

Patrick coughed up blood. “I didn’t.”

Claire sprinted over and immediately surveyed the area.

“What are you saying?” probed Kendal.

“Upp shot me. I’d been too hell bent on shooting you to realize what he planned. When I spotted him sprinting up behind me I turned to try and outrun the man. I felt a burning sensation in my back. I collapsed onto the ground. My fate has been sealed.”

“Claire, check out the area,” whispered Kendal. “Be careful.”

“Do me a favour?” asked Pat.

Kendal lifted her head off the path. “Sure.”

“Call me by my real name one last time.”

“Ashlee Patricia Clarke, hold on, help is on the way.”

“Forget it. Help will be too late.”

“It’s never too late,” Kendal lied.

“You can’t fool me,” croaked Ashlee. “Have you forgotten I’m a medical doctor? I know I’m dying.”

Kendal watched the woman’s blue eyes close. She exhaled for the last time. Her body went limp in his arms. He placed her head gently back on the path. For a moment Kendal fell silent. Finally, he lifted his eyes and stared into the dark.

“Upp, if you can hear me, Patrick’s going to be fine. You missed his heart. He was hit in the shoulder. Do you hear me, Upp, you missed. He’s confessed everything. He’s going to testify who you are and what you’re up to.”

Kendal yelled the convicting sentence two more times.

“Upp, do you hear me. After Patrick comes out of surgery I’ll get a description of you and I’ll track you down. Upp, are you listening?”

A volley of shots was the only reply.

Both detectives dived behind the seat.

Another three bullets whizzed past.

“Upp, in case you missed what I said before, Patrick’s still alive. He’s spilled his guts on your plans. Give yourself up and maybe you’ll be given a lighter sentence.”

Kendal swiped his mobile phone from his pocket, dialing 000. Three bullets whizzed past his ears, embedding themselves in the closest tree.

“Dispatch I need immediate backup. I’m Detective Kendal. I’m in the park exactly as I said I might be. I need you to let the troops know to close in, now.” He yelled loud enough through the phone so Upp could hear every word. He hung up and cupped a hand around his mouth. “Hey Upp, the boys and the dog squad will be here in two minutes.”

“Hey coppa, I’m overjoyed Patrick is alive and kicking. I’ve a short message. The next bullet

entering her body will be fatal. Tonight's wound is to remind her of the headache she gave me after king-hitting me and stealing my gun."

Footsteps fleeing the park forced Kendal and Claire to follow. The dense fog left drops of water on Kendal's hair. He heard a motorbike's motor roar to life. Claire sprinted ahead and arrived at the entrance to the park ahead of Kendal. A fading tail light was all they could see.

Both detectives stood in the fog looking disappointed.

"Crap," jeered Claire, slipping her gun back in her ankle holder. She stood and swore again. She stared into the eyes of her partner. "What was the bullshit you yelled?"

"I've a plan."

"Want to tell me?"

Kendal's reply came as a chuckle.

"If you aren't up to date on everything, Patrick's dead. Or should I say Dr. Ashlee Clarke's dead."

"Upp doesn't know," whispered Kendal.

"You lied," chirped Claire, her eyes sparkling.

"I misinformed." Lifting his mobile from his pocket, Kendal rang Police Headquarters. He waited for the girl in dispatch to finish her introduction before a volcano of words spewed out of his mouth. "Where's my backup? Where's the dog squad? I want to know and I want to know right now."

"Detective Kendal they informed me they'd be five minutes. The fog has slowed them down. As for the dog squad they were chasing a suspect who burgled a house. They were en-route to your location. Next time, don't yell at me in a tone of voice which could force me to hang up."

"Fair enough," confessed Kendal. "It's been a frustrating night. I need an ambulance and the coroner, please."

Claire clapped her hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles.

"I'll put the call through. Backup should be at your location in seconds."

"Good. In fact, they're here now. Claire, let's go." Kendal snapped his mobile phone shut and marched towards the first police car.

A thin fit constable wearing blue overalls stepped down from the police car. Kendal flashed his police badge.

"Don't get too close to the dog he's a bit excited tonight," warned the man.

Kendal looked through the side window of the police station wagon. The Rottweiler started to growl. Kendal faked a grin before focusing on the young burglar cowering in the back corner well away from the dog.

"I'm happy you caught him."

"It happened to be an easy catch. The teenager tried to hide under a car. Sorry, we're a bit late. We're ready to chase your suspect," reported the constable.

"Don't bother. He roared off on a motorbike."

"In that case, I'll take this felon to the cop shop."

Kendal watched him drive off. He saw Claire re-entering the public community centre and ran

for the door. The dance floor looked like a war zone. Young people were crying and hugging each other. Some were sitting staring at the exit door. Others were walking about outside searching for their friends. A fleet of taxis pulled up. Young people scurried to the cars. Inside three minutes the place sounded graveyard quiet.

“Dad, we need to set a trap,” advised Tegan, giving her father a bear hug.

“We don’t have to do anything. Claire and I will set the trap. You’ll stay by your mum’s side and sister at Police Headquarters.” He looked his partner in the eyes. “If my plan works, Upp will be in jail by morning. I’ll explain my idea on the way to the hospital.”

“This ought to be good,” said Claire.

Kendal tapped Leopold on the shoulder. “Do you feel okay?”

“Yes. I won’t forget this party in a hurry.”

“If I may suggest something,” blurted Claire. “Replay the party in two weeks. I’m sure it’ll be a great success.”

“I’ll agree only if you’d be kind enough to be my partner for the night?”

She agreed by slapping him on the shoulder.

Erving was being placed on an ambulance trolley when Kendal and Claire marched over.

“How do you feel?” asked Kendal.

“How do you think I feel,” he growled. “Receiving a hole in my new shirt, I’m pissed off. If I could get my hands on the sniper I’d break him in two.”

Kendal chuckled. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. To add to the record, the shooter is dead.”

“Good. You’ve made my night.”

“I didn’t cause her death.”

Erving looked at Claire.

“Me neither.”

The big man frowned just before he was wheeled away.

“You can help to capture the killer of the shooter,” called Kendal.

Erving wore a schoolboy’s grin long before he was placed into the back of the ambulance. He acted like he’d been given permission to buy a lolly shop.

Kendal called a constable over before squaring himself to Marg. “I want you, Tani and Tegan to go with this nice constable to the safety of Police Headquarters. I’ll see you in the morning. Claire, we have work to do”

CHAPTER FORTY

“ERVING’S WOUND isn’t life threatening. The bullet went through his shoulder. He’ll be fine,” reported the doctor. “Light duties for a week will see him fit again.”

“Knowing the old fella, he’ll be back at his desk barking orders in twenty-four hours,” said Kendal.

“Thanks, Doc,” added Claire.

A nurse entered the room to take Erving’s vitals. He waved her away grumbling under his breath. He reached up for the overhead frame so he could sit up. Kendal pushed him back down.

“Is he always this difficult?” asked the nurse, frowning.

“Always,” giggled Claire.

“Only when he’s in a good mood,” added Kendal.

“What if he’s not?”

“Don’t be in the same room.”

The nurse chuckled before checking her watch on her way out of the room.

Kendal walked to the head of the bed, swiping Erving’s name from off the wall. Turning the slip of paper over, he wrote Patrick’s name before sliding the paper back into the narrow plastic pocket.

“What are you up to?” questioned Erving.

“I’ve an idea,” replied Kendal. He tapped the big man on the shoulder. “Don’t go away.”

Claire followed Kendal out of the room. They marched straight to the abandoned nurse’s station.

Kendal looked down the three identical corridors. They were quiet. He paced the floor studying his watch. “Seven in the morning, where are the nurses?”

“Change of shift must be about now?” advised Claire.

A lady wearing an apron, pushing a food trolley stepped out of a lift. She smiled briefly at Kendal before walking away.

“It’s breakfast,” stated Claire. “Speaking of which, I’m starved.”

“So am I.”

“Sugar, this idea of yours better work.”

“I’m betting on complete success. Look sharp here comes an official looking woman.”

The nurse came strolling down the corridor, her nose buried in a folder. The moment she stepped level with Kendal he cleared his throat. She looked up. A surprised expression reacted against her steel shaped face.

“Have you been waiting here long?” she asked. Her voice sounded full of authority.

“Long enough,” replied Kendal.

“How can I help you, Sir?”

“I’m Detective Kendal, my partner Detective Claire Ambroso is standing on my right. If you don’t have any objections I need to alter a name on your patient list?”

The woman cocked her head to the side, giving him a doubtful look.

“I certainly do mind. It’s against the hospital’s protocol. You can’t go about changing anything unless the doctor agrees.”

Kendal grunted before moving on. “It’s only temporary. Twenty-four hours at the outside.”

The nurse folded her arms.

"May we speak to you behind closed doors, Miss. Fallon," asked Kendal, reading the nurse's name tag.

The woman puffed out her cheeks before leading the way to an empty room. She closed the door and faced the two detectives square on.

"I'm a busy woman. I have no time for games or practical jokes."

"Me neither," blurted Kendal. "If you'll spare me five minutes of your time, I'll explain."

"I'll give you two minutes," she jeered, slamming her hands onto her hips.

"I believe sometime today or tonight in a room on this floor a murder will be attempted."

"How can you be so sure? You don't look the psychic type."

Kendal faked a cursory grin. "I've planted a doubt in the mind of who I believe is the killer."

The eyes of the head nurse narrowed.

"The alleged murderer is a highly motivated professional. You have a forensic scientist in room 302. His name is Erving. He will be briefed on my plan the moment you agree."

"Which is?"

"The only thing I need you to do is erase Erving's name on the computer, replacing it with the name, Patrick. I'll do the rest."

Claire snorted, stepping forward. "Correction, we'll do the rest."

"This is highly irregular. In my twenty-three years of nursing and then being in charge of the nurses on this floor for the past two years I have never struck this situation. If there is any danger to anyone in this hospital I have to write it in the book so security is prepared."

"It won't be necessary," insisted Kendal.

The woman looked down her nose at the man standing before her.

"It is necessary. You don't understand the implications of what you are asking."

"Enlighten me."

"For one thing, an operating room has to be made vacant. If an attempted murder does take place an emergency operation might have to be performed. An anesthetist has to be on standby not to mention a surgeon and theatre nurses and so on. This preposterous idea will cost a fortune. The hospital budget won't stretch that far."

Kendal walked to the window. He looked through the glass at the grounds.

"I didn't have the time to consider the cost of my idea."

"Well, you should start. Good day." The nurse reached for the doorknob.

Kendal turned his head so he could glare at the woman.

"Before you leave, I don't give a dime about the cost. I have to locate a killer who has no description. For all, I know you could be the murderer or you could be his or her next target. If I was summoned to the morgue to identify your body, to me, this meeting wasted my time." He walked across the carpet and stared into the eyes of the woman. "I don't like to waste my time. Understand?"

The head nurse gulped. "Do I have a choice?"

"No," growled Kendal confidently.

"I can call the head poncho to stop this."

"I urge you not to. The killer might arrive and through red tape, escape."

The woman's shoulders slumped. "Will my staff be safe?"

"Yes."

"What guarantee do I have?"

"Nothing's bullet proof. My partner and I will do our utmost to protect everyone. We don't want anyone shot."

"I repeat my question, detective. I'm a woman who works on percentages."

"Ninety-nine percent is the odds I'll give on the gamble."

The woman walked over to a vending machine, inserted a coin into the slot and pushed the middle button on the third row of the number pad. A can rolled out at the bottom of the machine. Instead of retrieving it she spun on her toes, facing the two detectives.

"I'll do as you ask."

"Thank you," said Kendal, suppressing a grin.

"There's one more hurdle," added the nurse. "You have to change the names downstairs at the enquiries office. If I don't have the proper written form which they will request, what you ask is impossible."

"Leave it to me, I'll see what I can do," said Kendal. "Claire, let's go have a bite to eat."

In the small café on the ground floor not far from the enquiries window, Kendal sat next to Claire at a round table studying the faces of the special team he requested. A young girl wearing a white apron came over to deliver coffee and bacon and eggs. For nearly two hours the group sat and planned.

While Kendal talked to the team he kept one eye glued on the enquiries office and one on the team. He watched every move the woman behind the computer screen made.

"Perfect view of the window," whispered Claire, leaning into his shoulder.

"Almost perfect," replied Kendal. He swayed from side to side when people stopped directly in front of him, blocking his view.

"Why are you watching the woman so closely? She's not that interesting. In fact, if you boil it in a pot you'd cook up she's totally boring."

"I'm not concerned about the woman's personality. Sometime today she has to vacate her seat. When she does I'll shadow the woman to stall her. I need you to get behind the computer screen and change Erving's name to Patrick."

Claire started to giggle.

"What's wrong? It's a solid plan."

"I don't think security will like you following a lady into the women's loo. She certainly doesn't look the type to rush off and suck air through a filter."

"Okay, wise arse. The moment the woman stands you follow her. I'll change the names," whispered Kendal.

The group of four male police officers and two females chuckled.

"Do you have a description of this Upp fellow yet?" asked one of the female cops.

"No, there's nothing substantial. Tarskney, the head of the Mental Institution said Upp wore a

black pinstriped suit. A bright yellow tie hung from his neck.”

“How expensive was the suit?”

“She described it to be tailor made.”

“You’re right, nothing substantial.”

“How does Erving feel about your idea?” asked Claire.

“He’s okay with it,” whispered Kendal. “Westmore, I want you staring at the security video. Featherby, I need you on carpark duty in the South and East corner. Bowen, I need you to cover the North and West side. Pay particular attention to any clean and new motorbikes entering the carpark. Also, watch for clean expensive cars. I sense this Upp bloke loves the high life, the best of everything. It’s the reason he wanted kids working for him stealing money and jewellery. Osset, I need you and Morobe imitating cleaners working on the third floor, covering the lifts. Claire, I need Wannager and you posing as nurses. Philips, I need you on the ground floor at the enquiries counter.”

The group gave a silent nod to the plan.

“The trap is set. Let’s hope the rat takes the bait,” added Kendal. “Good hunting everyone.”

“Any idea at what hour you expect Upp to arrive?” questioned Philips.

“Anytime from now,” replied Kendal. “Claire, the woman at the enquiries counter is standing. Go and convince her you want to take over.”

Without hesitation, she left the group and marched towards the small office.

The woman picked up her bag and started walking in the direction of the ladies powder room. Kendal shed his duffel coat, placed it over the chair and briskly strolled over to the enquiries counter. His eyes searched for Upp or anyone who looked official and might question his motives. He slipped behind the computer screen undetected. His fingers moved at speed over the keyboard. He must complete his task before the receptionist returned. He prayed Claire will keep her busy long enough.

Claire straightened her French cap in the mirror over the washbasin and struck up a conversation.

“Busy?” she asked the woman from enquiries.

The woman, absorbed in washing her hands, jumped, splashing the mirror.

“I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Heavens,” the woman croaked. She looked at Claire through vague eyes. “I was miles away thinking about my holidays. They start at the end of today’s shift. I’m off to see my daughter and son-in-law. I’m a grandmother for the first time. Alice was born three weeks ago.”

“Congratulations!” shrieked Claire.

“You’re not married?” quizzed the woman. She wore a definite caring expression as she looked for the usual gold band on the left finger.

“No not me. Other than the obvious how else can you tell?”

“Your voice sounds down. I can see it in your eyes.”

“I’m married to my job,” hinted Claire.

“What a shame. Too much of the one thing isn’t good. You need to find a good fella.”

Claire chuckled before re-straightening her cap. "The only decent one I know is married. His name is Alan Kendal. I nag him constantly. I must confess he's a stubborn man."

"Sometimes being stubborn is a good thing."

"In what way?" quizzed Claire.

"Once they have a goal in sight nothing and nobody can change their mind. It's like trying to hold back a train in motion; impossible." The woman walked into Claire's personal space. "You have to get this Alan Kendal bloke to understand why you and he should be together."

"I'm intrigued by your idea. Any suggestions?" asked Claire.

"My dear girl it's easy. You have to manipulate your wording so he'll think it's his idea. It's tricky. If you take it slow he'll come around. It might take a few weeks of hard work on your part, but your reward will pay off. When you're walking down the aisle in your wedding dress no one will know what went on in your mind to plan for your day. There's only one thing more you have to remember."

Claire raised her eyebrows.

"Make sure you wear the most confident smile you can muster when you're walking down the aisle."

"I'll keep what you've said under my hat. I'll never forget this conversation. I've only one question."

"Ask away."

"Do you know anyone who has tried your theory?"

"Years ago I tried it out on a man."

"I take it you were successful?"

"I've been married for thirty years the last day of next month. I mentioned to my daughter what I've told you. She's been married for three years. It works every time."

Kendal easily located Erving's name on the computer. He wiped the letters, replacing them with Patrick. Spying Claire and the receptionist exiting the ladies, Kendal finished up and marched out of the office. Claire strolled over slipping her arm around his waist.

"Keep up the good work," called the woman settling herself back behind the computer.

"Never give up until they surrender. You have to show him you're more than interested."

Kendal sent Claire a blank look. She giggled, escorting him back to the table in the coffee shop.

"What conversation did you conjure up?"

"Never you mind," laughed Claire.

The other cops started to chuckle. They were quickly silenced at the wave of Kendal's hand.

"I take it I'm not allowed to know?"

"Correct," said Claire.

"Being in charge of this operation I should know."

"If you insist, though I must declare publicly it's none of your business. We were talking about how to catch a man."

"I've changed my mind. I don't want to know." Kendal rolled his eyes. "I can only imagine

what both of you were saying. I think I've a headache coming on."

Claire chuckled at the blank looks the group happened to be sending her. "Let's get back to it." She straightened her back and sat deep in the chair.

Kendal swallowed the last of his coffee.

"Good idea. The only thing left is to wait."

CHAPTER FORTY ONE

THE MOON looked high in the night sky when Kendal ventured out of room 302. He started clicking his fingers and pacing the semi-dark corridor. Claire remained at the window scanning the carpark waiting for Upp's arrival.

Kendal walked up and down the corridor stopping momentarily at each window, studying the parked cars. He spied the headlights belonging to a shiny white car entering the hospital grounds. He scrutinized the vehicle. He watched it being parked. The headlights went out. The driver's door opened. A man stepped down onto the concrete. He closed the car door, straightened his suit and tie before proceeding to walk towards the hospital's main door.

Kendal drummed his fingers against the glass window deep in thought. He lifted his two-way radio to his mouth, pressing the open button.

"Look sharp fellas, I think our fox is coming to taste the bait. The man in question is wearing what appears to be a grey pin-striped suit. He's carrying a small black bag. Stand by Westmore; I need you to glue your gaze on the video screens. Zoom in on the West carpark. I want a good picture of this bloke; over."

"Roger," whispered a voice.

Kendal walked back into room 302, clicking his fingers. Claire looked up, beckoning him over to the window to view a second car being parked.

"The car I've been watching drove into the carpark with no headlights," she reported.

"Interesting," Kendal whispered. "Probably a kitchen hand."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded at the woman driver. She wore a pink apron. Her blonde hair was tied back into a tight ponytail. She carried a mop and bucket towards a service door.

Claire followed her partner into the corridor.

"The bloke wearing the expensive suit must have used the back entrance to gain access," whispered Kendal. "Stay here. I'll go check out the enquiries office."

Claire watched him march to the lift. She saw the doors open and close.

The lift doors opened on the ground floor. Kendal looked out scanning the area. He'd replaced his duffel coat with a white one he found draped over a chair in the tearoom.

The emergency room seemed quiet so he exited the lift.

Six people were waiting in emergency. Included in the group were a family of three, two adults and a sleeping child. Her approximate age appeared to be about eight. The woman looked to be nine months pregnant. She sat in a chair which didn't look comfortable.

"Excuse me, Doctor," grumbled the cleaning lady.

Kendal sidestepped away from the lift. He heard the lift doors shut before walking to the enquiries window. A man stepped into his path.

"Are you the Doc on duty tonight?"

Kendal glared at the man in the expensive suit. He was definitely the one he watched from the third floor.

"My wife has told me she's been sitting here for nearly an hour. She's heavily pregnant. I want you to help her find a bed."

The man behind the computer screen focused on the pregnant woman.

"Mr. Ditchfield, if you'll bring your wife this way I'll see her now."

Kendal stepped to the window. "Are you a doctor?"

"Yes, who are you? You don't look familiar. Do you work in this hospital?"

"No."

"Why are you wearing a white coat?"

"It's a long story," whispered Kendal.

"I'm calling security."

Kendal reached over the counter, grabbing the man's shoulder.

"Take your hands off me," ordered the Doctor.

Kendal flashed his police badge. "Sir, I'm waiting for someone to arrive. There's nothing to be concerned about. Please, be on your guard. Secrecy must have priority. I've only one shot at this."

"Is the person you're waiting for dangerous?"

"Only to the person upstairs," replied Kendal. His words trailed away into a slur.

"Are you okay, detective?"

"Yes," he whispered slowly. "Do you expect any cleaners to arrive at this time of night?"

The doctor slowly shook his head.

"I don't think so. Not since the budget cuts. They work during the day. If you'll excuse me this mother-to-be looks to be about ready to give birth."

Kendal's eyes bulged as he cast his mind back to the lady carrying the cleaning bucket. He instantly visualized the scene, remembering vividly the dry mop inside the empty bucket.

'The clean empty bucket'

Kendal sprinted towards the lift. He ditched his white coat, extracted his Smith and Wesson from his shoulder holster and hurriedly tapped the lift call button several times.

"The lift car must be stuck on the third floor," he grumbled, watching for the number three on the wall to change to the number two.

Trouble had easily walked past him undetected. It was too late to warn Clair on the two-way

radio. His only option left was a quick text message.

“I only hope I’m not too late,” he mumbled, tapping the words, ‘danger is on the way.’ He pushed send, before sprinting towards the stairs.

Inside room 302 Claire heard the lift door slide open. She frowned at the light footsteps walking her way. A slight scraping outside of the room made her look away from the window. She quickly marched across the room to the closed door, sidestepping so if the door opened she’d be standing behind it.

The woman cleaner placed her clean bucket on the floor and slowly opened the door. She stood at the threshold looking into the room. Claire remained motionless watching the woman quietly sneak up to the side of the bed, one hand behind her back.

For a long time, the cleaning lady stared at the long lump under the blankets. She finally retraced her steps by walking backwards to the door. Standing at the doorway, she lifted a handgun with a silencer screwed into the end. She took careful aim at the bed, squeezing off three rounds.

Claire wrapped her fingers around her gun and readied herself to slam the door shut. At the wrong second, her mobile phone lit. She didn’t have time to react to the swinging door. It hit her square in the forehead, her gun slipping from her grip. The door was yanked shut. Claire stood swaying. Her gun was quickly kicked across the floor. The murderer spun Claire around, lifted his gun and easily thumped her between the shoulder blades. Claire crumpled to the floor unconscious.

The assassin pointed the gun barrel at Claire’s head. Looking at the long lump in the bed, he seemed to delight in knowing he’d won. The gunman again pointed his gun at the bed, took careful aim and squeezed the trigger. Another two bullets bore a hole through the blanket. He then turned his attention back to Claire. The hit man stood over the unconscious woman, gave a salute and stepped into the corridor, re-loading his gun as he walked.

Claire groaned.

The assassin looked back at Claire.

“Police,” yelled Kendal. “Upp, you’re under arrest. Drop your gun and lay on the floor.”

Upp hurriedly pointed his gun in Kendal’s direction and squeezed the trigger. Four bullets embedded themselves in the stairwell door.

Kendal fired twice.

The first bullet struck Upp in the upper arm. The second bounced off the gun. Upp staggered back into the room, closing the door.

Still dazed from the door hitting her, Claire tried to stand.

The gunman pointed his gun at her and pulled the trigger. The weapon refused to fire due to the damage it had sustained.

Kendal spied the mop handle wedged in the lift door track. The moment he kicked the handle in two, the lift door closed. Walking quietly along the corridor Kendal reached for his snub nose revolver near his ankle. Without breaking his walk pattern he placed it in his back pocket, grabbed his mobile phone and rang the team downstairs.

The door to room 302 opened. Upp stepped out dragging Claire for protection.

“Give up,” yelled Kendal. “There’s no escape.”

The lift doors opened. Two members of the undercover team looked out.

“Stay where you are,” hissed Upp. He grabbed Claire’s gun. He now pointed it directly at her head.

“Upp, you can’t escape,” growled Kendal. “Place the gun on the ground and step away from Claire.”

“What will you do if I don’t?” He looked unperturbed at the threat. He pushed the gun barrel harder against Claire’s temple. “Step aside or the cop accepts a bullet in the ear.”

Kendal’s eyes narrowed. Upp’s words sounded familiar.

“Drop your gun, coppa.”

Kendal placed his gun on the corridor floor.

“Kick the gun into room 303 and step aside.”

Kendal kicked the gun and watched it disappear into the room. He then backed away.

Upp dragged Claire towards the lift. “Step into room 304 and shut the door,” he demanded.

Kendal sidestepped and backed into the doorway. “You won’t make the lift.”

“Don’t bet on it.”

Claire started to struggle.

Upp glared at the two cops in the lift. “Place your weapons on the floor of the lift and get out,” he spat.

They stood their ground.

“Neither of you be a hero. I’ll step into the lift. Once I’m out of the building you can have this woman back. I’m a man of my word.”

They both glanced at Kendal. He nodded.

“Now,” yelled Upp. “If you don’t I’ll drag a dead female cop into the lift.”

Hiding a hand behind his back, Kendal boldly completed two steps towards the lift.

“I’m not going to ask you again,” hissed Upp.

Both cops crouched, placing their guns on the floor.

“Detective Ambroso looks heavy. Put her on the floor and step into the lift. The four of us are unarmed. It looks as though you’re in a win, win situation.”

“Don’t patronize me, Kendal. We’ve had dealings before. I don’t like you. You’re not a person I can trust. When Claire and I reach the ground floor, I’ll leave her in the lift.”

“Will she be alive?”

“It’s up to you.”

Claire stared at Kendal. He was confident she knew he held the snub nose revolver behind his back. She winked. Kendal readied himself. He wanted to make sure he didn’t kill the man or Claire. He wanted the undercover team to take Upp alive and expected nothing less from himself. The moment the lift doors were closing was the moment Upp will have grown too cocky. Claire will be out of the way and Upp will be vulnerable.

His finger constricted on the trigger of his snub nose.

Upp made it to the lift and stepped inside. He leaned forward, pushing the ground floor

button. Claire whirled around sending Upp off balance. For a brief second his gun pointed to the roof. Claire thumped him in the ribs before diving out of the lift. She rolled across the floor and scrambled for the stairs. Kendal pulled his hand from behind his back, aiming at the closing doors.

Two bullets hit their target.

Upp went down. Blood flowed from his torso.

Kendal sprinted for the lift at the same time as the other two cops entered.

The lift doors started to close.

The two cops looked proud as new fathers.

The lift doors opened on the ground floor.

Kendal leapt from the stairs yelling. "I need a doctor."

Upp's breathing sounded fast and shallow.

Claire skipped down the stairs. Her face was aglow. "Good shot, Sugar."

He frowned. "I wasn't trying to kill him."

A woman screamed. Kendal yelled again for a doctor and kicked Upp's gun out of the lift. He squatted, staring at the man in the eyes.

"Hang on. Help is on the way."

"Forget it coppa. This is probably the best solution. I couldn't stand living out my life in jail. I was the real heart of a spider."

Kendal heard footsteps approaching.

"You'll be looked after. Nobody will attack you in jail. It'll be taken care of. Why did you help Patrick to escape?"

"I needed a new person to keep stealing for me. I pumped Jillian Wentworth full of drugs. We made a deal. I supply drugs she'd supply money and jewellery. The more dependent she became the richer I'd be."

"Tell me, what does Upp stand for?"

"Only if you go easy on the kids; they were all part of my scam."

"I can't make deals."

"Kendal, before I die, I have to confess my story. I was given one chance to redeem myself. A night visitor hit me on the head. I went into a coma. My heart stopped. The doctors managed to bring me back. I needed to convince the people who owned the drug ship I had the money. Make sure you seize the drugs when the ship arrives. In two days it will arrive at Port Melbourne. She has three shipping containers full of drugs."

"It'll be done."

Upp started to cough up blood. Kendal knew the man didn't have long.

"Why did you spring Patrick?"

"He must die for all the fires he started over the years. It was part of my redemption. When I die the second time I want to be judged as a decent bloke. I'm betting my soul I've done enough to convince the hellish Judge not to send me to eternal damnation. Do me a favour, don't rip off my fake beard, wig, and glasses before I'm dead."

"Why?"

“You’ll get a surprise.”

Upp closed his eyes and exhaled for the last time.

“Tell me who you are?”

“Sugar, he’s gone,” advised Claire.

Erving stepped off the bottom stair holding Kendal’s gun.

Kendal stared him in the eyes. “You killed Upp,” he hissed.

“Sugar, I thought you shot Upp?”

“Not me. My snub nose Beretta is still full.”

Erving handed over the gun. “In the war, I was a sniper. I happened to be the best in the country at the time.”

Kendal checked the gun. “Except for the two rounds, I shot, the chamber’s full. You never fired.”

“I couldn’t do it.”

“So who did?” questioned Claire.

A man in a wide-brimmed hat hesitated on the first step. The group looked up. He seemed to dip his hat as he pulled his hand from under his long coat. He turned and walked out of the hospital.

“GP I know your secret. I bet you’ll announce to the one you work for the contract you were given has been completed.” Kendal reached up, slapping Erving on the shoulder. “Sometimes there isn’t an answer.” He grinned at the big man. “You’re okay, for a fake body in a bed.” He crouched. “Let’s see who Upp really is?”

Kendal peeled back the mask. The group looked shocked.

“I should’ve known,” grumbled Kendal.

“Sugar, don’t cut yourself up,” urged Claire slapping him on the shoulder. “If anyone should’ve known it ought to have been me. After all, he was my ex-boyfriend.”

“Daniel Weakom sure was an unimportant person,” blurted Kendal.

“Mr. Upp, the perfect name,” added Claire. “Sugar, do you think Weakom redeemed himself?”

“After murdering and blackmail not to mention drug running, what do you think?”

End.

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Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my novel 'Heart of a spider.' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted. The information you, the reader give, helps me to become a more professional author.

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian. Thanks for your understanding.

Again thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

Mark Stewart

Other novels I have written in the way of romance are: [Kiss on the bridge](#); [The Perfect Gift](#).; Legendary blue diamond. Don't tell my secret.

A vampire adventure is The [Blood Red Rose](#) and Blood Red Rose Two

Crime novels: The Kendal Chronicles: Fire Games: [Heart of a spider](#); [I know your secret](#)

Children: A Troglian knows and Luke's cubby house.
Young adults

[Planet X91 the beginning](#) is the start of a sci-fi series.
Planet X91 the new home

Synopsis: [Kiss on the bridge](#). Adventure romance. Available free from obooko.com.

How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?

Kiss on the bridge is set in the year 1974. Cyclone Tracy made land fall in Darwin on 25th December 1974 at 9:55am desecrating Darwin. After Tracy had swept the state there was nothing left except this story. Out of the ruins love sparked and mushroomed between Anneli and Wade. They were destined to meet and tell their story for decades to come.

Synopsis: [The Perfect Gift](#). Adventure romance. Available free from obooko.com.

Naomi is twenty-six and doesn't like the way all men mistreat her. She decides a change is needed and applies to be a jillaroo on a cattle station named the Oasis. Its location is in outback Australia. She meets a cowboy, Trent, who is a rodeo champion. They agree on a bet. Eventually both want out, however, neither wanted to be first.

Through a series of adventures that stretch from the city, to a fast flowing river in the outback where Trent must save Naomi from drowning, love germinates in the middle of a storm.

In her heart, Naomi is a woman who adores the city's nightlife, but as the sun sets on each day, the Australian outback is enticing and the excitement of the city fades. Then she inadvertently saves the Oasis.

Love is growing, then Brandt; Naomi's obsessive ex-boyfriend tracks her down. Can Trent save her one last time?

Synopsis: *Legendary Blue Diamond*. Adventure romance. Available April 10th 2012

HISTORIANS AND researchers say the birth of the legendary blue diamond originated when the earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who had skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who had skin the colour of the sun. Rumour has it that the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers that the deep blue coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of nine carrots possibly even ten or higher. What I believe isn't important, though I assume it lays somewhere in between. There's been bush talk from the Australian Kimberley's to Melbourne; whosoever touches the blue stone will die, for it is cursed by God. I believe it is due to man's greed and the blood that drips from his hands is the truth behind the cursed stone.

I have extensively researched a great number of books on the subject looking for a start date to the authenticity of the legend. I think I may have uncovered the actual events, but I have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend was born around the mid 1800's AD when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he had sold it. The buyer was a man in charge of the bank. The diamond was indeed dark blue in colour, but definitely a one off, stroke of luck find. One cold dark night a bushranger, his brother and a third man came into a small town searching for the blue diamond. They never found it. The banker was tortured for the information of the stone's where-a-bouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating that the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered was any one's guess.

If you ask me, do I believe in the story, I'll answer you truthfully. I know it only to be a legend.

Synopsis: [*Blood Red Rose*](#). Vampire adventure romance. Available free from obooko.com.

“You can’t force me to drink that, I’m innocent,” yelled Haleton. “Rose-a-lee what have you done?”

There was no reply.

William Haleton is a normal man looking for love and the good life then the council of four modifies his DNA and uses him as a guinea pig. They transform him into a vampire. Pleading his innocence falls on deaf ears.

Haleton is hungry for the next evil soul, but deep down he has a burning desire for the love of a girl. Her blood is sweet and hypnotic. Her genetic makeup is his perfect match.

Being transported again through time is not an option.

The clock is ticking.

Haleton will do anything to stay by Amber’s side, but is it possible for her to love him? Can Craig Benyon, Amber’s close friend, be trusted? After all he loves her as much as William Haleton.

If an antidote to the vampire’s curse is found in time, will it be successful, or is everything Haleton going through part of the vampire curse?

Synopsis: Fire Games. Crime. First book in the series. Available only from publish America.

Detective Alan Kendal puts his life on the line to outplay the psychotic arsonist known as Patrick.

Detective Kendal is ordered to team up with Detective Claire Ambroso, whom he’s known since school, but she carries a secret and he has a grey past. Which one will come forward to haunt first? Kendal grows suspicious of his new partner when she aims her gun directly at him and pulls the trigger. What’s her motive? Is she Patrick’s accomplice? If not, who is?

How can Patrick always be one step ahead? Does Kendal have enough time to rescue his kidnapped twelve-year-old daughter, Tegan, before Patrick’s fiery finale?

Synopsis: [Heart of a spider](#). Crime. Second book in the series. Available free from obooko.com.

Detective Kendal is on the trail of a patient who has escaped the mental institution and wants to sever Kendal’s life line. The chase is complicated by the visitation of a ghost and the appearance of a supposed vigilante.

Kendal doesn’t believe in ghosts, but finds himself having a conversation as he stares at one. His partner, Claire Ambroso has to fight for her life when Kendal is told to meet GP at the wharf when the moon is at the highest point in the night sky.

Confusion sets in at a local supermarket when a robbery goes wrong and someone in Kendal’s

family is shot.

The trap is set for the person who masterminded the escape and a final shoot out at the hospital reveals amazing results that astounds even Kendal.

Synopsis: [I know your secret](#). Crime. Third book in the series. Available free from obooko.com.

Everyone has a secret. Some people take theirs to the grave. Some hold their desires inside for a lifetime. Some stew on their secret all their life, and then they get revenge.

I know your secret is a suspenseful crime novel. Melbourne homicide detective Alan James Kendal and his partner Detective Claire Ambroso have to locate a missing teenage girl. The case hots up when he is introduced to a medium. She seems to hold all the knowledge of the case except a few minor details, like, why did Kendal find an empty bullet shell that had a note inside that read, 'I was paid to miss.'



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