



Five Games

A Crime Thriller

Mark Stewart

Fire Games

Mark Stewart

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In this series

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CHAPTER ONE

‘2:03 am’

THE INTERIOR of the two storey mansion located in a suburb of Melbourne sounded graveyard quiet. Detective Alan James Kendal flicked the light switch to the on position. His first two attempts, his fingers only brushed the plaster. He heard a click on his third attempt.

The area remained midnight black.

For a split second, a bolt of lightning transformed the dark room into daylight before plunging it back into the colour of charcoal. The low steady rumble in the sky followed soon after.

“The storm’s seven kilometers to the South and closing,” he whispered.

In the darkness, Kendal extracted his police issue Smith and Wesson from his shoulder holster.

Outside, a dog howled and dragged its metal tether across the wooden verandah. Kendal took a moment to listen. He heard the one-hundred-year-old Grandfather clock’s tireless ticking coming from the formal dining room.

A series of blue flashes from the approaching storm caused the shadows in the room to look alive. A clap of thunder drowned the clock’s rhythmic echoes.

Kendal stepped towards the first window. Holding his gun at the ready he hesitated, noticing the curtain over the window hung heavy. He moved on, his back and shoulders scraping the freshly painted wall. A mahogany staircase loomed thirteen paces directly ahead; its ghostly outline beckoned him to climb the seventeen steps to the top.

The detective stepped silently towards the next window. The curtain puffed inwards. He froze, aimed his revolver at the window, waiting for the curtain to move again. Outside, a cat leapt onto the roof of a metal shed. Even though his trigger finger remained rock solid, he jumped at hearing the thud.

Upstairs, underneath the worn carpet, a floorboard creaked. Kendal stared through the darkness. A blue lightning flash illuminated the top step. For only a moment he saw a figure holding a gun then darkness again swallowed the room. Un-blinking Kendal held the spot. His spine tingled. The hair on the back of his head stood military style.

Above the house lightning and thunder rolled together. The curtain over the window quickly inflated, flapping around him. Hail started to slide down the glass creating dirty streaks. For a brief second, the top landing was again shrouded in blue. In the flash of light, Kendal spied a shorter figure standing next to the hooded person clutching the balustrade using both hands.

Kendal aimed his gun at the two ghostly figures staring down at him.

“I wouldn’t shoot if I were you,” called the taller of the two.

The detective swore under his breath. He yelled through clamped teeth.

“Patrick you’re under arrest.”

“How do you figure, Coppa?”

Patrick’s bone chilling voice easily surged through the darkness.

A quick light show followed by a deep rumble in the sky intensified, enveloping the house. The windows rattled. A claustrophobic darkness swallowed the stairs and the surrounds.

“Patrick, drop your gun. Come down the stairs, nice and slow.”

“Save the negotiations. I don’t take orders; I give them. If you don’t drop your gun, I’ll shoot your kid.” The balaclava-clad figure yanked the girl’s hair, forcing her to light a match. “Hey, Coppa, have you sniffed the air lately?”

Kendal took a whiff and coughed.

“The stench is petrol fumes.”

A blue lightning flash highlighted the petrol soaked kindling stacked pyramid style as thunder broke on top of the house.

Kendal looked up and saw the horror written on his daughter’s face.

“Don’t be stupid Patrick, if that match falls, you’ll burn. Tegan, don’t be scared, blow the match out.”

Patrick leveled his gun at the girl’s head. “Who gives the orders?”

“You do,” she mumbled.

“Correct. Hey, Coppa, you forget, I have plan B. I always have plan B. Now drop your gun.”

Kendal slowly shuffled away from the kindling. “Give yourself up. The game’s over.”

Laughing a hideous noise Patrick lowered his gaze to the lit match, slapping it out of Tegan’s hand. Three pairs of eyes watched the small flame free fall towards the floor.

Kendal aimed his gun upwards into the darkness and pulled the trigger. He heard a groan. The thud made his blood run cold. Sprinting for the balustrade, he looked up and saw a figure slumped on the carpet. He heard feet running as the lit match hit the petrol-soaked kindling. Hesitating only long enough to watch the fireball mushroom towards the ceiling, Kendal sprinted up the stairs two at a time. Each large step he completed his heart sank further. He cursed the reason why he was such a good shot and tried to convince himself Tegan was the one running. In his heart, he knew he was wrong.

Kendal housed his gun and pulled his mobile phone from his pocket. By the time he reached the top step he had dialed 000. Standing over the bloody body and as the fire spread quickly throughout the house, he sank to his knees and sobbed.

Kendal’s home phone shrilled. He swept the sleep from his eyes using his knuckles and checked the time on his study clock.

‘2:12 am.’

Reaching out he placed the cordless phone to his ear. “Speak,” he croaked, his voice still sounding Laden from the dream.

“Hey, Detective, did I wake you?”

“Patrick,” Kendal growled. Sitting straight-backed in the leather recliner, he pushed his free hand through his thick black hair. To rid himself of any remnant of sleep he stood and paced the brown carpet. He stopped at the open study door to stare at his wife walking slowly down the stairs. “I was awake and waiting for your call,” he lied.

With a tight fist, Patrick thumped his balaclava. “You were asleep.”

“Stop playing me for a fool. Give yourself up. Stop playing these fire games.”

“You’re the one playing games. I’ve already given you three months. Do you have any idea of my identity? Or why I chose you for my next target?”

“I know who you’re not. Everyone who hates me is in prison.”

“I’m not in jail, and I hate you. I loathe what you did.”

“What did I do?”

“You love mind games, guess.”

“Give me a clue.”

“It all started a long time ago.”

“What year?”

Patrick smirked. “Frustrating isn’t it? Not knowing the answer.”

“Tell me more.”

“It’s not part of the game. I’m going to frustrate you until the day you’re buried.” Patrick’s lips parted into a wide satanic grin. “Hey Kendal, I’ve used petrol to douse the kindling and the interior walls of the house I’m standing in. I love the smell of petrol fumes; don’t you? It gives me a high.” He struck a match and stared intently at the small dancing flame.

“Tell me truthfully, do you want to burn another house?” Kendal frowned at Margaret. She had a firm grip on the balustrade while her torso swayed from side to side. Sweeping their youngest daughter Tani closer to her hip, her eyes welled with water.

“Real soon it will be time to burn another house.” Patrick blew the match out. He parted the curtains hanging over the window to study the neighbourhood.

“Give me a clue to your identity.”

Patrick pondered the idea for a moment. “I’ll consent to a tiny hint,” he whispered, allowing the curtains to close. “Twenty-seven years ago, I happened to be playing at a friend’s home. The two-storey house burnt to the ground. The fire looked beautiful. Its colours of blue, vanilla and orange were hypnotic. It was my first fire. I told them all it was an accident.”

“Them? Whom did you tell?”

Patrick lit another match. He stood watching the small flame dance on the match head completely captivated by its blue base and orange stem. “It’s a secret,” he finally whispered.

“You haven’t answered my question,” growled Kendal.

The mahogany framed Grandfather clock in the formal dining room sounded its deep half hourly ritual chime. Kendal frowned, watching his wife walk a death march towards him. She looked him in the eyes. Tears streamed down over her cheeks. Kendal’s eyes widened as he stared at the phone.

“What have you done?”

Fear was trying to take over Kendal’s thoughts. He wanted to grab Patrick’s throat and squeeze a confession out of the pyromaniac. He swallowed the lump in his throat, waiting for the conversation to continue.

“I love the moment of release when the lit match starts to fall towards the food. The flame flickers and dances on its journey eagerly waiting to be fed. The climax comes quick. The match lands on the petrol-soaked kindling. For a microsecond, nothing happens. In a bright flash, the kindling ignites. The fire roars to life. Fire fingers hungry for food stretch along petrol trails I created. Alas, the house will be devoured.”

Kendal listened closely to Patrick’s ramblings, all the while watching Margaret closely, scrutinizing her every move.

“It’s like skydiving. The moment he or she is in mid-air you can feel the adrenalin pumping through your body. Detective, have you ever posted a letter then wondered did you put a stamp on the envelope?” Patrick paused to chuckle at his words. “Coppa, knowing you can’t stop me is exciting. The first day of each month for the past twenty-seven years I have created a house fire. Of all the cops who have tried to catch me, I’ve decided you’re the last. You’ll be my trophy.”

“Which house are you in Patrick?”

“I’m not stupid. Why would I tell you? We’re playing a game of cat and mouse.”

Kendal wondered had fate brought them together or was some unknown force pushing him towards an inevitable end one-on-one with Patrick? Only time will tell.

“I know where you live. Under the coat you always wear, you’re like all the others; stupid. You don’t even know I’ve watched every move you’ve made for years. I’ve a

complete dossier on your achievements, starting with that night. You read my notes, you find the clues, and you're still not even warm. At least the cop before you came close, twice. I was careless, overconfident, but I'm a professional now. I leave nothing to chance. There will be one last fire." Patrick held the phone in a death grip and started to yell. "You hear me, Coppa? Do you hear me? You wait, though, the last fire is going to be the best, extremely spectacular. You will die. And you ask me if I have to do this?"

Kendal could feel his blood pressure rising. He needed to force his voice to sound ice-cold.

"You've confessed to having stalked me for years. Why?"

"You're supposed to be clever. Work it out."

"What night are you referring to?"

"I'm not saying. Be advised, my vendetta against you has been building since that night."

"What did I do to trigger your bitter grudge?"

Patrick grabbed the back of a chair and threw it across the room. "No more questions. No more questions. All you ever do is ask stupid questions. You need to listen."

Margaret stood at the threshold to the study. Her face looked to be the same colour as the sheet of paper she clutched between her fingers. Both her hands were trembling making the handwritten words on the paper too hard to read.

Kendal sat and focused his attention on the phone. He didn't like it, but his wife would have to wait.

"Okay, I'll sit here and listen."

In the sudden pause, Kendal raised his eyebrows to affirm Marg's presence. He extracted his mobile phone from his long black duffel coat and stabbed the Police Headquarters' phone number. He needed to stall long enough for the trace to be finalized. Three months of phone traces had always failed to locate the psychotic bum. He must keep Patrick talking. Tonight, might be his last opportunity.

"Coppa, are you ready to listen?"

"Yes."

Patrick's voice lowered to a whisper. "I've changed the rules."

"Why?"

"You're supposed to be listening, not talking. Burning a house to the ground has become monotonous, boring. I need more of a thrill. Besides you couldn't catch a fly if it was half dead. Don't waste your time using the trace. In the changing of the rules, I'll give you a clue. I'll say the address slowly so we can play, 'catch me if you can.' I'm at number 13 Ashton Court. Three streets from where you live."

In the silence, the Grandfather clock's ticking again filled the air. Kendal leaned forward in the chair. His eyes were fixed and ablaze. Excitement erupted on his face. He hurred his two-metre frame to a standing position, setting himself to run. At last, Patrick had become too cocky and made his first mistake.

Kendal again stared at his wife. The sheet of paper she held floated to the floor. Marg looked ready to faint, leaning against the wall. Kendal pushed the stop button on his mobile phone and switched to messages.

"Before you sprint out of the house let me take this opportunity to say I've a hostage."

"Care to elaborate?"

"I knew my statement would get your full attention. I'm not telling. I want you to guess."

“Give me a hint.”

“No,” replied Patrick.

“It seems only fair?”

“I’ve already told you. This game has grown to be a bore. In my new game, I’ll do what I want. You like guessing games; I expect you to play.”

“Games are plural.”

Patrick’s belly laughs chilled Kendal to the bone. “Coppa, I’m going to keep you, running around in circles for one more month then you’ll witness my grand finale.”

“What happens if I don’t want to play?”

“My young female hostage will die.”

“I thought you said you’re not a murderer.”

“I’m not, the fire is. The fire will eat my young hostage.”

Kendal finished the text message which included the house address and pushed send. Constable Susie Alderson was supposed to be working the graveyard shift. She should respond to his message provided she wasn’t chatting up some young rookie cop.

“Hey, I love the text message.”

“What text message?”

“The one you just sent. Don’t look so concerned. You’ve forgotten I know everything you do.”

Kendal glanced about the room looking for a hidden camera. Unable to detect one he re-focused his attention on the voice coming through the phone.

“You’ve gone quiet on me. If you forfeit the game, my hostage dies.”

“You’ve kidnapped a child, a female child.”

“You’re getting warmer.”

Kendal cursed under his breath. Staring again at his wife, Kendal frowned. “When did you kidnap the child?”

“No more than one hundred and twenty minutes ago. I waited for the kid’s parents to fall asleep before entering their two storey house.”

“The child would have woken.”

“Ether works well. It’s extremely quick in rendering the victim unconscious.”

Kendal’s mind slipped into overdrive. Up to now, Patrick had only been another arsonist. Now there was a third person involved. Kendal’s Adam’s apple bobbed violently as he swallowed the lump in his throat. Patrick’s new game was to involve a hostage. There hadn’t been a death yet, but the stakes were climbing. Kendal’s thoughts were distracted by his wife’s sobs. He walked over and stared into her watery eyes.

“How old is the girl?”

“Twelve years, six months.”

Kendal could feel Patrick’s smirk through the phone. He located the sheet of paper on the carpet and read the note. In silence, he raised his gaze. His eyes were already red and glazed.

“You found my note?”

Kendal’s skin began to crawl. Blinking away his tears he gently squeezed his wife’s right shoulder. The lump in his throat threatened to block his words. For the second time, he attempted to swallow it. When he talked, he sounded fanatically calm.

“What note?”

“The one I left sitting on your wife’s bedside table.”

“What’s the name of the hostage?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t already guessed.”

Kendal raised his hand to massage his throbbing temple. He shook his head. Not daddy's little girl, not little Tacca. Keeping up his gaze on his wife Kendal spoke casually through the phone.

"I didn't catch the name of the child."

"She's daddy's little girl."

"I need a first and last name."

"Don't play me for a fool, however, if you insist, I believe you call her little Tacca. Tegan Alexandra Kendal."

"I don't believe you."

"I worked fast. You were asleep for only twenty minutes. Watching you sitting in the rocker, you looked so tired."

Kendal's legs faulted. He buckled slightly under his weight. "You hurt my daughter; I'll finish you off. You won't live to see a prison cell," he spat, squeezing the phone in a death grip.

The noise from a magnesium covered match head striking the edge of a matchbox came through the phone.

"Now, now," snarled Patrick. "Remember your blood pressure. I don't want you to die before your time."

Margaret's eyes closed. Tani reached out and patted her arm.

Kendal's blood ran cold. "What do you want for the safe return of my daughter?"

"It's not like you to beg. Do I hear the desperation in your voice?"

"Set my daughter free. Your grudge should only involve me."

"I want you to suffer for what you did. I want you to know what I'm feeling. I want you to know what it's like to have something you hold dear to your heart ripped from your grasp."

Patrick casually dropped the match onto the petrol-soaked kindling set up in a pyramid style on the highly polished marble floor.

"Hey, Coppa, catch me if you can."

The phone went dead.

CHAPTER TWO

THE KINDLING ignited. Patrick's eyes sparkled in the light of the fire. Four flaming trails rapidly ate their way through the house. One trail led out of the lounge doorway towards the kitchen. A second trail moved rapidly over the meticulously polished mahogany balustrade and upstairs. The third devastating trail led into the study. Its floor to ceiling bookcases full of law books and a painting by an unknown artist started to smolder. The final branch had almost encircled the lounge. The four-metre high ceiling and expensive gold coloured drapes were ablaze.

Patrick grinned, tossing a house brick through the window.

"Fire, have fun. I'd like to stay and watch, but, I must to be going."

Shards of glass littered the edge of the weed free and expertly maintained, Rose garden. Hungry flames devouring the oxygen from the open window made the fire roar louder.

"What a great view," announced Patrick to the house. "Sitting for years near the ocean watching the ships floating by, the wind brushing against your roof tiles and glass

windows, I'm jealous. I'm glad you won't see it again." He cocked an ear and turned to stone. Slowly he shook his head and whispered. "House, what made the noise? It couldn't possibly be Kendal. It's too soon. The noise sounded like a cough or a moan. No, it couldn't be. Brain, don't be stupid, it's just the house. I've done my homework. The parents took the baby on holidays. I should know I've staked this house out for weeks. I've walked the floor and bedrooms nearly every night. I've watched Mrs. Nabatinee sleep. I've even stroked her hair as she dreamt. It pains me to burn their house. Just like the good Lord says, what you sow is what you reap."

The noise changed to a definite cough. A faint cry followed. The fire's roar turned to laughter. The antique leather chair adjacent to the window started smoldering.

Pulling at his balaclava, Patrick began to tremble. He spat on the carpet and kicked out at the walls. "Fire, stop laughing. I can't leave. Not now. Either way, I have to know if the baby is home." Staring at the flames, he started to sway from side to side. He shook his fist at the smoke. "I'm not a murderer like you. I'm not. I don't care about Mr. Nabatinee. However, if the baby and its mother are home, I have to save them." His eyes widened. "Hey house, I'll be a hero. What a challenge. What a thrill. I'll be on a new high."

The heat created by the fire made the walls of the house creak louder.

"Fire, stop laughing at me and don't argue, you're not Doc Clarke."

As the heat from the fire intensified, window after window, shattered. Fresh oxygen from the smashed glass fanned the fire. The flames grew and spread faster throughout the two storey mansion.

"Fire, I told you to stop laughing at me. Talk to me in words I can understand. What is it you're trying to say? You don't believe I'll rescue anyone except myself. You don't believe I know the way to the baby's room? I'll prove it. Upstairs the second room on the left. I used to cuddle the baby back to sleep. I'd stop when Mrs. Nabatinee's husband, Claude came home. I feel sorry for Candice. Her husband always came home late. He's a sleaze. If Candice were my wife, she wouldn't be alone for five minutes. Claude, you're never in the office when I call. I must admit I know where you go, Mr. Goody, two shoes. I've seen you down at the hotels many a night being entertained by the young whores. You're such a liar, telling your wife you're in the office when you're not."

The fire started to lick the window frame where Patrick stood. In a gush of flames the wooden frame was engulfed.

The last remaining escape route quickly disappeared.

The heat felt unbearable. Already the fire appeared to have engulfed all the downstairs room. Fiery darts rained from the ceiling. The carpet fibers were already singed, giving off a putrid smell. The balustrade appeared well alight. Every wall in the house was ablaze.

Time was fast running out. The house wasn't going to stay upright for long.

Patrick coughed out smoke and sprinted up the stairs. The house started to implode. The lounge ceiling creaked and collapsed. The noise sounded deafening when the plaster crashed onto the floor. He stepped off the staircase, glanced over his shoulder and saw a fireball rising from the fallen lounge ceiling. Patrick turned his back and ran into the baby's room. The small area was full of smoke making breathing almost impossible. Visibility had dropped to a half metre. He ran to the middle of the room and almost fell over the cot. He yelled and started to turn in circles.

"The cot's been moved. How? There must be someone else here. Show yourself. I demand it."

Patrick turned in slow circles waiting for a response.

“If we’re to get out of this hot house before Kendal arrives we have to leave now. If you want me to save you, now is the time to call for help.”

Again, Patrick waited for a reply. The only noise he heard came from the fire and the creaking of the house. Feeling despondent he shrugged his shoulders.

Patrick reached into the cot and gently picked up the baby. Snatching the blue blanket off the cot’s railing, he wrapped the baby tight.

“Do you hear the sirens little one? Detective Kendal is on his way. Three months he’s been trying to catch me. He could add an extra string to his bow if he found me here. I have to admit he is good, clever too, but not clever enough. Underneath his coat, he’s just another dumb cop. I can already smell his cheap two-dollar deodorant. I know where he bought the last one. I’m certain he only goes there to flirt with the young whore behind the counter. He calls her by name. She’s a flirt too. She tries to drum up business by battering her eyelids at all the men. How pathetic. Claire is her name. I’m good at remembering names, and I never forget a face. Why would Kendal flirt when he’s married to an attractive woman? He’s worse than Mr. Nabatinee. It would serve him right if Margaret Kendal left him. I should DOB him into his wife. If I’m lucky, she’ll turn her attention to me.” His grin widened. “I’d make a great partner.”

A figure of a woman clawed at the cot and stood half bent. She coughed several times, staring at Patrick through narrowing slits.

“Please help me,” she begged. “I can barely see through the smoke. I don’t know why the smoke alarms didn’t wake me. Please help me save the baby.”

“I disconnected the smoke detectors and stole the batteries last week. I don’t want the neighbours to be alerted too early.” Leaning closer to the squatting woman Patrick coughed out smoke. “I know you.”

“Please help me,” whispered the woman.

“Why should I? You’re Claire, the whore from the shop. I’m totally disgusted. Not only are you after Kendal, you’re also Nabatinee’s mistress. Hey, do you know Ms. Jemima Jones lives on the corner? The old bag’s house was next, but I’ve changed my mind. I need a more of a grand finale than her ugly looking house. The fire won’t be spectacular enough. She doesn’t live far from her best friend, Mrs. Sallows. I burnt her home to the ground six months ago. The house is still a pile of rubble. I did feel a little guilty for five minutes. The sweet old couple they were. Now they live in a caravan on the south side of the city. They don’t even have a view of the ocean. Mr. Sallows bragged too much about having the best view of the beach. He should’ve bought fire insurance when he had the chance. One should never brag about not having house insurance. Live and learn I always say.” Patrick grinned. “What a waste.”

“I’m Claire, the babysitter. I don’t understand what you’re saying. The Nabatinee’s went out for tea and asked me to babysit.”

“Why aren’t they in Perth? I saw the plane tickets. Tell me now.”

“They postponed their business trip. Candice didn’t want to go. Her mother might be dying.”

Claire’s voice trailed off into incoherent mumblings.

Patrick picked the woman up by her hair and whispered sarcastically.

“Babysitter, Babysitter, how quaint. How convenient. How thoughtful of Claude Nabatinee. It’s okay; I’m here to help.”

Claire mouthed the word help.

“Struggling to talk? Need help you say? Don’t want to commit to idle chatter. Considering the circumstances, I shouldn’t either. Are you scared? Do you feel helpless? You want to know why I’m in the house don’t you? You’re growing a little suspicious of me because of my balaclava? I can tell you’re in trouble. Your words are

floundering. I know your body is shutting down and you're dying from the lack of oxygen. I know you'll agree no matter what I say. I have the power to let you live or die. You're completely at my mercy."

Patrick loosened his grip on Claire's hair and watched the woman crumble to the floor un-conscience.

"It's time to go. If plan 'A' doesn't work, there's always plan 'B.' It's a shame I don't hear a forty-piece band playing a victorious song."

Patrick wrapped the baby tighter in the blanket and prepared to jump out the open window.

"What are you doing?" called a voice from the doorway.

Patrick stepped back from the window, turned and glared. "Hey, how did you get in here?"

"The same way you did, up the stairs."

"Dr. Clarke, I don't want to talk to you. You shouldn't be here; it's too dangerous."

"Neither should you. I'm here to help. Take off the balaclava."

"No. I don't need your help. I've got the baby. I'm a hero."

"If you jump you will not survive the fall," warned Dr. Clarke, pulling at her French knot of blonde hair. She shook her head and allowed her hair to cascade over her shoulders.

"Yes, I will. Jumping is plan 'B.'"

"The four-metre fall is a long drop."

Patrick looked out of the window. Turning to face the woman, he growled.

"Dr. Ashlee Clarke, don't worry, I'll live."

"Do not speak my full name. Dr. Clarke is enough. Respect between patient and Doctor must be adhered to at all times."

Three fire trucks, an ambulance, and seven police cars turned into the court. The firemen buckled their helmets and prepared to fight the fire.

"Make your decision. The sirens are close. If you jump, you might live, but the baby may not. If you hand over the baby, I will cover your escape. You do want to escape?"

"Of course, I do."

"Come on hand over the baby before the house implodes."

Patrick nodded and handed over the baby.

"Tell me why you kidnapped Kendal's little girl?"

"The rules of the game bore me. I want to start a new game."

"You should stick to the original rules."

"No, and I hate the way Kendal calls Tegan his little Tacca."

"Why?"

"He wanted his firstborn to be a boy."

"I think you are wrong. If you take the first letter of each of her names, it spells TAK. Tegan Alexandra Kendal. He has replaced the K with a C, and added a C and an A."

"Shut up. Just shut up. I don't want you here," barked Patrick.

"It is okay. You have to tell me the location of the girl. Is she in this house?"

Patrick punched his balaclava several times with a clenched fist. "Stop asking me questions. Why must everyone insist on asking me questions?" He marched over to the window. Staring over his shoulder, he snarled. "Coming?"

"What about the woman lying next to the cot?"

"The sirens have arrived. If you want to save her, go right ahead. I don't care."

Patrick pocketed his balaclava and jumped.

CHAPTER THREE

DETECTIVE KENDAL snatched the note from the carpet and stuffed it deep into his coat pocket. Seeing the small coffee table in easy reach, he kicked it across the room.

Tani stared at her father through wide, terrified eyes. Looking at her mum, she started to cry. "Where's Tegan?"

Marg buried her head in her hands and sobbed.

Kendal gave his wife a quick hug, kissed Tani on the top of her head and sprinted towards the door. For a single heartbeat, he paused to blink away his tears and swallow his emotions.

"Go back to bed. I'll find Tegan by sun-up. Patrick has struck for the last time. The home he has set on fire is located three streets from here. Tonight, will be the last fire. Love you."

Kendal didn't waste time waiting for a reply. He sprinted to his unmarked police car parked in the driveway. Hearing the engine roar, he looked at his wife sobbing at the front door. They made eye contact. He displayed a genuine smile. His eyes feasted on her long black hair. One of her many attributes he loved. He first noticed her back in high school. They were in the same psychology class. Margaret went on to study teaching. Two months before her twenty-first birthday she said yes to his marriage proposal. It was the day he graduated from the Police Academy. He gave her a reassuring nod and drove off down the road.

Kendal pushed the accelerator to its stop. Smoke billowed from the back tyres. Three fire engines, seven police cars, and an ambulance were driven at speed towards Ashton court. He joined in the convoy by bringing up the rear. Overhead the police helicopter's spotlight cut the darkness, turning it into daylight. He sensed a change. This time, Patrick had no way to escape. This fire was going to be his last. There wasn't going to be any finale.

Kendal drove into the court and was forced to park eighty feet from house number thirteen. The two-storey house appeared to be completely engulfed in yellow flames.

Sprinting up the court, Kendal pulled his gun out of his shoulder holster. His gaze darted back and forth searching the shadows. The lights from neighboring houses were burning bright. A constant throng of people spewed onto the road to take a gander at the scene. Soon people from other streets will join the sea of faces and Patrick could easily vanish. Kendal had to work fast.

"Fire Chief, I need the house searched. I have information my daughter might be inside."

"Forget it. This house is about to drop."

Kendal grabbed the big man by the collar and yelled through clenched teeth.

"You have to. My daughter's life is at risk."

"Read my lips. No. If anyone is still inside that house, they're dead. The smoke is un-breathable. The heat is unbearable. Detective, forget it."

"Give me a hose; I'm going in."

"No, you're not. All you can do is pray everyone got out."

Deep down Kendal knew the fire chief was right. He marched away and followed a group of uniformed cops towards the backyard. His eyes searched the windows looking for a lull in the flames. He was determined to find a way to get into the house. Constable Susie Alderson marched towards him. Kendal started barking orders.

"I want you to take two blue uniform cops and search the adjoining front yards for the arsonist. I don't want him to mingle with the crowd. He goes by the name of Patrick. Everyone else, fan out, I want this property locked so tight a snail will tremble."

The rookie cop glared. "Got a description of the arsonist?"

"No, I don't," he bellowed.

"I feel sorry for your wife," Alderson growled. "In the three months we've known each other, Arsehole is too good a word to describe you."

Kendal peeled his stare off the fire to stare at the young cop.

"Stop rolling your brown eyes; you look too much like a school girl in love with the arsonist. Quit stalling and go. I don't want Patrick to escape. If you see my daughter, yell." Satisfied Alderson was scooting off to begin her search, Kendal refocused on the fire. He saw a small window near the rear of the house and decided it could be his one and only chance to slip inside.

A man in a dinner suit came running up the drive. "Excuse me," he called. "Excuse me."

Kendal half turned and eyeballed the medium built pale skinned man.

"Who are you? Why are you wet?"

"I'm Weakom. Daniel Weakom. You are?" He extended his hand in a friendly gesture.

Kendal ignored the man's invitation to shake hands. "Detective Kendal and I'm busy."

"Sir, I won't hold you up. I need to find Detective Claire Ambroso, the undercover cop. She's my soul mate. We've been together for three months."

"Interesting number; when I see her, I'll let her know you're looking for her."

Kendal turned his back on the man. Staring at the house, he saw flames licking the glass window closest to him. His heart sunk to the lowest he'd ever felt.

"You don't understand," sobbed the man.

Kendal displayed the look of a thunderstorm. He turned, squaring himself to the man. He reached out and grabbed him by the arm.

"You don't understand. My daughter might be in that house. You're stopping me from finding her. Now get out of my face."

Deciding attack was his only option, Kendal sprinted for the window.

"She was supposed to be babysitting in the burning house tonight," called Weakom.

The house creaked violently. In one massive groan, the structure imploded.

Estimating he could be only twenty feet from the window Kendal dropped to all fours and threw up. Thoughts tumbled over each other in his mind. Each passing second his stomach churned into tighter knots. Finally arranging several thoughts in a positive order, he remained thinking about two. Surely Claire wasn't in the house. He didn't want to attend a double funeral.

A shout from the backyard interrupted his thoughts.

"I've found the arsonist, and there are survivors."

Fourteen police sprinted past the remnants of the smoldering crumpled house.

"Move it or lose it," Kendal yelled at the sea of blue uniforms blocking his way.

At the shallow end of the pool, two people stood, both were female, one white the other looked to have an olive complexion. The white woman was holding a baby wrapped in a blue blanket.

"Don't shoot," yelled the darker woman, shaking her police badge at the crowd.

"Claire, what are you doing in the pool? Have you seen Tegan tonight?" yelled Kendal, housing his gun.

“She wasn’t in the house at the time of the fire. Only the baby and I were. As for the doctor, I am trying to protect her from any gun happy, trigger pulling, bozo cowboys.”

Kendal studied the woman standing waist deep in water. “Doctor,” he echoed.

“This courageous lady just happened to be driving past the neighbourhood on her way home when she saw the flames. Hearing a baby crying and a splash, she unselfishly ran past the burning house and saved both the baby and myself from drowning. She reckons she saw someone jump the side fence. She informed me the person was bleeding from a gash in the leg.”

Kendal barked out news orders. “Detective Philips, check out the fence. Alderson, go find Weakom, he’s the one wearing a wet dinner suit.” Refocusing on the doctor, he frowned. “How could you tell the person who jumped the fence had a gash in the leg?”

“My ten years experience as a medical doctor. In the light from the fire, I watched a person wearing a balaclava limping rather profusely towards the fence, climb it and jump over. I am positive if you examine the surrounding area you’ll find traces of blood.”

Kendal reached out his hand to help both ladies from the pool. He even took off his coat and draped it over the doctor’s shoulders.

The woman smiled. After handing the baby to a police officer, she pulled up the hem of her blue jeans.

“As you can see, Detective, I have no cuts.”

Kendal stared at the woman’s legs. “Nice tattoo of a moth.”

“I apologize I did not catch your first name?” said the doctor.

“I’m a little slow on introductions. I’m Detective Alan Kendal, Melbourne Homicide.”

They shook hands in a business-like manner.

“I understand. You were trying to catch the arsonist. If you do not mind, I want to go home and change. I don’t want to catch a chill.”

“I won’t keep you long. How do you know I’m looking for an arsonist? The house fire could’ve been an accident.”

“This size house, burning to the ground in a few minutes, in my opinion, it must have been deliberate. What do you think?”

Kendal grunted and flashed the woman a morose look.

“Detective, I do not know what you are thinking. I only did what anybody else would have done, and being a doctor, I feel it was my duty to do all I could to help. You should be delighted I managed to save this young lady and the baby from drowning.”

“Lucky for Claire you came along.”

“Sorry, I could not get a description of the person running off. It all happened so terribly fast, and it was dark. My first job was to help save the baby and the young woman. They were lying face down in the water.”

“Again, I thank you, Doctor. I don’t want to appear rude I don’t know your name.”

“I am sorry once again, Detective. I am Dr. Ashlee Clarke.”

“Before I changed the subject you looked as though you wanted to explain about the tattoo.”

“Yes. My Uncle had just opened a local tattoo parlor in Melbourne. I think I was seven when he asked for my permission. I happened to be his first client. It was supposed to be a butterfly.”

“Thanks for clearing up any future misconstrue. Can I contact you at the hospital tomorrow?” asked Kendal. “In case I have a few more questions.”

“Not until late. The day after, around five in the afternoon will be most suitable. I have a strenuous eighteen holes of golf tomorrow.”

“Naturally,” replied Kendal. “Could you stay here for five more minutes? I’ll have someone take your statement.”

“Very well,” moaned Dr. Clarke.

Seeing Constable Peterson walking towards him, Kendal ushered the doctor his way. He turned to face Claire.

“Go to the hospital before you catch a cold. I don’t suppose you’ve seen any sign of Tegan around here tonight?”

Claire’s eyes widened. Between coughs, she slowly shook her head.

“No. That’s the second time you’ve asked. Is Tegan missing? Does Margaret know?”

Fishing for the note in his pocket, Kendal’s brow wrinkled. He thrust it at her.

Claire read the note. She looked up, her eyes full of tears. She slapped him on the shoulder.

“Sugar, don’t worry, I’ll be out of the hospital before breakfast. I’ll help you find her. My guess is she’s nowhere near the house. Don’t forget I’ve been here all night.”

A plain-clothes detective trotted up. “You might want to take a look at this,” he said in a monotone voice.

Kendal watched the ambulance boys help Claire onto a stretcher and wheel her up the drive to a waiting ambulance. Kendal turned his attention on the young cold-faced man. Fresh to the job, Philips was his partner three months earlier. They had been partners for a week when Kendal approached Captain Hughes. He told him he’d take his complaint all the way to the top if he couldn’t work alone. Unless Kendal was under orders to take on a partner his mind was unchangeable. He didn’t want another dead partner.

Philips pointed a crooked finger at a red blotchy trail.

“A preliminary search at the side fence closest to the pool has uncovered a small trail of blood. It leads from the pool to the fence. It looks like Dr. Goody two shoes just happened to be correct. I’ll take a sample of the blood and have pathology run a test on it in the morning to make sure it’s human blood.”

Kendal scratched his chin and gazed intently at the fence.

“Good work, Philips. Patrick did a good job on this house.” He looked around. “Where’s the baby?”

“The ambulance boys transported him to the hospital. They said he’s fine. Apparently, the doctor reported the fire and requested an ambulance.”

For a long time, Kendal stared at Philips.

“What?”

“You said the Doctor reported the house fire?”

“Yes. Is it that important?”

“The information could be. I’ll keep the info under my hat for now.”

Kendal slapped Philips on the shoulder. Together they walked towards a poolside table.

“Constable Peterson, after you get a full statement from the doctor you can send her home. When she is on her way, find constable Alderson and Weakom, we need to have a chat.”

“I’ll go find Alderson,” advised Philips.

Kendal watched him limp towards the front yard as his mobile phone sounded. He lifted it to his ear.

“Patrick here, don’t say a word, just listen.”

Kendal turned in tight circles studying everyone, the bushes, and every dark shadow in the backyard for the arsonist. Seeing no one talking on the phone, he ran after

Philips. A barrage of newspaper reporters yelling at him for an interview blocked his path. Kendal was forced to cover his one free ear and march back to the pool area for some silence.

"It's nice of you to come to the pool party and invite all your friends. Shame I couldn't stay around to enjoy it. I know you'll understand. I'm glad the doctor turned up. If it wasn't for her, who knows, you might've caught me. I'll be in touch so we can have a good long talk."

The phone went dead.

Kendal stood next to the pool. Again, he watched everyone in the backyard. No one seemed suspicious, but he knew Patrick must be close. His stare widened as his gaze swept the backyard and every shadow for the third time. Nothing and nobody looked to be out of place. He walked over to the poolside table and found Peterson and the doctor shaking hands.

Peterson downed his pen and housed a clipboard under his arm.

"Thank you, Miss Clarke. Your statement on tonight was quite detailed. You can now go home."

Dr. Clarke smiled, handed Kendal his coat back, shook his hand and started walking up the drive. She had only completed several steps when she stopped to look at Kendal.

"Excuse me, Detective, do not worry, I am confident the offender will be stopped. Tomorrow is another day."

Kendal looked into the woman's luring sky blue eyes and lustful looks. His eyes narrowed. She seemed familiar. Was it the way she looked at him or had he seen a familiar mannerism? He felt positive they had met somewhere a long time ago. He put his thoughts deep in his memory, vowing to recollect the scene at a later date.

"I'll catch the arsonist," he insisted confidently. "Go home. I don't want you to catch a cold."

The doctor nodded a polite goodnight. She left Kendal dousing his mind with her movements.

Displaying a tight grin, Peterson slapped him on the shoulder.

"Mate, she's out of your league."

"There's something about that woman."

"There certainly is. I love the way she walks and how her hair hangs when it's wet."

"I reckon she knows more than she's saying."

Peterson snorted. "How can a beautiful woman be bad?"

Kendal raised his eyebrows, cleared his throat and stood non-committal. They watched the doctor's walk-in silence. The last trace of her silhouette had long been swallowed up by the darkness when Peterson's voice ended the scene.

"Have you been able to discover any more leads on the arsonist's where-a-bouts?" His voice sounded like he had lost the love of his life.

"Yes. No. I don't know. I felt positive tonight I'd catch the mongrel. He's vanished and has taken a hostage."

"Anyone, you know?"

"My daughter," growled Kendal.

Movement at the top of the drive broke Kendal's hypnotic stare. He ran to intercept. The ambulance boys who were wheeling Claire up the drive on a stretcher ignored his request to stop. He rudely pushed an officer out of the way.

"Claire, I forgot to ask, how do you feel?"

She looked at Kendal and grinned from underneath the oxygen mask. She coughed several times, attempting to answer.

“When you feel up to it, I’ll need a full report on my desk about tonight. By the way, do you know a bloke named Weakom?”

While Claire was talking, she was wheeled away.

Kendal watched the ambulance slowly dividing the forty plus people who were still loitering in the court. Looking around, Kendal spied Constable Alderson. He walked up and grabbed her arm.

“Where are Weakom and Philips?”

The rookie bit her bottom lip. She shrugged. “They must’ve slipped away.”

Kendal felt drained. He was suffering from the lack of sleep and slowly walked towards his car. It had been a long night. He needed to sit and reflect.

“Leaving so soon?” rebuked a deep voice.

Kendal searched the surrounds. He found the man standing under a large tree on his right.

“Captain Hughes, what brings you out this time of night?”

“To see if you caught the arsonist. By the look on your face, I’d say you missed, again.”

“Yes, however, I got close.”

“Close isn’t good enough. Catch the bum, soon, or else.”

“Or else what Cap?”

Captain Hughes grunted and walked off to his car.

Kendal stood watching the tall man drive off into the night. Opening his car door, Kendal slipped behind the steering wheel. He sat staring at the fire truck’s red and blue flashing lights.

“Patrick, where are you hiding?” he heard himself say. “Mark my words. I’ll get you next time. There’s always the next time.” Kendal turned the ignition key. The engine roared to life at the same time as his mobile phone started playing a ring tone someone had downloaded off the Internet. Lifting his phone to his ear, he mumbled. “What is that lousy tune?”

“Hey, Coppa; going so soon?”

Kendal’s eyes bulged. He started to swear through the phone.

“Calm yourself, Coppa. How on Earth can you think straight? You must be over exhausted. My advice to you is not to drive home. You might have an accident and die. Have you any idea what it takes to break in a new cop?”

Kendal sat up straight, his gaze darting about in all directions. His thoughts flashed back to Philips and Weakom.

“Patrick, where are you? Can you see me?”

“Kendal, Kendal, Kendal. How many times do I have to spell the words Fire Games? Can’t you remember what I said?”

“Tell me again.”

Patrick groaned into the phone. “We’re playing a game. You’re my partner. At the moment, I can’t say your performance is too thrilling. You’re letting the team down.”

“I demand you tell me where you and Tegan are?”

“If I tell you, I’ll be breaking the rules. You have to guess.”

“What happens if I want to stop playing?”

Silence marred the airways. Kendal fidgeted in the dark waiting for an answer.

“Patrick, are you still there?”

“I’m still here.”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

“To stop playing would be a shame. Yes, a real shame.” He sighed. “You will have to die.”

The only noise coming from the phone was the rhythmic high-pitched beep. Kendal shook his head and buried his mobile phone in his pocket.

CHAPTER FOUR

KENDAL SAT in his car tapping the ignition key. His thoughts were running deep. Something wasn't kosher at the burning house. Something was wrong, terribly wrong. Patrick escaped too easily. Adding to the mystery, there was Weakom and Philip's timely disappearance. He drummed the steering wheel to the beat of a song his mobile phone started playing. A third of the way through the song he began singing the words.

"I should be home tonight."

Kendal sang the words to the song several more times. The words, 'red herring' entered his mind.

After a long pause, he dismissed the thought. For the first time, the arsonist had threatened his life. Why? He was positive Patrick must have an accomplice. Kendal's eyes narrowed. The word decoy flashed into his brain. He sang the words to the song one more time. Pausing after the word 'home,' he whispered.

"The fire must have been a decoy."

Kendal slowly nodded as his mind quickly arranged his thoughts. The letter Margaret found, Tegan's kidnapping, and the third clue were the ring tone on his mobile phone. His eyes widened in horror. Roaring the car's engine, he started to yell.

"No, no, no. Patrick, somehow you snuck into my house and downloaded the song as a clue to your where-a-bouts."

Kendal's foot hammered the accelerator. He threw the car's gear stick into fourth and screamed the engine.

He swore under his breath when the car rounded the corner, and he saw his house in the distance. He angrily threw the gear stick into neutral. Reaching out he turned the ignition key to the off position, killing the car's headlights and engine. The only noise came from rubber against tar.

Before the car came to a stop, he jumped out and ran half bent, his black duffel coat flapping violently behind him. Kendal crouched behind his neighbor's one-metre high fence to view his house through a hole in a fence paling.

The area looked and sounded graveyard quiet.

Kendal extracted his gun from his shoulder holster.

"Patrick, I swear if you're in my house I'll shoot you where you stand. I will refuse to give you a second thought. I know you have a fad over burning two storey homes. Be warned you won't be burning mine, not tonight or any other night."

Kendal's whispers fell into mumblings. He jumped the fence and quietly ran up his drive. Squatting behind a small bush nine large strides from the front door, he stared through the darkness, listening. The only noise was a baby's faint cry from the house next to his. He counted to three and silently moved closer. He ascended the three concrete front steps. The lounge room curtains were closed. However, the window remained open. He pushed his shoulders hard against the rough brickwork, eased his left hand past the security door and tightened his fingers around the doorknob. He turned the knob slowly and pushed the door.

It swung open.

Kendal stepped onto the welcome mat, his feet slipping slightly. He looked down and studied the mat. It was wet. Patrick had somehow gained entry. Kendal could already see the satanic smirk behind the black balaclava. He applied pressure on his gun's trigger. He didn't jump when a tree branch lightly scraped across the study room window.

Kendal didn't waste time in searching. Thinking Patrick must be upstairs, Kendal hesitated at the first step to recollect his dream. He shook his head. Surely, he wasn't living his nightmare?

Pushing his back flat against the wall, he ascended the carpeted stairs. He stopped at the halfway point to listen for any noise Patrick might make. Hearing no sound, he saw only darkness. He knew the pyromaniac must be close.

Kendal finished climbing the stairs and stood at the threshold to Tegan's bedroom. He stared into the black gloom wondering how scared she must be. His heart skipped a beat. Satisfied the room was empty he moved along the hall to Tani's room. It too was empty. He pushed the cupboard door in the narrow hall to be certain it was closed. He then walked on to the next room.

At the doorway to the main bedroom Kendal could see Marg and Tani lying prone under a bed sheet.

'Strange,' he thought. 'Where are the blankets?'

Kendal studied the room.

A small splinter of pre-dawn light lit up the bottom hem of the curtains as the Grandfather clock in the formal dining room geared up to strike the sixth hour. Darkness appeared to be turning to grey at the dawn of a new day.

Returning his attention back to the bed, Kendal noticed Tani was motionless lying next to his wife. He churned Patrick's words over in his mind.

'If you won't play the game you will die.'

The curtains over the window bulged. Staring at the curtains, Kendal waited for them to move again. After a long pause, he again refocused on the bed. He saw his wife wink.

"Marg, sorry to wake you," he whispered. "I thought Patrick might be hiding in the house."

Kendal slid the gun back into his shoulder holster, bent down and retrieved the snub nose revolver strapped to his ankle and slipped it into his back pocket.

"I wasn't asleep. I know you didn't catch Patrick," whispered Marg.

"How do you know?"

"He gave me a message."

"What's the message?"

"Fire games," sobbed Marg.

"Anything else?" asked Kendal.

"No nothing."

"Did you ask about little Tacca?"

"Yes. Patrick told me she was safe for the moment."

"What a dirty slime ball psychopath. Why involve you? I want you to pack some clothes and take Tani to your mother's place at Aura Lake for a few days."

Marg rolled her eyes towards the window. A tear cascaded down her cheek.

The curtains parted. Patrick stepped forward, laughing.

"Hey Kendal, you're extremely slow at this game. You don't even know when your loving wife is trying to give you a message someone's in the room."

Kendal squared himself to the pyromaniac.

"I knew where you were." He slipped his hand inside his coat and coiled his fingers around the police issue, Smith and Wesson.

"Don't. This crossbow arrow has a thrust of one hundred and fifty pounds. It's pointing straight at your heart. You missed your one and only opportunity to kill me."

Kendal raised his hands. "I want to take you in alive."

"Good excuse for incompetence."

"What gives you the right to invade my home?"

"Don't fret Coppa; I've been here many times watching you and Marg breathing while you slept. It excites me knowing you have no idea who I am. It's all part of the game. I watch people then I burn their house to the ground."

Patrick struck a match. He held it up between his gloved fingers. Everyone in the room watched it burn. When the fire touched his glove, the flame went out. He immediately struck another.

"Tell me how it feels to be defeated?" growled Patrick.

"You tell me something. How did you obtain entry into my house?"

"Your loving wife heard a knock at the front door. You should've seen the look of horror on her face when she opened the door and found me standing there. It was priceless."

Tani sat up and started sobbing.

"Kid, shut up," growled Patrick, switching his stare to the bed.

Kendal gambled at not being seen and took a wide step closer towards the window.

"You're close enough. Hand over your guns, now."

"What guns?"

Patrick appeared to grow agitated at hearing the question. He started rocking back and forth. "The Smith and Wesson in your shoulder holster. Move your hand slowly. I'm a terrific shot. From here I can't miss. Make sure the safety's on and toss it to Tani. I don't want the girl to be hurt just yet."

Extracting the revolver butt first, Kendal's steel expression didn't alter.

"Tani, give me the gun." Patrick outstretched his hand.

"Good girl. Now Coppa, cough up the snub nose."

"I don't have another."

"I know you carry two guns. I've seen it. Hand it over."

"It's getting old. I left it at Police Headquarters."

"Liar," yelled Patrick. "How can you look me in the eye and lie?"

Kendal shrugged.

"I have underestimated you and your perfect poker face. It won't happen again."

Tani covered her ears and went from sobbing to screaming. She hid her face by cuddling into her mother.

"I can prove I don't have another gun." Kendal lifted both trouser legs.

Patrick exhaled heavily. His lips parted into a victorious grin. "Good."

"If we're about to die remove the hood. Show me your face. What have you got to lose?" Kendal flashed a snappy grin.

"You've been watching too many crime movies. In them, the hero always survives. I'm not stupid. Plan 'B' doesn't include showing my face."

"Let the ladies go. The vendetta is between you and me. Come on let's fight it out. It'll be a fun game. I've no gun. The odds will be in your favour."

"I'm not going to fight. You're boring. My fun will be hearing you beg for your life."

"I'd never give you the satisfaction." Kendal folded his arms. He shuffled his feet in a desperate move to gain ground.

“I want you to go into the next life not knowing my identity. Do you feel frustrated? You should be. It’s all part of my game. I’ll take decades to die. It should drive you insane.”

“You’re already there.”

Patrick used the gun to smash the window and climbed onto and was balancing on the window ledge. He pointed at Kendal. “This moment is all part of the game. It has been fun,” he growled through clenched teeth. He lit a match. For a few moments, he watched the small dancing flame. Smirking, he threw the match onto the bed and started to drop from view.

Beads of sweat broke out on Kendal’s face. He snatched the snub nose from his back pocket, aimed and fired a full second too late. The bullet missed and embedded itself into his neighbour’s spouting narrowly missing his beloved seven-year-old black cat. He glanced at Marg. She looked petrified. He knew he was in a bind. Apprehend Patrick or rescue his family. He had a second to decide. This must be Patrick’s plan ‘B’ he thought. It seemed to be the perfect escape. Patrick was clever, insanely clever. Kendal felt like he was in the middle of a chess game. One bad move and the game will end.

Tani let out a blood-curdling scream as the lit match landed on the sheet at her feet. Marg reached out to shield her from the fire.

Kendal dived for the bed landing on his back. His black duffel coat muffled the flame. He sniffed the air.

“It’s ok. There are no petrol fumes. It’s another one of Patrick’s little games.”

Kendal rolled off the bed and pushed both shoulder blades against the wall nearest the window. He stole a look through the broken glass. Somewhere outside he heard Patrick’s hideous laugh. Kendal scrutinized the area close to the house. Finding no trace, he widened his sight pattern. He saw a group of young female fitness fanatics jogging through the park one hundred and fifty feet from his house. He shuddered slightly at the thought of exercise.

The dawn of a new day was almost as hard to spot an offender as it was in the twilight hours of the day’s end.

Kendal squinted. It didn’t help. Patrick will be hard to locate. He could be hiding anywhere, behind a bush, a fence, or a tree. Kendal saw and heard nothing. He glanced at Tani’s trampoline and the tracks it left from being pulled under the window. A long toothpick size branch moved on a tree ten and a half feet from the window. He raised his snub nose revolver to eye level and aimed confidently. He didn’t blink. Leaves on the branch moved. From this distance, he couldn’t miss.

“Patrick, freeze,” he yelled.

The bed squeaked. Kendal didn’t flinch. He knew Tani and Margaret were off the bed and hiding on the floor. Endless practice drills over the years had finally paid off.

Another branch moved. Kendal’s finger constricted on the trigger, but his arm and hand remained solid. He didn’t want the bullet to miss its target. A girl from the jogging group, an early morning walker, or perhaps a paperboy or girl could die; or the neighbor’s cat.

Kendal saw a blue flash. He heard a bang. Brick mortar showered his face. He sidestepped back from the window to take cover. Patrick had given away his hiding place. Kendal heard light footsteps running and hurriedly took aim. For a couple of heartbeats, he wondered why Patrick missed. Surely, he was confident enough to kill his posse. It was another piece to the jigsaw puzzle that was yet to be slotted into its correct position.

Kendal pulled the trigger. The bullet embedded itself in the wheelie bin Tegan had put out the previous day.

“Shit,” he cursed.

The neighbour’s main bedroom light flicked on. Kendal grinned at knowing he’d woken them. Payback for those all-night parties.

Kendal dived out of the window, landing on the trampoline in a sitting position. He was thankful Tegan and Tani tried to teach him the seat drop. He bounced off into a small azalea bush, rolled and got to his feet.

‘I’d never be a good alley cat,’ he thought. He made a mental note to have more trampoline lessons.

Ignoring the pain in his ankle, Kendal ran towards the park.

“This is the part I hate,” he mumbled. “I’m a thinker, not a runner. Where’s Claire when I need back up. She loves a run. It’s nothing for her to complete a three-K jog for breakfast and the same for dinner.” His eyes widened. “I hope those female joggers haven’t stopped to have a chat.”

A car’s engine started up. He heard it backfire. Kendal tried to sprint, but his sprained ankle slowed him down. On the other side of the park, he saw a white van. A cloud of white mist was billowing from its exhaust. For the second time, the van backfired. Kendal focused on a hooded figure sitting behind the steering wheel.

“I’m laughing at you Coppa,” yelled the figure, lifting a crossbow to eye level.

Kendal stopped dead in his tracks and looked for cover. The closest tree was too far.

The group of female joggers was laughing and talking, as they approached to begin another lap of the park. They rounded the corner totally unaware of what they were running towards. Kendal winced at the pain in his ankle as he ran desperately for a tree. Patrick’s finger tightened on the crossbow’s trigger. A woman jogger from the group screamed a warning when she saw the hooded figure holding the crossbow. Instead of diving for cover, the group strayed from the path and scattered. One of the young girls sprinted for a tree closer to Patrick.

“Get down before the arrow puts a hole in your back,” yelled Kendal.

He pointed his revolver at the sky and pulled the trigger. The young woman covered her ears and dived for the ground. Her interference gave him the extra seconds he needed. He dived for the tree, re-aimed his gun at the van and hurriedly squeezed off another two rounds. Both bullets buried themselves into a big oak tree.

Kendal heard a thud. Patrick’s arrow missed his shoulder by the width of a dog’s hair. Kendal glanced at the woman jogger trembling in a fetal position at his feet.

A car turned the corner. Its headlights highlighted the van’s rear. He saw a child’s face. Her long black hair swayed from side to side. Before Kendal could react, she fell from view. A child’s hand re-appeared and threw something out of the window. The van’s engine revved, and the vehicle was on the move.

A car pulled into the curb not far from where Kendal stood. A woman’s voice broke through the sound of Kendal’s heavy breathing.

“Sugar, need a hand?”

“Claire, follow the van.”

Kendal sprinted for the car. He skidded over the bonnet towards the passenger door. Hearing the car’s engine revving, he pulled open the front passenger door and waved his handgun in the direction of the van.

Claire’s foot pushed the accelerator to the floor. They rounded the corner and headed for the T intersection at the end of the street. “Left, or right?” she questioned.

Kendal displayed a blank expression. “Kill the engine.”

The engine fell silent. Kendal and Claire stepped down from the car. They stood listening to the early morning traffic starting to build.

Kendal eventually slumped onto the passenger seat. "At least I know where Tegan is."

"Patrick?"

He looked up at Claire. "Yes. How did you know where I was?"

She shot him a sterile look. "I called Margaret. She said you were chasing Patrick through the park. You know I can't resist a chase."

The detectives started to cruise the neighborhood searching for the van, stopping at each corner hoping to hear the van's engine backfire, all to no avail. The van and its backfiring exhaust had vanished into the early morning traffic.

Returning to the park, Kendal brought Claire up to speed on the chase and the woman who had unknowingly saved his life.

"The arrow's over there," Kendal reported, pointing at a tree. Seeing a CD cover in the gutter, he walked over and picked it up. Except for a few scratches, the cover looked new. He read the group's name. 'Split Theory.' The band comprised of only four names, three men, and a woman. Edward Taylor, Phil Mason, Trent Nielsen and Helen Mitura. His mind slipped into overdrive. 'Tegan must have discovered the CD, and she was the one I saw throwing it out of the van's window. When Patrick finds out his CD is missing he's going to be pissed.'

Kendal slipped the CD cover into his coat pocket and watched Claire stepping out the distance between the road and the arrow. When she finally reached the tree, she trotted over, shaking her head. She slapped his shoulder.

"You're either one lucky cop or Patrick isn't a good shot. Forty feet is a long way for an arrow to travel."

"I'm swayed into thinking he meant to miss. I'll visit the local archery club later today. I'm positive anyone who can shoot an arrow so far needs to practice." Kendal dislodged the arrow from the tree.

"Careful Sugar, don't forget fingerprints."

"There won't be any. Patrick wore gloves." Kendal held the arrow up to the brightening sky. "This arrow is made of surgical steel."

"How do you know?" asked Claire, staring at the arrow.

"It's marked surgical steel."

"A worker at a hospital?" she quizzed.

"Possible. I need to talk to Dr. Ashlee Clarke. I have a hunch she knows more than she's admitting. I also need a close look at the kid's trampoline, and I want to know about Weakom. Daniel Weakom."

Claire flicked Kendal a cold stare. "I'm feeling fine. Thanks for asking."

"I'm glad you're okay."

"I think we should be partners. We'd make a great team."

"You know I prefer to work alone. Let's go. Marg will be wondering what's happening."

Claire opened her mouth to say something. She shrugged instead. On the way back to her car she smiled up at the heavy-set man walking next to her. When she spied an elderly lady walking her even older dog with a pink ribbon around its neck, she grinned mischievously and cuddled firmly into Kendal's chest, almost tripping them both.

"I'm glad you love me again, Sugar," she teased, battering her eyelids.

The elderly lady looked up. She frowned at the young woman cuddling the man in a public place. The lady's dog waddled over and sniffed their feet. Kendal kicked out at the dog.

“Sugar, I can’t wait to get you home,” hinted Claire, over the dog’s annoying yelps. “Forget the other woman. I have so much more to offer.”

The elderly lady pushed her nose into the air, turned and walked briskly back the way she came. “Queeny, come,” she croaked.

The dog yelped several more times and ran off in the direction of its owner.

Claire put a hand to her cheek and threw her voice into a perfect theatrical scene. “My love, my love, at last, you’re mine, all mine.”

“You’re such a tease. Gossip will be all over the neighborhood by mid-morning about us having an affair.”

Claire gripped onto Kendal’s shoulder. Her giggles were contagious.

“Lucky for you Marg has a great sense of humor. Feast your eyes on this.”

Kendal extracted the CD from his pocket and handed it over.

Claire’s grin faded. “It’s time to start work.”

“Have you ever heard of a band named; ‘Split Theory?’”

“Sounds like a school exam.” She turned the CD cover over in her hands. “What an ugly picture. Four misshapen pink guitars, a backdrop of deep green and black swirls in a field of flowers.”

“I agree. I’ll run the band’s name past Tani when we get home. Maybe she’s heard of the group.”

Claire turned the ignition key and eased the car away from the curb.

At Kendal’s house, she parked her car halfway up the drive. Both stepped down and walked towards the trampoline.

Claire lifted one end. “Patrick must be strong; this trampoline weighs a ton.”

“Take a look around. There must be footprints somewhere in the garden?”

“Hey Sugar, darling, you’re not a good gardener!” exclaimed Claire. She stared at a weed infested garden bed. She kicked a clump of clay. “Not much will grow in this hardened ground.”

Kendal answered sarcastically, his voice sounding hoarse from the lack of sleep.

“Marg’s the keen gardener in the household. This stretch of, ‘hard Garden,’ is the last patch to be attended to.”

Claire looked around and saw that the backyard was free of weeds, the lawn looked short, a small hedge growing around the pool’s fence looked beautiful.

Kendal grinned at Claire’s reddening face, walked over and slapped her on the shoulder.

“If you’ll ignore the garden’s magnificence for a moment, I’ve discovered footprints.” He pointed to a slight indentation near a small plant. Seeing another more profound imprint a step away he directed Claire’s attention towards it.

Both detectives squatted to study the ground at length. They were of an average size runner. The depth of the print indicated a person light on their feet.

“More stealth than a cat,” mumbled Kendal. He looked up. “Weakom has a slight build. The last time I saw him, he was wet.”

Claire returned a slanderous look. “What are you implying?”

“Nothing I can prove. In fact, I’m only thinking out loud.”

“For your information, Daniel has done nothing wrong.”

“I believe you.”

“Good. I’ll forgive you this once. Don’t let it happen again.”

“You two come inside for breakfast,” called Marg. She stood at the back door holding three mugs of coffee. She hugged and kissed her husband then hugged Claire, her life-long friend. Her gaze darted about the backyard. “Al, where’s Tegan?”

Guiding his arm around her waist, his face looked strained.

"I believe the person in the rear of the white van we were chasing was Tegan."

Marg closed her eyes. She dropped her mug of coffee and started to sway from side to side.

"Sit at the table, and I'll clean up the mess," advised Claire. She walked to the kitchen sink to retrieve a handful of paper towel.

Marg sat staring at her husband with a far-away look. The colour in her face had drained. Raising her left hand, she began to massage her temple.

Kendal patted his wife's hand to reassure her. He downed his left knee and stroked her hair.

"Patrick was driving the white van and is using Tegan as a pawn to get to me. It's the reason why I believe she'll remain safe."

"When will we get her back?"

"I'll make breakfast," interrupted Claire. She walked to the cupboard and rummaged through the boxes of cereal.

"I'll find her," stated Kendal.

Marg slowly stood. In a trance-like state, she walked towards the hall. Tani came into the room, hugged her father and jumped into Claire's open arms.

"Good to see you short stuff."

"It's good to see you too. You need to visit more often. Tegan and I want to give you a competition doing seat drops on our trampoline. I bet I can do double what you can do."

"You probably can," chuckled Claire.

Kendal extracted the CD cover from his pocket, the one he found in the gutter. He held it out to his daughter. "Sweetie, have you or any of your school friends ever heard of a band named Split Theory? They have a CD out. It looks like this."

"Can I have it? Please say yes. Tegan and I have a fight when I borrow her copy."

"Your sister has a copy in her room?"

"Yes and no. Yes, Tegan has a copy. It's in my room. I borrowed it again. Please don't tell her."

"I won't say a word if you bring it here."

Tani ran to her room. She returned boasting a wide grin. She held out an exact duplicate of the CD Kendal held.

"What's so good about this band?"

"Dad, get modern. Everyone at school is talking about 'Split Theory' and their new CD. Tegan got a copy when she kissed the boy in the shop."

Claire quickly clamped her hand over Tani's mouth. "I don't think your dad needs to hear the details."

"It's okay. I promise you can have the CD when I've finished this game," whispered Kendal. Pocketing the CD, he walked into the hall. He found his wife staring at four framed photos hanging off the wall. He walked up behind her. "You okay?"

Marg was trembling. She spoke in sobbing whispers.

"I was petrified this morning. Tell me why was our baby kidnapped?"

"Tegan's not a baby. She's twelve-years-old and will be fine."

Marg glared at her husband through red-rimmed eyes. "How can you say she'll be fine?"

"I know how Patrick thinks. I'm positive little Tacca will be okay. She's the bait."

"Bait?" echoed Marg.

"Patrick wants a western style show down. It's part of the game in his sick mind."

Marg stared into her husband's hazel eyes, her tears welling.

Kendal wrapped his arms around his wife. He hugged her tight and kissed her gently on the top of her head.

"I'll find Tegan and bring her home. I promise."

"Thank you," she whispered leaning her head on his shoulder.

Claire stood in the doorway to the kitchen leaning against the wooden frame. "I hate to break up the love scene kiddies. Coffee and toast are on the table."

"Al, go have breakfast, I'll be there in a minute."

Kendal paused at the dining room door adjacent to the kitchen. He didn't have to look to know Marg had reached up and taken a photo of Tegan off the wall and was cradling it in her arms. He could hear her quiet sobs. He knew her eyes would soon drip tears. He knew being a cop's wife wasn't easy. His endless hours away from the family and being a possible target for a psychotic maniac like Patrick could easily take its toll. All too frequent he'd come home and catch her crying. He'd hug and kiss her, waiting for her to stop. Everything would go back to normal until the next time. This, was the next time. He knew his hugs and kisses and reassuring words wouldn't stop the tears. They'd only stop when Tegan was home safe.

Kendal swallowed his emotions and walked to the dining room table.

"Sugar, I'm certain Tegan is already planning her escape. She takes after you. I believe she'll walk into Police Headquarters by tonight."

"Claire thanks for the compliment. It's not me you have to convince."

CHAPTER FIVE

TEGAN KENDAL slowly opened her heavy eyelids. She was lying prone on a single bed wearing the same pink pajamas she wore to bed. Sunlight streamed onto her face through a small window. She struggled to a sitting position and called out in a croaky voice.

"Mum, you didn't wake me for breakfast. Why?"

She yawned, stretched and rubbed her eyes using knuckled fists. Through brown slits, she gazed about the small barren room. Her thin eyebrows slowly angled to a point.

"This isn't my room. Where are my books? My Music CDs? Where am I? How did I get here?" Her eyes widened. She lifted her hands to massage her temples. "I think I remember last night someone entered my room and shoved a cloth under my nose. I remember waking up in the back of a van and managed to throw a CD out of the window before falling asleep again. Now I'm here."

Tears formed in her eyes. She mouthed the word mum. The only noise she heard sounded worse than a dry whisper.

Heavy footsteps trudged up the stairs. They stopped outside the closed door. Tegan heard a click, and the door swung open. Tegan screamed and slid back towards the bedhead dragging the heavy chain padlocked to her ankle with her. She screamed again and tugged on the chain that appeared to be securely attached to the bed.

"Hey kid, you hungry?" snarled a black hooded figure. His dark gloves were gripping the edge of a plate. His voice sounded cold and sinister.

Tegan nodded hesitantly.

The hooded person entered the room and placed the plate of steaming bacon and eggs on the bed.

Tegan pushed her shoulder blades harder against the cast iron bedhead. The unforgiving eyes behind the hood stared directly at her. They seemed to be amused at her fear.

“Who are you? What do you want? Why am I here?”

The tall figure stepped closer, towering over the girl. She tried to cower away.

“You’re here because you are a little mouse and your last name is Kendal. I hate everyone who’s last name is Kendal. I especially loathe your father for what he did. Be advised I’m no killer. However, the fire’s hungry. It’s hungry for human flesh, and I’m using you for bait.”

“My dad’s a cop. He’ll find me, and he’ll hunt you down.”

“Precisely why I won’t tell you my real identity, it’s the rules. Now eat.”

“How do I know you haven’t poisoned the food?”

“You’re brighter than a solid silver button, aren’t you?”

“I’m not scared of you, Hoody. Be warned I’m not about to do anything you tell me to do.”

The hooded figure paced the floor chanting. “I’m not scared of you. I’m not scared of you.” He abruptly stopped. “You’re my hostage, and you’ll do exactly what I tell you.”

The hooded figure recommenced his chanting and pacing the floor.

“Stop walking. You’re making me dizzy.”

The figure stopped at the doorway, folded his arms and let out a belly laugh.

“The dizziness you’re experiencing is the after effects of the Ether.”

“What’s Ether?”

“I’m not going to say. You have to guess.”

Tegan stood and copied the hooded figure’s stance.

“I don’t want to guess; I want to go home.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“No.”

“Tell me your name,” ordered Tegan.

“No. Do you want to play a game?”

“No.”

“Don’t you like games?”

“I like games only when I know the name of my opponent.”

“Hey, you’re almost as good as your father.” The hooded figure grinned. “I like games. Guess what kind.”

“I don’t want to guess.”

“Guess,” yelled Hoody. Glaring at Tegan, he folded his arms tighter.

“I’ll guess if you tell me your name.”

“No. Frustrating isn’t it?”

Hoody marched across the room. He stood staring at Tegan nose to nose.

“Scared yet?”

“No,” Tegan whispered between sobs.

“You should be.”

“Hide and seek. Do you like playing hide and seek?” quizzed Tegan.

“Bad guess. I don’t like that game.”

“Why?”

Hoody answered by changing the subject. "This is the Doc's place. She doesn't like it when I'm here, and she's not at home. I'll let you in on a secret. I don't care what she thinks. I told her I'm the stronger. Naturally, she disagrees. If you stay quiet and play by my rules, she won't find out."

"If you don't want to play hide and seek, I won't play anything."

"You're a typical girl."

Tegan stared into the eyes of her captor. "When I grow up, I'm going to be a cop just like my dad. I'll track you down, and I'll arrest you."

"If you want to celebrate your thirteenth birthday, change your ideas. You and your father have the same stinking attitude."

Hoody marched to the door. He turned on his toes and glared at Tegan.

"Do you want to know what game I love most?"

"No, I don't."

"I think you do. I call it Fire Games."

"I've never heard of fire games."

"It's a game I win, and you lose and so does your father, Detective Alan James Kendal."

Hoody grinned. Back stepping into the open doorway, he extracted a match from a matchbox and lit it.

Tegan stared at the small lit flame. She scrambled backwards in an attempt to escape. The chain clamped around her ankle slid towards her a short half metre before it was piano wire tight. The Cast Iron brace welded across the width of the bed did a great job in preventing the chain from sliding too far.

Hoody chuckled at the girl's feeble attempt to escape.

"Hey, girlie, call me Patrick."

He flicked the lit match high into the air and slammed the door shut. He descended the stairs three at a time.

Tegan yelled a blood-curdling scream, gripped the chain using white knuckles and dived off the bed. She completed a tumble roll over the floor, screamed again and lunged for the window. The metal tether tightened restricting her escape. She fell to the floor. Her left shoulder hit first. Her torso came next followed by her legs. She winced at the pain, rolled over onto her back and looked up at the window.

"I don't want to die," she screamed. "Dad, Mum, what can I do?" Her tears flowed faster. "I don't want to be burnt alive."

CHAPTER SIX

CLAIRE FOLLOWED Kendal into Police Headquarters.

Constable Susie Alderson looked up when they walked past the front desk. "Captain Hughes wants to see you both in his office."

"Later," Kendal replied. "I'm busy going over the arson case. The clock is ticking."

"I think by the expression on the Captain's face he wants to see you, now."

Kendal saluted and escorted Claire to the lift.

"Asshole," rookie Alderson muttered under her breath. She raised her middle finger to Kendal's back.

Captain Hughes' office was located on the second floor. Kendal stepped up to and rapped his knuckles on the light brown door.

"Enter," bellowed a deep voice.

Kendal opened the door and allowed Claire to enter the office first.

"Thanks, Sugar," she chirped.

"Two of my favourite Detectives," the Captain boomed, turning from the window. "Don't be shy, come in. Join the party."

"I wonder where I've heard that saying," Kendal mumbled. He frowned and waited for the usual verbal abuse over anything from parking in the wrong place to arriving at the office door later than expected. "Cap, I can see you're not happy, though I don't know why? You have a nice office. The phone is sitting neatly on your dust free desk. You have a new filing cabinet, a coffee machine at the ready, and a small fridge probably stocked full of milk and liqueurs."

"You're correct; I'm not happy. The painters are going to paint my office today, and I'm being moved out."

"Change is good," mumbled Kendal.

"Shut up. I don't like your sarcasm. Now pay attention."

"Yes, Cap."

"I want a full report on last night. I have the media on my back demanding an internal investigation over why one of my top detectives discharged his gun without probable cause five times. Kendal, before you say a word, I'll talk to the commissioner. I'll make up a story. It will give you time to type up your fictitious excuse."

Instead of correcting the false accusations, Kendal just stood nodding his head.

Captain Hughes averted his attention to Claire. He smiled and talked using a friendly tone.

"Please, Claire, tell me all you know."

"There's not much to tell Sir. I was babysitting my friend's son for the night. They were only out for dinner and a movie. I expected them home in four or five hours."

Hughes sat at his desk switching his gaze between the two detectives. He reached out, picked up a pencil and started tapping the end on the desk.

Kendal gazed at the big man. He even managed to display a tight smile. To his relief, the Captain stopped his annoying tapping.

"What's so funny?"

"I was amusing myself by trying to guess what colour suit you'll be wearing this time next week."

Hughes scoffed at the sentence. He leaned forward across the desk. "I think you should find a way of catching this arsonist than waste your time thinking about my clothing."

"Yes Sir, Cap."

"Stop calling me Cap. Why on Earth do you persist on calling me that stupid name?"

"Your predecessor came from the army, and the nickname stuck," explained Kendal.

"Tell me something intelligent by informing me the name of the bloke I saw running from the fire?"

"He's attached himself to the woman sitting next to me."

"If I may cut in," growled Claire, glancing at Kendal with a cold steel look.

"I'm listening," said Captain Hughes.

"Daniel Weakom is my boyfriend. My personal life is my business."

"How long have you known this Weakom character?"

“Three months.”

“Kendal’s been on Patrick’s case for the past three months.”

“It’s a coincidence.”

Sitting on his swivel chair, the Captain scooted to the window. He parted the wooden louvers and stared out across the area set aside for impounded cars. There was a total of twenty cars in the yard. They had been either stolen or vandalized. All were waiting to be claimed by their owners.

“I think Alan and I should be partners,” Claire blurted. “I have a few ideas of my own.”

The Captain scooted back to the desk. He displayed a widening grin.

“Say no more. I think that’s the best news I’ve heard in days.”

“I have to protest. Patrick’s kidnapped my daughter, Tegan. I have to work on this case alone.”

“I reckon Detective Ambroso will make you an excellent partner.”

“Did you hear what I said?” questioned Kendal.

“I heard. You now have a new partner.”

“I have personal excuses why I prefer to work alone.”

“I don’t care about your reasons. Claire has a good point. You seem to be having a lot of trouble finding this asshole. I have the Chief Commissioner on my back-demanding results. Claire, you have to help catch this idiot.”

“Sir, if I may suggest something.”

“You’re full of good ideas this morning,” grumbled Kendal.

The Captain’s eyebrows shot up. “I’m listening.”

“So am I. One minute on this assignment and you want to run the show,” jeered Kendal.

“Sir, I have an idea on Patrick’s identity.”

“Good, I like detectives who think of solving a case and not about clothes.”

“I’m almost certain he’s a cop.”

Kendal buried his head in his hands.

“He might even work in this building.”

“Harsh words,” snarled the Captain. “Do you have proof?”

“Not yet.”

“Kendal, do you agree?”

“No. I’ve suspicions of my own. Patrick knows I’m closing in.”

“You think Patrick is Daniel Weakom,” hissed Claire.

“If Patrick is a cop or Weakom or anyone else I need to have strong evidence,” warned Captain Hughes. He banged a clenched fist on the table. “I need hard evidence.”

“Sir, we’ll find Patrick real soon,” announced Claire.

“You two have twenty-nine days.”

“Thirty nights,” corrected Kendal. “Patrick burns one house every month. He’s granted me thirty nights before his big finale.”

Hughes picked up his pencil and again started his annoying tapping. “Get out and do some work.”

He threw his pencil at the two detectives as they marched towards the door.

“I think the meeting went well,” announced Claire, on the safe side of the door.

“Thanks for the encouragement in front of the Captain.”

“Sorry Sugar. I thought you could use some new ideas. I’m fond of Tegan too. I’m proud to know the kid. I reckon the way she looks up to you and wants to walk in your footsteps is wonderful. Makes me want to have a kid like Tegan and I am not even married.”

Her voice faltered on the last word.

Instead of probing into her private life, Kendal decided to file his thoughts. His questions could wait.

“In my opinion, I don’t think you and Weakom make a good-looking couple.”

“Who asked you?”

“We need to have a chat.”

“Why?”

“For a start, you haven’t told me where Weakom is.”

“If you’re think Weakom is Patrick, let me put your mind at ease. He’s not.”

“Are you positive?”

The glass observation window behind Kendal and Claire banged a few times. When they turned around, they saw Captain Hughes beckoning for their return.

Stepping into the office, Claire closed the door.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Hughes. “Kendal, take your family to a safe location. Get them far away from this maniac. Call your wife and tell her to pack. I’ll arrange an impounded car for you to drive.”

“Sir, isn’t it illegal to use an impounded car?” asked Claire.

“Usually yes, the wagon I’m referring to has only been sprayed with graffiti. The owners are holidaying in Queensland and have given written permission to use their car if we need to.”

“Cap, I can’t risk the time moving my family. I don’t want the trail to go cold.”

“Don’t argue Kendal, just do it.” Hughes waved them away.

On the corridor side of the door, Claire grabbed her partner’s arm.

“Tell me why you’re only focusing on Patrick? And why is it you seem so lax in wanting to find Tegan?”

“I’m desperate to find her. To uncover Patrick’s identity, I have to flush him out in a non-threatening way. Besides, when I find Patrick, I’ll find Tegan. The game has to finish. Claire, there’s not many souls I can trust. Not even Captain Hughes.”

“Sugar, you can trust me.”

He displayed a steady smile. “Thanks, partner.”

Claire opened the door and poked her head into the office.

“Excuse me, Captain Hughes. I’d be grateful if I can have today off. I’m still tired after the fire.”

“Yes, of course, you can, rest today, catch Patrick tomorrow. Kendal, the next time you want to pick on my clothing look at your reflection in the mirror and ask yourself. Why do I wear the same brown pants, white shirt, and black coat every day?”

Kendal faked a smile, digging the CD from his pocket.

“Partner before you go home, could you run the names of the band members through the computer? I have to take my family out to Aura Lake.”

“Claire, are you certain your boyfriend, Daniel Weakom, isn’t Patrick?” asked Hughes.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TEGAN SCREAMED at the thought of being burnt alive. She frantically pulled hard on the chain and stared at the exact place where the lit match had fallen. She stopped

struggling and walked to the bed. Staring at the smoldering match, she quickly realized the match had gone out.

“Patrick, you creep, this was all a game,” she hissed. Managing a slight smile, she sank onto the bed next to her breakfast and sobbed.

The smell wafting up from the food finally made her stop crying.

“Patrick, I live in hope you haven’t poisoned the food.”

Tegan sat watching the closed door while she ate.

“Milk’s a little warm,” she complained.

After swallowing the last mouthful of bacon and eggs, Tegan examined the chain which tethered her to the bed.

“A chain, no matter what colour, is only as strong as its weakest link. Dad, this gold-plated chain is stronger than the cast iron bed. I need suggestions on what to do?” She chuckled. “Now I’m talking to myself.”

Tegan began to study the almost barren room. There were polished floorboards under her feet and a small window she might be able to squeeze through if she could unlock the chain that was bolted to the cast iron bed. The only other idea of escape was through the single door.

“I wonder if the door is locked,” she whispered.

Tegan placed her hands under the cold metal bed frame and lifted. Quietly she started to drag it closer to the door. Each small step she made the bed banged back onto the floor. Her progress took on the speed of a snail.

“I hope Patrick can’t hear any noise,” she whispered.

Every few steps she froze to listen. Hearing nothing she’d repeat the performance. Again, the bed banged back onto the floor.

“A few more lifts and I’ll be at the door,” she mumbled.

As Tegan positioned herself for another lift, noise on the stairs made her wait.

The noise grew louder.

“Footsteps,” she whispered. “Patrick’s coming.”

Tegan hurried to the other end of the bed. She lifted and pulled. The bed moved only slightly. Again, she lifted, and again the bed banged. Her gains were painfully slow.

The footsteps stopped outside the door. A key slid into the lock, and the doorknob rattled.

“Too late to move the bed back to its original position,” Tegan moaned, diving for the floor. She slipped underneath the bed, dragging the chain.

A person wearing black stilettos strolled in. Tegan watched the slender calves, and the thin ankles move around the room. Twice the stilettos stopped at the bed.

Eventually, a pair of black closed in shoes was placed on the floor by long slender fingers. Each fingernail had been French polished.

The feet were pulled out of the stilettos and slipped into the closed in shoes. The stilettos were picked up, and the person walked back to the door. When the woman spoke, her voice sounded like a principle in charge of a school.

“Is anyone in here?”

Tegan didn’t move.

“If you are in this room you will save yourself a lot of trouble by telling me right now.” The woman hesitated long enough to sigh heavily. She walked out of the room, slamming the door shut in her wake.

“Friend or foe, it’s time to find out,” mumbled Tegan. She slid out from underneath the bed. “I’m here,” she yelled. “Please, don’t go.”

The woman's angry voice came through the door in a high-pitched muffle. "I knew someone was in the room. You are a thief."

"I'm not a thief. I was kidnapped, and chained to the bed," yelled Tegan.

"I do not believe you."

"Open the door, and you'll see."

There was a long pause then the woman talked again.

"What is your name?"

"Tegan," she said.

"You sound like a child."

"I am."

"If I open the door do you promise to sit and stay on the bed?"

"Yes." Tegan jumped onto the bed making the springs in the mattress squeak.

A key was inserted into the door lock and turned. The door slowly opened, and a lady's head poked through the narrow opening. For a long moment, the woman and Tegan stared at each other.

"It is okay little one. I will not hurt you. I heard noises and thought Patrick brought another dog home." The woman displayed a friendly smile. "Who in their right mind would chain a child to the bed?"

"Patrick."

The woman braced herself against the wall. "I did not hear your name through the door."

"I'm Tegan Kendal. What's yours?"

"Dr. Ashlee Clarke."

"It's good to meet you."

"What nice manners you have."

"Thank you."

"I told Patrick off for kidnapping you last night. I suggested he should set you free. He informed me of your imminent release."

"He obviously didn't listen."

"Footsteps, I hear footsteps. Patrick must be here."

"I didn't hear any footsteps. Dr. Clarke, I want to go home."

"Yes, of course, you do. I will go downstairs and square everything with Patrick. When I return in a few minutes, I will have the key to the padlock." She smiled and walked out, closing the door behind her.

Tegan sat on the bed listening to the doctor's footsteps fade. She listened to the silence for a long time. Eventually she heard muffled voices coming from somewhere downstairs. The mumblings became louder and louder before turning into a full-blown argument. Tegan again dragged the bed towards the unlocked door. By the time she twisted the door knob, the argument had sounded to be in full swing.

"I hope the door doesn't squeak," Tegan whispered.

When she opened the door, there was no squeak. The muffled voices quickly cleared.

Tegan grinned, gathered the chain into a neat pile, dropped to all fours and crawled out of her small prison-like room. The chain slowly unraveled making minimal noise as it slid across the polished floorboards. Lying prone on the floor, she could see downstairs. The doctor was standing in the kitchen doorway waving her arms around and yelling at someone. The tightened chain prevented Tegan from seeing the other person. She quickly glanced at her surroundings and found the doctor lived in a plain two-storey house. There was a scarce amount of furniture. A fake wood heater was against the lounge-room wall; an average size TV sat snug in an oak coloured wooden

unit and the silver framed glass coffee table was near the TV. In the middle of the table was a crystal vase full of red roses and several women magazines were neatly stacked in one corner. Tegan's survey of the house was interrupted by Patrick's angry voice.

"What did I tell you about kidnapping Kendal's daughter?"

"You said I shouldn't have," yelled Patrick.

Tegan pulled on the chain and craned her neck in an attempt to see more.

Disappointed, she let the chain go slack.

"Keep going?" yelled Dr. Clarke.

"You ordered me to set her free."

"Why did you not listen?"

"I didn't want to."

"You should listen to what I say."

"No. I've made up my mind I'm never going to listen to you again."

"You have no choice. You have to listen to me. How else can I keep covering for you?" questioned Doctor Clarke.

"Hey, never tell me what to do."

"My advice is for your own good. I want the girl gone. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Good. I will leave you to it. After you have done what I ask, come back for dinner, and I will cook your favourite meal, vegetable pie. Patrick, do not forget after I am gone get rid of the kid. Now escort me to the front door and see me out."

Tegan's eyes widened. She bit her bottom lip. Her face drained of colour. She hurriedly gathered the chain, crawling backwards into the small room. After closing the door, she marched to the head of the bed. In desperation, she lifted the bed up and towards her as she tried to walk backwards. The bed banged and scraped the floor. Again, Tegan lifted the bed, and again it banged and scraped. Beads of sweat broke out on her forehead from the exertion. She hesitated only momentarily when she heard Patrick groaning as he climbed the stairs.

The doorknob rattled then it turned. Patrick violently pushed the door open, wedging the doorknob into the plaster.

Tegan's shoulders sagged. She froze, dropped the bed and faced her warden.

"Aren't you an enterprising little girl," Patrick growled. "I lost count of how many times I heard you drag the bed and allowed it to bang on the floor."

"You have to let me go."

"Why? The rules say no."

"Dr. Clarke said for you to let me go."

"I'm not listening to her."

"She'll be upset."

"I don't care. You're a hostage in my game."

"What's the game called?"

Patrick stepped closer. "Chess; you're a pawn in my chess game."

Tegan squealed. She tried to get away by pulling hard on the chain.

"You can't run too far," laughed Patrick. He stepped forward towering over the girl. "You can't stop the inevitable."

"I thought we were playing Fire Games."

Patrick grabbed Tegan by the hair. "You're too clever for your own good. It's going to be a pleasure seeing the fire roaring towards you." He let her hair go and produced a key.

"You're freeing me?"

He displayed a sarcastic smirk. A gloved hand reached out and unlocked the padlock.

Tegan watched in silence. She even dug up a weak smile. "Thank you. I won't tell a soul about this place."

Patrick pulled a pink cloth from his pocket. Faster than lightning he shoved it under Tegan's nose. One breath and she had slumped unconscious onto the bed.

"Ether; what a medical break-through. Don't you worry, Doc, I'll get rid of the kid." Patrick relocked the padlock. He leaned close and whispered in Tegan's ear. "When I return, it'll be time to quench the fire's hunger."

CHAPTER EIGHT

KENDAL LEFT Claire hunched over a computer keyboard and marched towards the impound car-yard.

"Good morning Sir," called a twenty something-year-old man in blue overalls. I've just got off the phone from talking to Captain Hughes."

The moment the young man stepped out of the small office his runners crunched the pea stones.

"What did he have to say?"

Pointing at a car parked behind the gate, the young man began to chuckle.

"I thought Hughes was joking when he talked about this car. Hughes told me to tell you that you must accept the vehicle. He added, or else."

Kendal glared at the grinning man, snatched the keys from his hand and in silence walked a complete lap around the car shaking his head. Except for the graffiti, the car was perfect for its age. Green, pink and burnt orange swirls and a large black peace sign had been sprayed on every panel. Not to mention a 'Jesus loves you' sticker was firmly glued to the rear bumper. Kendal flung open the front driver's door, slid behind the wheel, turned the key and roared the engine. Driving out of the yard his mobile phone sounded.

"Captain, if this is you, I want to protest."

"Hey, this isn't your Captain."

"You?" spat Kendal.

"That's no way to talk to an old friend. I've called to let you know I've talked to your wife again this morning."

"Patrick, what have you told her?"

"If you're going to yell at me, I'll end this conversation, and you can find out for yourself."

"I'm sorry Patrick. Please inform me of what you said?"

"Now your blood pressure will be returning to normal, don't you feel a whole lot calmer?"

"No."

"Your wife has just finished packing a small suitcase. She is ready to leave."

Kendal slammed on the brakes and pulled the car into the gutter. The sudden jerk made the car stop in the shade of a Japanese maple growing close to the road.

"Tell me what you said?"

"I told her Tegan's safe for the moment. I also said she's asleep. The only mistake I made was I laughed. I don't like women screaming in my ear. They should be strong, confident, just like me."

"Anything else?" questioned Kendal.

"Your wife started the water works again."

"Why involve my wife and my kids? This game is between you and me."

"I thought it might add some spice to the game."

"You thought wrong."

"Coppa, I'm never wrong," jeered Patrick. "Do you hear me? I'm never wrong."

"Let Tegan go."

"No. I'm having fun."

"Are you really?"

"Yes. I'm excited to the bone. I'm visualizing you're driving home in an old station wagon with Graffiti sprayed on every panel. By the way, I agree about the car; it looks horrid. The Captain could've at least sent a limousine to pick you up."

"How do you know what sort of car I'm driving?"

"Don't interrupt me when I'm talking."

Kendal ignored the taunt and repeated the same question.

"I know all things. I even know what you're thinking. Hey, I reckon I'm psychic?"

Kendal shook his head and restrained his sarcastic answer. "What am I thinking?"

"You're thinking your wife's hysterical. She's cowering in a corner screaming and trembling watching me waving a gun at her head and shooting at the walls to scare her."

Kendal heard a bang followed by two more in quick succession. He slammed the gear stick into gear and pushed the accelerator pedal to its stop. The engine screamed. Smoke billowed from the rear tyres.

"You'll roar up the drive, stall the manual car, run and kick the front door in hoping to catch me."

Kendal steered the car into his court and replayed the previous night's act. He threw the gear stick into neutral and let the car roll towards his house. One hundred and nine feet from his drive he stopped the car and started running.

"Tell me more."

"Now now, Coppa, you do insist on knowing too much. What have I told you?"

"This is all a game. A game you invented."

"Correct. Come sit at the front of the class so all can see how clever you are."

Kendal sprinted past his brick letterbox. He reached the front door. Pushing his shoulders into the brickwork he pulled his gun while his left hand held his mobile phone in a death grip against his left ear. He could hear Margaret sobbing from inside the house. Exactly where she was he couldn't be sure.

"I believe you're close. I can smell your cheap deodorant. You ought to put a hand in your pocket and buy an expensive brand. Buy some good aftershave while you're at it." Patrick paused. "You've gone quiet on me."

"I'm here."

"I have a question," whispered Patrick.

"I'm listening."

Kendal pulled his house keys from his pocket. Silently he pushed the key into the front door lock.

"Have you ever heard what a reversing truck sounds like on the phone?"

"I can't say I have."

Patrick ended the call and slipped his mobile phone into his pocket.

Standing in front of the half-open-door Kendal counted five beeps coming from the phone. He shook his head and buried his mobile phone deep in his pocket.

"Just another stupid game," he mumbled.

A nosy neighbour stood watching the man in the black duffel coat push the door open. The moment the man saw Kendal's gun he disappeared behind closed curtains.

Kendal pointed his Smith and Wesson in the direction he thought Patrick might be. Instead, he found Margaret cowering in the corner exactly how the pyromaniac had reported. Kendal studied the room and his study.

"Patrick was never here!" stated Kendal.

Marg shook her head. "I was given a message over the phone."

Kendal gently took the phone from his wife's trembling hand. Helping her off the floor, he walked her to a chair. He knelt and patted her hand.

"Tell me everything. A good place to start is Tani's where-a-bouts."

Marg couldn't stop staring at the floor. Kendal gently lifted his wife's head so he could look into her eyes. Her pupils were darting back and forth. Tears were cascading over her cheeks.

"Where's Tani," he repeated quietly.

"I told her to hide under her bed until you got home."

Kendal exhaled a sigh of relief. "What is Patrick's message?"

"The next fire is going to be spectacular. Patrick reckons it will go down in history. You and all the other cops will remember the scene for years."

Kendal cradled his wife in his arms waiting for her trembling to subside. Marg buried her head in her hands. Trying to repeat the remainder of the message, her words were inaudible.

"It's okay," he said gently. "When you're ready the words will come."

Marg displayed a feeble smile. Locking her red eyes onto her husband's stare, she whispered the message.

"Our family will be dead."

Kendal repeated the five words out loud over and over. Marg used her hands to cover her ears. Unable to hold back her tears she burst out crying again.

"Sorry. I'm having trouble believing Patrick is a killer."

"I'm not lying," she sobbed. "I'm not."

"Of course, you're not. Patrick's getting worse. It's the single reason why I'm taking you and Tani to your mother's. Aura Lake is only an easy forty-minute drive from Melbourne. Everyone knows everyone else. You'll be safe there."

After finding Tani and inside an hour Kendal drove into the township of Aura Lake. Half a mile from the town center Kendal saw an elderly man sitting on an old rocking chair outside a small cottage surrounded by a white picket fence. His eyes were shut tight as he rocked back and forth, puffing on a thin cigar. Above his head floated a turban of grey smoke.

"Are we there yet?" asked Tani.

"We sure are Sweetie," reported her mother.

Kendal stopped the car long enough to let his daughter retrieve the mail from the letterbox. The moment she got back into the car he proceeded up the narrow drive, taking careful consideration of his mother-in-law's small plants lining the driveway.

'This place hasn't changed at all,' he thought. 'Same old rusty gate with the graveyard pattern welded in the middle, unpainted front steps and the missing spouting around the top floor. Yep, this was the place all right. No chance of forgetting this joint in a hurry.'

"Tani, don't break Grandma's plants," urged Marg.

“You don’t want to see her get angry,” added Kendal. “I have, and it’s not pretty. If you break a rose bush, it’s okay. They’re fair game. No matter what caused the breakage, say it was an accident. I’ll back you up all the way.”

“Alan!” shrieked Marg. “Mum loves those rose bushes. Besides, you know she lives alone. She’s done well to keep this place going these past two years since dad was admitted to the nursing home.”

“Maybe the old dear should sell and move to a unit in the city.”

“Mum and I have been through the idea many times. She won’t sell. She was born here; she wants to die here.”

“Thank heaven Patrick doesn’t know where this place is or she might have a hand getting into the next world sooner than later.”

“Alan, don’t agitate me. My nerves are already on edge.”

“I apologize,” he grumbled, raising his hands.

Marg kept up her chilled stare until she rang the front door bell. Hearing a faint voice calling from somewhere around the rear of the house Kendal and Marg went to investigate.

Kendal pushed hard against a one-metre tall cast iron gate. The rear of the house looked worse than the front. Every weatherboard covering the outside walls appeared to be rotting.

“Your father never was one for painting. This half of the house hasn’t seen paint in years. The paint he did use on the other half of the house must have been watered down something shocking,” announced Kendal.

Marg nodded. She slipped her hand around his hand. Her anger quickly melted. She looked down the solid red brick path towards the lake in time to see an old woman wearing a tatty old pink dressing gown tied at the front shuffling towards them. Her feet were planted in black knee-high gumboots. She was slowly strangling a bunch of wild yellow daffodils in her left hand.

“Hello mum,” Marg yelled.

The old woman appeared not to hear.

“I’ll have to wait. When she’s closer, I’ll call again. She’s a little deaf.”

“And senile,” added Kendal.

His wife’s chilled stare returned as they walked down the path to meet the old woman.

Kendal returned his attention back to the house. He shook his head. “What I could do to this place. The first thing he’d do is to pull out all the bloody rose bushes. Second, I’d rip off all the creeping vines attached to the walls, replace all the weatherboards and spread an extra thick layer of paint.”

Kendal was so engrossed in his imaginary renovations he didn’t hear the old woman sneaking up behind him.

“Do you still like the view of the lake?” she yelled in his ear.

“Yes, I do,” replied Kendal. He hid the fact she managed to get the jump on him.

“Would you like some tea and scones?”

“Sounds wonderful to me,” he said over the shrill of his mobile phone. “I’ll meet you two ladies inside the house, in a few minutes. “I’m hoping the person phoning is Captain Hughes. I could use some good news about Teagan.” Watching the two ladies watching him he grabbed his mobile phone from his pocket. “Hello.”

“It’s nice to hear your voice again. Did you miss me?”

“Patrick,” Kendal spat.

“You sound surprised. In fact, I’ve missed our little chats. I’ve called to let you know I’m not waiting for another month to burn the next house.”

"I don't suppose you will inform me of the address?"

"I'm not at liberty to say."

Inwardly Kendal could see Patrick's smirk. The pyromaniac was slowly wearing him down. He needed a breakthrough, and fast. "Let Tegan go," he said.

"I'll let you in on a secret. The kid will be reunited with you real soon."

"Will she be alive?"

Silence came through the phone. Holding his mobile phone to his ear, Kendal paced the ground in circles. Eventually, he talked.

"Patrick, are you listening?"

"Yes."

"Answer my question."

"It depends if you'll do exactly as I say?"

"What's on your mind?"

"I want you to take your new partner out for dinner."

"Why?"

"I want you to."

"What will happen if I refuse?"

"Do you want your daughter to be delivered whole or in very small pieces?"

"What assurance do I have Tegan will stay alive?"

"Do it and don't tell your partner. The dinner will be at the closest Chinese restaurant to Police Headquarters. Understand?"

"Patrick, I've come to a decision."

"Hey, I'm hanging. I can't wait to hear what's on your mind."

Kendal rolled his eyes. He closed the phone and dropped it back into his pocket.

CHAPTER NINE

KENDAL FELT weak at the knees. He stumbled towards a garden seat built for two. Instead of sitting he drummed the back of the seat wondering if he'd done the right thing by hanging up. For several heartbeats, he doubted how well he knew Patrick. After all, he was psychotic to the bone and liable to do anything. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Marg still watching him. Resisting the urge to vomit he looked away.

"Come on Patrick," he mumbled. "Ring me back. I know you want to."

Kendal distracted his thoughts by picking at the loose paint on the seat. The wooden slats and cast-iron frame looked older than the house. Marg's father had the seat positioned under a large oak tree when she was fourteen. The seat faced the house much to his wife's disgust. Marg helped her mother rearrange it to face four large one-hundred-year-old grape vines. An imaginative new world was conjured up in the brain of Marg's father. He used to sit on the seat under the old tree all day every day studying the growing grapes and watching the panoramic view of the lake, allowing dementia to have its way. Two years ago, he was forced to move into the Garden Lodge, a home for the elderly. Marg's mum was going down the same path. She unknowingly skipped entire meals then insisted she'd eaten. It was a constant worry for her daughter.

Kendal decided to sit on the seat to reminisce about his life before he married Marg. He lifted his arm and slid his hand along the top wooden slat. This spot was the exact place where he and Marg first kissed. He smirked. Mr. Minx was the name of Marg's

tortoise coloured cat. It didn't like strangers. While he and Marg kissed, it hissed and dug its claws into his ankle. He kicked the cat away and watched it climb the tree. Marg was forever grateful when he rescued the cat. Three weeks later he buried it.

Their engagement party happened to be a small affair. Claire Ambroso and a few close friends attended. Their wedding took place next to the seat. Detective Philips was sixteen then. He was the son of his first partner, Ray Philips. Tragically Ray died in their first shootout two weeks after Kendal graduated. Ray had arrived at work drunk. His reaction time was too slow. He died at the scene of the armed robbery.

Two weeks later Kendal was given his first assignment to see if he could cope on his own. He'd worked solo ever since.

On the far side of the lake, sunlight glistening off glass caught Kendal's attention. Unblinking, he steadied his gaze on where the flash occurred. He saw a figure standing next to an early model white van. The person was looking directly at him through binoculars. The hair on the back of Kendal's neck prickled. He had a bad feeling he might be looking straight at Patrick.

The figure kept the binoculars trained on the seat. If the person happened to be Patrick, it was a standoff. To reach the other side of the lake before the figure disappeared was impossible. Kendal felt helpless.

To walk the perimeter of the lake took a shade less than an hour. Joggers, bike riders and the like used the shared path. Kendal caught a glimpse of a pushbike rider approaching from the left where the trees thinned. He sprinted through the scrub towards the red brick path to cut him off. He took the right fork when the path split.

"Hey you, on the bike," Kendal yelled.

The undulating narrow path through the trees didn't appear to be long however low rainfall in the area had seen a considerable drop in the water level, taking the lake further away from the two-seater bench. The old woman's private jetty was the only one remaining in the water. Judging by the number of boys fishing, it looked to be the most popular place on the lake.

Kendal was thankful the boat hire shed obscured his actions as he pounced on the bike. Grabbing the handlebars, he forced both bike and rider to fall into the scrub.

The mid-teen rider, wearing a yellow and black striped riding outfit yelled at the man standing over him.

"What's your problem? If you wanna pinch me bike, I'll be glad to give ya a knuckle sandwich." Jumping to his feet, the lad clenched his fists.

Kendal flashed his police badge in the boy's face.

"I done nothin' wrong, Coppa."

"How long does it take you to lap the lake?"

"Why should I tell ya?"

"I'll give you twenty dollars if you do."

The boy relaxed his fists. His red coloured cheeks faded.

"I haven't broken one law in three years; I'm not about to start now. I can do it in twelve-minutes flat," he boasted.

"Can you do me a favour?"

"Maybe," the lad replied.

Kendal handed the lad a twenty dollar note.

"I want you to remember the number plate of a white van parked on the other side of the lake. If you can describe the person driving the van, there's an extra twenty."

"How do you know I won't piss off?"

"You look like an intelligent boy. If you return in ten minutes, I'll give you a bonus of another twenty dollars."

The young bloke checked his watch, grinning with confidence.

Kendal stood watching the lad ride at speed past an old woman walking her dog. He grinned at the old dear as she stood shaking her fist in a swirling cloud of leaves. The boy returned after thirteen minutes looking a little disappointed.

"Did you remember the number plate?"

"By the time, I got to the van it was moving too fast. I chased it for as long as I could. I have to report the van didn't have number plates. Before you start yelling at me, I saw a sticker. It read, 'save the elephants.'"

Kendal stared directly at the boy, shook his head and started to walk back towards the house.

"What about me money?" called the lad.

"You were late getting back. I told you ten minutes."

"Arsehole," yelled the boy shaking his fist.

Hearing his mobile phone ringing, Kendal picked up his walking pace. Lifting the phone to his ear, his voice sounded void of all anxiety.

"Yes, Patrick."

"How did you know it was me?"

"I've been expecting your call."

"You shouldn't have upset the boy. He's devastated."

"How did you know about the lad?"

"I'd been watching you, watching me. Isn't this game of cat and mouse exciting? How does it feel to know you could almost see me and you couldn't do anything about it?"

Kendal knew he needed to change tactics to force Patrick to lower his guard. "We're sitting at a different table. We're playing my game now."

"It doesn't matter whose game it is; you'll get what's coming and soon," growled Patrick.

"Bring it on. Give my game your best shot. You're going down."

"At last, a worthy challenge. What will the stakes be?"

"Let Tegan go. Let her go, and you can have me."

The phone went quiet. In the silence, a bird squawked as it landed and sat on a branch in a nearby tree. Kendal could feel his blood pressure climbing.

"What do you say, Patrick?" Kendal stopped walking and stared at nothing in particular.

"I'm willing to play your game only if I keep the girl and you keep the dinner date."

Kendal screamed inwardly. Patrick still had the upper hand. Somehow Kendal needed to think of a plan to force the pyromaniac into checkmate.

"Do you remember the club named Miss Finns? Does it hold vivid memories of long ago?" questioned Patrick.

"Is this a clue or another game?"

"Call it what you like."

"I haven't been there in years."

"Remember the fight between you and your father?"

"The incident happened a long time ago."

"Think carefully about the fight. I was there. The fight is the reason why I hate you. I've been watching and waiting for the right time."

"The right time for what?" Kendal probed.

"Pure unadulterated revenge," spat Patrick.

"Revenge is an old game. I thought you might be different?"

"You thought wrong. You changed the rules. We're playing your game now."

"It doesn't seem like it," chided Kendal.

"Shut up Coppia. It's no coincidence you've been given a chance to bring me down. It's been strategic moves on my part. You're mine. All mine. I'll have my revenge sooner than you think."

"Join the queue." Kendal exhaled, pressed end on his mobile phone, dropped it into his pocket and walked the last thirty feet to the house. Entering the kitchen, he announced cheerfully. "I'm here."

"How can you be cheerful? I'm going out of my mind with worry," growled Marg.

Kendal kissed his wife and grinned at his mother-in-law. His new-found confidence just happened to be strengthening.

"Patrick won't let Tegan die. He wants a show down to satisfy his anger."

"I don't understand."

"He's hell-bent on revenge."

"Why?" Marg questioned. She flopped onto the closest seat, staring up at her husband.

"Apparently something happened when my father and I were fighting in the strip club named Miss Finns."

"When you were seventeen?"

Kendal nodded. He coaxed Marg to a standing position.

"I promise Tegan will be fine."

"How can you promise Tegan will be okay?"

"It's a feeling, a gut instinct. I believe Patrick only wants me to die. Not the kids or you."

"I don't want to lose you either," sobbed Marg.

"You won't lose any of us." Kendal wiped the tears from his wife's eyes. Reeling her in closer, he kissed her. "I have to leave soon. Let's change the subject. Tell me, what were you two talking about? Did I miss anything?"

Marg flashed a half-hearted smile.

"I suggested to mum she should have a fire extinguisher in the kitchen."

"I've already mentioned not to fuss," barked the old woman. "I'd have no idea how to use one. Besides, I don't need to start a fire to keep me warm; I have my little radiator you bought me last winter."

"A fire extinguisher will put out a fire," explained Kendal, interrupting.

"Fire, what fire? Oh dear, I have to find Mr. Minx. He's probably up the plum tree chasing the birds again."

"Mum, settle, the cat died years ago," insisted Marg, gently. "And there isn't a fire. What would you say if I bought you a fire blanket instead?"

"A green woolen blanket sounds wonderful dear."

Kendal grinned at a sudden vision of seeing the old woman wrapped in a fire blanket sitting in front of the small radiator trying to keep her feet warm and patting a ghost cat.

"When Marg buys you the fire blanket you can hang it on this hook next to the stove." Kendal noted the carnations and wildflowers, were growing out the top of the antique stove. Seeing a broken tile under one of the stove's cast iron feet he squatted to have a closer look. "Another job I'll have to do," he grumbled.

"I'm not crazy Alan Kendal," blurted the old woman. "I stopped using the old cast iron stove years ago. I use an electric stove now."

"You might be old, but you know what you want, and when you've set your mind on something, nothing can change it."

The old woman shook her fist at him. "Not even you."

They dug into a lunch of egg and salad in Ciabatta rolls. Marg's family never settled for anything less than the best.

'One-hundred-percent Italian and all are great cooks,' Kendal thought inwardly.

He was fourteen when he met Marg. In twenty-four hours, he was introduced to Italian cooking. He had often mentioned to Marg her mother's cooking tasted superb. He also made her promise never to tell her. If she did, he'd deny every word. He didn't want to give the woman a big head.

After lunch, Marg found an old scrapbook full of photos. For several moments, Kendal stared at a picture of his scumbag father. He exhaled heavily and faced the old woman.

"Is it still okay if Marg and Tani stay for a few days?"

"Certainly," she replied.

"They won't put you out too much?"

"No."

The old woman waited for Marg to leave the room before making her move. She leaned forward and forced her head and shoulders over the table.

"You're lucky I'm short Alan James Kendal. If I were any taller, I'd grab you by the collar and make you talk."

"About what?" he asked, pushing his back deeper against the seat.

"All about this Patrick character. Is he dangerous?"

"I can't say."

The old woman raised an eyebrow. The second time she asked the same question she used a stronger yet raspy tone of voice.

"You ought to give up the fags." Kendal Leaned forward to look the old woman in the eyes. "You should be in the interview room when we bring in a suspect. He'd confess in no time."

The old woman shrunk back, her wrinkled skin covering her throat moved violently as she swallowed. "What about my grand-daughter?"

Kendal dropped eye contact and blinked a tear away. "I'm doing my best. Don't worry; I'll have Tegan home safe and soon. Trust me when I say I'll have Patrick locked away just as quick."

The old woman slumped back in her chair.

Kendal swallowed the last of his coffee. when Marg walked into the room he switched his attention on her.

"I have to leave. I'll call you at seven each evening. If you see your father, give him my regards. I'll talk to the local sheriff to arrange a Constable to protect you, Tani and your mum."

"Thanks," said Marg. "I'll feel more at ease if someone is guarding the house."

"I've been thinking about the fist fight my old man and I had in the strip club. One of the bouncers called himself Chuck. I think he and Patrick might be the same person."

"If nothing comes of the information at least it's a step in the right direction," said Marg. "Finally, you might be getting closer to finding Tegan and Patrick."

Kendal completed a last minute, check of the grounds and walked to his car. At the wave of his hand, Marg, Tani, and the old woman watched the tail lights disappear down the drive. When the car's engine faded, the trio walked back indoors, checked the windows and locked the doors.

CHAPTER TEN

KENDAL DROVE away from Aura Lake and went straight to Claire Ambroso's apartment. His thoughts of Tegan were strong. The clock was ticking. He must arrest Patrick sooner than possible. He certainly detested the idea of having to follow orders from the psychotic arsonist.

Kendal allowed his mind a five-minute breather by calling Police Headquarters. He grinned at the way Captain Hughes described how a local Constable, Roy Adams from Aura Lake had reacted to the order he must watch the house and make sure Marg, her mother, and Tani remained safe.

"Adams, you have five minutes to get your arse up off the chair it's buried in and be at the stakeout. Adams, do you hear me? Five minutes," ordered the local Sergeant.

When the Altona exit came into view, Kendal steered the multi coloured wagon off the freeway. He turned into Lochiel Drive and parked in the visitor's carpark.

Claire's apartment, number seven, was on the second floor in a group of twelve. Every apartment had a great view of Port Phillip Bay and were of modern design. Kendal stood outside the apartment, rapping his knuckles against the solid wooden door. A miniature brown yappy dog named Choco started yelping from behind the window of apartment nine. Kendal's eyes narrowed when he remembered the last time he and the dog stared at each other. The dog lunged and tried to bite his ankle. It sprinted away the moment he tried to kick it off the balcony.

"I hate small dogs," Kendal mumbled. "If you are going to own a dog, buy a Doberman. At least they look mean."

He rapped his knuckles on Claire's door for the second time. Glancing down at the grassed barbecue area he saw an old couple pointing at him.

Someone's muffled voice from inside the apartment was silenced. The slow shuffle of feet on the carpet also ceased.

Instinct took over. Kendal took a wide step to the right. He scraped his back against the solid brick wall and pushed his right hand under his open coat, slipping his fingers around the revolver sitting comfortably in his shoulder holster. He extracted the gun, moved the safety switch to the off position and reached for his police badge.

Kendal stood motionless listening for any more noise coming from inside the apartment. He flashed his badge at the door's round eyepiece. He was about to further announce his presence by yelling, 'Police, open up,' when he heard a moan. The door chain rattled and hung loose. The lock clicked. He pushed the door open a tad.

"Claire, are you alone?"

"No, my husband's asleep. Sugar, you look like a cop, come in, you'll scare the neighbours."

Kendal frowned. He stepped into the apartment, sliding his gun back into his shoulder holster.

"I am a cop, and you don't have a husband." He shut the door, blocking out the prying eyes of the old dears who were now standing near the barbecue area staring up at him.

Claire's voice came from the bedroom at the end of the hall.

"I know I don't have a husband, neither do the neighbours. I want to keep the secret from them. If they ever find out, they'll set me up on a blind date after blind date. I've seen their infinite list of male names, phone numbers and photos."

Claire walked out of the bedroom and straight at Kendal wearing a mischievous grin. "I hope you understand where I'm coming from?"

"It's your life," said Kendal. He sent her a reproving look. "Do you want to go and put on some clothes?"

Claire boasted a sheepish grin and battered her long black eyelashes. To Kendal, she belonged on the catwalk instead of catching criminals. She stood in front of him like a schoolgirl caught in a boy's bedroom by his parents wearing only a man's business shirt.

"Detective, I do believe you're blushing," giggled Claire.

"No, I'm not."

She reached up and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Yes, you are Sugar. I've been hitting on you since school, and I know when you're uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable? Me? Never!" he groaned.

Claire puckered her lips and swept them close to his.

"I confess. I'm uncomfortable."

"I knew it." Claire turned her back and waltzed along the hallway to the bedroom.

"You're very joyful today," Kendal called, shaking his head.

"Knowing we're partners has put me in a good mood. Sugar, make yourself comfortable. I won't be a minute."

Kendal knew of Claire's pendulum mood swings. Nice one day, intolerable the next. Going through a difficult case such as this one took up all his thinking. What was left he devoted to his wife and kids. He wasn't against a female partner he just preferred to work alone. He didn't want the added responsibility of another partner's death on his conscience. Then there was the small matter of her secret. He knew in time it will show its ugly face.

He slowly walked around the two-bedroom apartment studying its new look. He wandered into the kitchen and spied an opened envelope on the bench. It was addressed to Claire and was sent from an insurance company.

Kendal deliberately picked it up and studied it longer than he should have. The contents of the envelope were missing. He twisted the envelope by using his fingertips hoping to discover the name of the insurance company. Claire had obviously disposed of the name. Hearing footsteps, entering the lounge-room, he placed the envelope back on the bench and walked under the kitchen arch displaying an innocent expression. Claire had replaced the business shirt with tight black leather pants and a pale blue T-shirt. The runners she carried in her hand matched the colour of her French cap.

"Are Margaret and Tani safe?" she asked, slipping her arm around his waist.

Kendal quickly pulled away. "Claire, I'm married."

"When has that stopped me?" She giggled and walked towards the kitchen.

"Coffee?" she called.

"A coffee sounds great. I've dropped my family up at Aura Lake. They'll be safe there." He reached for the TV remote and made himself comfortable in a large bean bag near the window. He checked his watch and started to surf the TV stations for something to watch. Finding nothing interesting, he switched the TV off. "I like what you've done to the apartment. You've been busy on your two weeks off. Where's all the old furniture?"

Claire placed two coffee mugs on a small conservative table and jumped onto a large beanbag.

“My best friend Fiona and I had a garage sale. I sold the couch, bed, and all my junk. I finished painting the walls the peach colour last week. I lashed out and bought myself a new second-hand TV from Fiona, four bean bags, and the glass coffee table.”

“Is that the reason why you were at the burning house?”

“It happened to be an easy babysitting job. Fifty tax-free bucks would’ve paid off my gas bill. I’d never say no if someone sent me a big fat cheque in the mail.”

Kendal flicked a cursory frown her way.

“Sugar, are you okay?”

“Sorry, I was thinking about Tegan,” he lied. Hearing his mobile phone sound, he answered it before the second ring.

“Did you miss me?”

“Patrick!” Kendal hissed.

“Hey, you’re becoming a good guess. Don’t forget the date. I thought you might want to know the news is talking about me on the TV right now.”

The phone went dead.

Kendal switched on the TV. He settled his stare on a reporter interviewing Captain Hughes.

“What are the police doing to keep the public safe from this firebug?” the anchorman asked.

“We’re doing all we can. I’ve assigned an additional detective to the case. The team of top detectives is well on their way to catching the suspect.”

“What time frame are you looking at before an arrest?”

The Captain looked annoyed at having to explain details of the case. He folded his arms and faked a smile. “I’ve no further comment at this time.”

“What time frame?” the anchorman asked again. “You have to give the public some hope.”

“The only information I’ll share is; an arrest is imminent. Good day.”

The camera played Captain Hughes re-entering Police Headquarters. There was a seven-second summary then the next news bracket began. Kendal switched off the TV as his mobile phone sounded.

“If Patrick’s calling, keep him talking,” suggested Claire.

Kendal answered the mobile phone on the fourth ring. He switched it to the loudspeaker. Claire listened intently to the conversation.

“What did you think?” asked Patrick. “Personally, I loved the way Captain Hughes tried to convince the anchorman an arrest was imminent? I love the word, imminent.”

“You’ll be arrested and soon. You’re one mistake will see you in the nut house for the remainder of your natural life.”

“You can’t catch me. I’m too good. You have no idea of my identity or where I am. For all you know I could be sitting next to you listening in on our private conversation.”

Kendal looked at Claire. She stared back and shrugged.

“I don’t mean to be rude, how’s the new partner? Hi, Claire, you sound sweet.”

“Hello, Patrick.”

“Did you ring to gloat about something?” Kendal asked.

For several seconds, Patrick’s sigh marred the phone line.

In the short pause, Claire’s eyes sparkled.

“Did I catch you in bed?”

“What’s wrong?” asked Kendal. “Is there someone close? Someone who might expose you for what you are?”

Both detectives heard a click. For nearly a minute they stared at the mobile phone willing for Patrick to call back. Kendal closed his phone and pushed it deep into his pocket.

“Robbed,” growled Claire, leaping from the beanbag. The pitch in her voice sounded full of excitement. “You didn’t hear the noise?”

“No, what did you hear?”

“Someone knocked on a door just before the phone went dead.”

Kendal’s shoulders slumped. “Not much to go on. I need a break to catch the scumbag and find my daughter. The Captain was telling tales to the anchorman to shut him up.”

He swallowed the remaining mouthful of coffee, walking over to the window. He stared at the outside world, displaying a distant look.

“What are you thinking?”

“I’m wondering how long little Tacca will be alive? Time is running out.” He caught Claire’s gaze. “Somehow Patrick knows my every move.”

“Tegan will be fine. I bet she has discovered a way to escape and is walking home right now.”

“I hope so,” he mumbled. “Patrick has given a clear warning of another house fire. The big finale. The phone call was another piece of the giant jigsaw puzzle. I have to discover his identity before it’s too late. I also promised Marg, Tegan would return home safe.”

“It’s a big promise.”

Claire stood and walked into the kitchen to refill the two coffee mugs. Returning to the lounge room, she grabbed the biscuit barrel and glanced at the envelope on the kitchen bench. She placed both mugs on the coffee table and sat looking at Kendal.

“Nice table,” he commented in a distracted voice.

“Ten bucks at the local OPP shop. They were asking for thirty dollars. As if luck was on my side the man who runs the shop chipped the corner on my car’s tow bar. I did offer him my help to carry the table. He refused. He probably thought I was a weak female.”

“You weak, I don’t think so.” Kendal chuckled. “The man who wins your heart will be a lucky bloke.”

“Thanks, Sugar. You should’ve married me.”

“You know I’ll always be faithful to Marg.”

“Are you positive?”

Kendal flicked Claire a cursory glance as he swiped the coffee mug from off the glass top table.

“The look you just sent me is the very reason why I tease you endlessly.” She giggled and made herself more comfortable in the black coloured beanbag. “Patrick’s a cop,” she blurted.

“Careful, I nearly spilt my coffee.”

Kendal slammed the mug back onto the coffee table and wiped the hot liquid from the back of his hand. He yearned to see Patrick in checkmate in the not too distant future more than anyone. To accomplish the feat, he needed to discover enough proof against the pyromaniac, so when he got to court, it will be an easy win for the police. To react on impulse was not in his logic. Claire had always been the one to shoot first and ask questions later.

“He has to be,” Claire continued.

“Why do you think that?”

“All the facts fit.”

Kendal shook his head. He leaned forward to pick up a short length of cotton off the floor. He balled it between his fingers. "I disagree. The clues don't add up."

"Yes, they do. How else could Patrick know about us? Where you we? What you're doing at any one time?"

"I don't have an answer to your questions. I just can't believe a cop would play games like this. Maybe Weakom is Patrick?"

"Sugar, Daniel Weakom isn't Patrick, and this isn't a game."

"You're wrong." Kendal reached for and bit a cream biscuit in half. "To Patrick, it's all a game."

"If you think I'm wrong I'd love to hear your thoughts?"

"I don't want to table my ideas too soon," replied Kendal, shrugging a shoulder.

"I insist. If you don't inform me, I'll tell Marg we slept together."

"That's entrapment, besides she'd never believe you," snarled Kendal, choking on the biscuit.

"Are you certain?" she taunted.

Claire giggled at seeing his frown and the way he quickly changed the subject.

"Did you discover anything new from the names on the CD?"

"They're all clean. Not one name from the band 'Split Theory' has a criminal record. Although a Phil Mason had been questioned at length about a house fire, he was allegedly at just before the house was burnt to the ground when he was a kid."

Kendal felt genuinely relieved the subject was changed.

"Have you thought about my proposal?"

"You're talking blackmail again. I thought the subject was closed."

Claire's eyebrows shot up. "Shall I call Marg?"

"Okay, you win. You'll need a pen and paper to write down my ideas."

"I'll be right back. I can't wait to hear your views." Claire skipped off into the kitchen. "Sugar, do you want to stay for dinner. I'm cooking."

"I've tasted your cooking. How about we eat out? I know a lovely restaurant not far from Police Headquarters."

"Sounds like an idea too good to pass up."

While Claire stared out the kitchen window patting an escaping black curl, Kendal's mobile phone sounded. This time, he answered it on the first ring.

"Kendal, get over to Claire's apartment and bring her up to speed on Patrick."

"Yes, Cap Hughes, already done."

"Good. The APB on Tegan was started. All available police are on the lookout for the white van you called in this morning. We've had a couple of sightings in the South-Eastern suburbs. We're searching the area as we speak. This case will soon be wrapped up."

"Thanks, Cap."

"Oh, and Kendal, stop calling me Cap."

"Right Cap." He waited for the usual verbal diarrhea. Instead, he heard a click.

For several moments, Claire watched the driver of a white van watching her. He didn't do anything, in particular, he just sat behind the steering wheel watching her standing at the kitchen window.

"Arsehole pervert," she eventually yelled.

The van's engine started, backfired, and the vehicle was slowly driven along the road.

"Sugar, I think the white van we chased this morning was the same one that was parked opposite my window."

Kendal hurled himself off the beanbag and sprinted for the front door.

"Which way did it go?" he yelled.

"North towards the beach," replied Claire, sprinting past him.

For nearly a minute the pair ran along Lochiel Street. Kendal, sweating in his thick black coat, slowed to a walk. Leaning against an old large tree, he doubled over. His breathing sounded laborious.

"Don't keel over on me, Sugar."

"I'm okay." Kendal straightened, took a deep breath and stared up the road.

"The van's gone."

This time around Kendal reluctantly agreed. The two detectives turned simultaneously. Walking back to Claire's apartment Kendal scanned every side street in the hope of seeing the van.

"Did you see the driver?" he asked.

"No, only a tall shadow. The head nearly touched the roof of the van."

The elderly couples from apartments one and two looked up from watching the barbeque and smiled as the two detectives returned.

"Did you have a nice afternoon jog?" asked the elderly male cook. He started to entertain the group by his infatuation of using his barbeque tongs as castanets.

"No. I'm Detective Kendal, Melbourne homicide."

Claire stood in silence next to her partner.

One of the old women slowly stood. Reaching out she shook his hand.

"I live in apartment number one. These two blow-ins are long time neighbours from apartment two, Henrietta and Daryl. The cook's my husband, George, and I'm Mavis. Daryl and George met the day they enlisted in the Navy fifty years ago. They've been friends ever since."

Kendal nodded to each one in turn. Daryl was acting like a lifeguard for the sausages. His sleeves were rolled up revealing a large anchor tattoo on each arm. George was wearing an 80th birthday badge on his jumper.

"Happy birthday," sang Claire.

George replied by doubling his efforts to make a louder noise using his improvised castanets.

"Did anyone see a van in the last ten minutes?" asked Kendal.

George stopped his infernal clanging of the barbeque tongs to look at Kendal.

"What colour was the van?"

"White," Claire answered.

"Yes, we did," squealed Henrietta and Mavis.

"I didn't," said George, picking up a long fork and pricking each of the ten dehydrated sausages.

"Yes, you did," scolded Mavis.

"No, I didn't," corrected George.

"George!" exclaimed Mavis, displaying a frown.

"If Mavis said I saw the van, then I did. After all, she's my wife."

Kendal shook his head and extracted a small notepad and pen from his coat pocket.

"Can anyone tell me what the driver looked like?"

The four elderly residents shook their heads.

"What about the van's number plate?"

"The van had no number plates," reported Daryl.

"No, no plates," echoed George.

"See, you did spot the van," yelled Mavis.

"Yes, dear."

"Thank you," said Kendal. "You've been most helpful."

He buried his notepad and pen, extracted his mobile phone and tapped the numbers panel for Police Headquarters. "Susie, Kendal here. The white van everyone is searching for was last seen near Altona beach."

"Constable Rookie Alderson to you," she yelled through the phone.

"Sure Susie, whatever you say. Give the following message to Captain Hughes. Four elderly people saw a white van outside Claire Ambroso's apartment. The address is number seven, apartment one and two, Lochiel Drive, Altona."

"Since when have you started calling cops by their first name," hissed RA. "You're such an intolerable person."

"Don't say something you might regret."

"I'll give the right person the message," she advised.

Kendal heard the phone slammed in its cradle before he could say thank you.

"Would you two like to stay for dinner?" asked Mavis. "The burnt sausages will taste okay if you smother them in tomato sauce."

Kendal cringed at the thought of eating burnt sausages drowned in tomato sauce. "We'll pass," he said bluntly. "I've made a reservation for us at a restaurant."

"You have?" quizzed Claire, sounding surprised.

"We haven't seen each other in months. You understand?"

"Of course, we understand," said George. "It's always good to catch up with family."

"Family?" repeated Mavis, frowning.

"I'm adopted," explained Claire.

"That explains many things," mumbled Henrietta.

Kendal bid the four residents a polite goodbye and walked off.

"Excuse me, Claire," said Mavis, shuffling up. "I don't mean to pry; I asked George to shut your door when you went for a jog. He said he saw a gun inside your apartment and you left your keys on the coffee table."

"The revolver is for safety. A woman can't be too careful. Please tell me he didn't lock my door?"

The old dear placed both hands over her heart. "Yes, he did."

"Don't worry about the locked door Mavis, I have a spare key," advised Kendal.

"When did I give you a key?" asked Claire.

"Last year when I arrived from America," replied Kendal.

"Good, I'd hate to miss out on a dinner paid for by my brother."

"I thought we'd go Dutch and pool our money."

"Isn't the person being asked out supposed to have a free meal?"

Kendal grinned. In a moment, it vanished.

"Not forgetting to add I can't wait to see how you'll open my front door using your spare key."

The two detectives bid the group farewell and walked to Claire's front door.

"Maybe you and Rookie Alderson should have a talk. She's so moody."

"Sugar, you don't talk nicely to her. Calling her Susie or RA isn't a good start to making her like you."

"I don't want to blow my supposed, 'lax cover.'"

"Be careful; she's only been a cop for three months. She doesn't know you yet. She could have you up for harassment. Now explain all about the fictitious spare key you reckon is in your pocket."

Kendal leaned on the door and whisked two narrow steel tubes from his wallet.

"Little Mike showed me this trick."

They heard a click and opened the door. Kendal puffed out his chest and turned to the foursome watching from below. He flashed them a quick smile and a quicker wave. "Sugar, you'll have to teach me the illegal trick."
"One day."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A FIFTEEN-year-old honey blonde Aussie girl brought the evening meal. Uncommon Kendal thought. He tried to strike up an off the cuff conversation.

"You must be new here?"

The two detectives were sitting in the Chinese restaurant a short two-minute drive from Police Headquarters.

"Yes, Sir, first day on the job. I'm helping me mum out by paying the bills 'cause my stupid father nicked off two weeks ago and left us no money. It's me and my mum now." Her lips drooped down at their ends. "I apologize for sounding rude to you and ya Mrs. Please, don't tell the boss."

"Your secret is safe," whispered Claire, smiling.

Kendal raised his hands. "This woman isn't my wife."

After the girl had slapped both plates onto the table, she glared at Kendal.

"Typical. You're the same as my old man. Wife and kids at home watching TV waiting for their father to come home and here you are having a good time. I hope you and ya mistress enjoy your meal."

The girl turned on her toes and marched off towards the kitchen.

"I'm speechless," mumbled Kendal.

"Who would want to have kids?" Claire flashed her partner a shocked look. "Sugar, I didn't mean my statement to sound the way it did. Sorry."

"No offense taken. Let's eat."

While Kendal ate fried rice and lemon chicken he looked around the small restaurant counting ten occupied seats out of fifty wondering why Patrick wanted him in the restaurant. Thoughts of how scared Tegan must be, flashed into his brain. He saw a girl wearing the same school uniform Tegan wore march past the window. He jumped to his feet and set himself to run. Noticing she had long blonde hair and not black, he again sat and pushed his empty plate into the center of the table. Reaching for the bowl containing three king prawns his stare remained on the front door.

The young waitress walked past their table several times. On each pass, she glared wide-eyed at the two detectives.

"Quiet night," mentioned Claire.

Kendal knew she was only striking up a two-bit conversation. He nodded and beckoned the young waitress to his table.

The girl marched over displaying a frown. "What?"

"I want you to be pleasant."

"I don't have to."

"This scene isn't what you think."

Claire buried her head behind the menu card.

Folding her arms, the girl snorted. "Spare me the sarcasm. I've heard all the excuses. I don't have to be a genius to know what's going on here. I can see one

middle-aged white man sitting next to a young attractive woman he met overseas. What's to understand?"

Claire slapped the menu card on the table and looked directly at the girl.

"I'm of Italian descent. I'll have you know I was born in Australia."

Kendal fished a small photo of his daughter from his pocket and thrust it at the girl standing over him. "Have you seen this girl?"

"Why would I tell you?" the young girl growled. She unfolded her arms and pushed her hands onto her hips. "She's just another female you're trying to lure. My reckoning is you want them young. I should call the cops you pervert." The girl switched her attention to Claire. "Do you want my advice?"

"Not really. The way you're acting I know I'm going to cop it."

"If I were you I'd leave while you still have a chance."

"The girl in the photo is my daughter," advised Kendal. Fishing for his police badge his long black coat flopped open revealing his gun sitting in its shoulder holster.

The girl stared bug-eyed. "You want to find her, to bump her off."

Kendal stood, towering over the girl.

"Stay back," she yelled, "I have a black belt in Karate."

"Yeah, so have I." Flashing his police badge, he grinned at the shocked expression on the girl's face.

The girl bowed her head and fell silent.

"We're both homicide detectives. This woman is my partner, Detective Ambroso. I'm Detective Kendal. The girl in the photo is my daughter."

The girl's cheeks reddened. She flopped onto the seat next to Claire.

"I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions. I'm Genevieve."

"Apology accepted," said Kendal, sitting on the chair opposite Claire.

"Is there anything I can do?" asked the girl.

"Yes, if you or your friends could watch out for my daughter, you'd be a great help. Her name is Tegan. When she was kidnapped, she wore long pink pajamas and no shoes."

"I'll spread the word." The girl stood. Walking towards the kitchen, she tapped a message out on her mobile phone.

Claire changed seats. Her shoulder scraped her partner's coat. She reached for her black handbag and opened it. The paper she had scribbled all his thoughts on, was nestled between a snub-nose .38-caliber police handgun, and her travel makeup case was squeezed next to the spare fast reloader and a flick knife. She took out a small notebook and placed it on the table.

"What's the astounded look for?" Claire asked.

"The knife is illegal."

"Like you said earlier at the Barbeque, a girl can never be too careful."

"I don't suppose you have a couple of post-dinner cigarettes."

Claire pulled two cigars from the internal side pocket of her bag. She grinned. "They help settle my nerves."

Kendal didn't return her smile. He waved his hand at the cigars. He decided it was time for her to confess her secret.

"You can keep both of your cigars. Tell me something. I read the incident report on the accident. What actually happened?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"We all have secrets. Seeing how I'm your partner, I have a right to know."

Claire pushed her bag to the side of the table. Staring at nothing, in particular, she sipped her hot chocolate. Tears gushed from her eyes. Kendal looked on embarrassed

by the sudden emotion. He'd known her since school and not once had he ever seen her cry. He had to provoke her. He had to know the truth. She had to confess the whole ugly story. His life might depend on it. He sat staring into her red-rimmed eyes.

Claire stared back. She swiped a napkin from an adjacent table and wiped her eyes.

"You're right Alan. Seeing how you're my new partner you should know."

Kendal displayed a tight smile. He swallowed his emotions. He felt intrigued, almost bursting at the seams to prove his theory of what happened inside the convenience store, on the wet night of May 28th, 2006. The report he read was one-sided, cold and uncaring.

"It was my fault," she blurted.

"I read those exact four words in the report. Now I want to know the truth."

"The report happened to be the truth. It was my fault." Claire's hands started to tremble as she tried to drink her remaining hot chocolate. She gave up and placed the mug on the table. "I killed my partner. If I hadn't met Daniel Weakom a few days later, I don't know how I'd have made it through. He's been there for me."

Gob-smacked Kendal sat staring. "You should've talked to either me or Margaret."

"You don't understand. I couldn't tell anyone. Not even you." She lowered her gaze and stared at the remaining hot chocolate in the tall glass.

"It was an unfortunate accident."

"I look at it differently. I made a mistake. I killed him. I killed Peter."

"You're too good a cop to make a mistake." He could see she was trying to bury the incident. Could he rely on her? Or was she a liability? He had to know. "Sorry, I need details."

Claire lifted her head. She spat angrily. "I understand. It's your job. It's always the bloody job. It's the single reason why I latched onto Daniel. He's an outsider. That's what I admire about him. He's not our kind."

Kendal's thoughts tumbled over and over in his mind. Should he just pat her on the hand and say, 'case closed,' or should he continue his cross-examination? He decided in a heartbeat. "Our kind?" he asked.

"He's not a cop."

"It's the very reason why you should've turned to Marg or me."

"Thanks, Sugar. You're a good friend." She exhaled heavily and sat straight-backed. "Peter and I were called to the convenience store at 11:15pm, robbery in progress. By the time we arrived, the bloke was gone. At 11:31pm the bloke returned, shotgun cocked and pointed at Peter's head. I was at the rear of the shop buying food for breakfast. I heard Peter yell, 'put the gun down.' I snuck up an aisle. The gap between us couldn't have been more than twelve feet. There was the problem. Peter had his back to me, and he was in my line of fire. The gunman's accomplice was sitting behind the steering wheel of a pale green sedan, watching. All I had to do was take a step and shoot. The only thing the gunman had to do was look away. I swiped a packet of rice off the shelf and threw it. The gunman turned his head towards the door. I stepped out from behind the shelf. I had the perfect shot. I couldn't miss. The scene was over in seconds." Unrestricted tears tumbled over her olive cheeks.

"Go on."

"Peter lunged for the gunman as I pulled the trigger. Peter went down. The gunman must have seen my reflection in the glass window. He aimed the sawn-off shotgun at my head. Peter managed to knock him off balance. I put a bullet in the gunman's heart. His accomplice roared away. Peter died in my arms."

"It was an accident," whispered Kendal gently. He reached for and patted her hand.

"You don't understand." Claire picked up a spoon and started twirling it between her fingers as if struggling to confess the remainder of her secret.

"I understand people grieve in many different ways."

Claire threw the spoon across the room. She stood and slapped her two palms on the table. She kicked out at the chair. Leaning over the table, she yelled.

"Spare me the psychological analysis."

Kendal watched her tears fall. Restaurant customers watched in horror at her outburst. Some walked out. Others folded their arms to watch the spat.

"Because of me," she screamed. "Because of me, Peter's dead and the gunman's accomplice escaped."

Kendal leaned back in his chair. He painted a friendly smile on his face.

"It's not funny."

His face turned expressionless as if he was about to play his trump card and win a round of poker. "What's the remainder of the confession?"

Claire slumped into a chair. "There's no more."

"Yes, there is."

Her eyes darkened to the colour of thunderclouds. To Kendal, the look was all too familiar.

"I went to the practice range that same morning and pumped ninety-nine bullets into the stupid cardboard target. No one dared come close. All the new rookie cops said later my face resembled a wild Amazonian woman. The one-hundredth bullet is for the gunman's accomplice when I find him."

"There's more," provoked Kendal, leaning forward in his chair. "I know your secret."

"The only secret left is; you thought Peter might have been Patrick."

"Three months ago, everyone was a suspect. Yes, even you. At the time, Peter happened to be my first choice. He started padlocking his locker about the same time Patrick's case was thrown at me. I used the trick little Mike taught me to gain entry into his locker to search for evidence."

Claire flashed black pupils at Kendal. In a show of anger, she slapped him across the face. He fell back in his chair, shocked. He hadn't seen the slap coming. His gaze darted around the restaurant and found a few more people preparing to leave. Their faces said it all. Refocusing on his partner, Kendal looked deep into her eyes.

"I found a wedding photo in Peter's locker. Marg and I kept the secret, you and Peter eloped."

Claire exhaled as if a heavy burden had lifted from off her shoulders.

"No one was supposed to find out," she whispered.

"I'm a good detective."

"Who else knows?"

"No one," replied Kendal. "Marg and I will never tell a soul."

"Thank you."

Kendal displayed a soothing expression. He reached out to take hold of Claire's hand.

"The shooting was an accident. You should've put it all in your report including the details of the wedding."

"I believe I did the right thing to keep everything a secret," growled Claire. She pulled her hand away. "If I didn't I can still image the headlines on the front page of the newspaper."

"Wife and partner kills husband over money."

Kendal shrugged.

“What, there’s something you didn’t know?”

“I’m at a loss.”

“Peter’s life insurance was worth a million. I found out this morning when I opened the letter. The cheque was inside the envelope you found on the bench. I didn’t want anyone to know, so I tore away the insurance company’s name from the envelope.” Her lips curled slightly upwards. “I’m a good detective too. You didn’t return the envelope to its original position.”

Kendal’s face looked red. “The least you could have done was inform Marg of the wedding. Why keep it a secret?”

“I wanted to tell you. Peter insisted our marriage be kept a secret. He was concerned about the consequences. If Captain Hughes found out he’d have split us up. Peter said he couldn’t protect me if I were someone else’s partner. He took an hour to convince me. It looks as though we were both wrong.”

“Case closed.”

Claire swiped another napkin from a different table and wiped her eyes. “Sorry for slapping your face.”

“I’ve felt worse. Now back to the case.”

“Always the worker,” she moaned.

Kendal studied the restaurant for the umpteenth time.

“What’s going on? Are you expecting someone?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Partner, you’re a bit vague. Do you want to let me in on your thoughts?”

He shook his head. “Have you heard from Weakom lately?”

Claire ate a mouthful of cold honey chicken and a spoonful of fried rice before mumbling a reply.

“No. I’m beginning to be slightly concerned. I’m switching my view of Patrick’s identity from being a cop to Daniel.”

“I have to admit his sudden disappearance is suspicious. I put an APB out on him.”

“It’s ok. If Patrick isn’t Daniel, I don’t know who is.”

Kendal used chopsticks to pick up a headless king prawn and swallow it whole.

“That’s disgusting,” groaned Claire, scrunching her nose.

“Why?”

“How can you eat something that’s been swimming happily in the ocean?”

“I didn’t hear any complaints from the prawn.”

She shook her head and dissected a piece of chicken.

An old long grey-bearded man dressed in shabby street clothes opened the restaurant’s front door. He slowly hobbled up to the reservation desk. He gained the attention of the young Chinese girl talking on the phone by banging his walking stick three times on the floor. The girl slammed the phone back on its hook and eyeballed the man.

“Sir, may I help you?”

The old man leaned forward dragging his beard across the stack of menu cards. He whispered his question. The girl pointed a slender finger at Kendal. The old man tipped his wide-brimmed hat and hobbled over.

“Excuse me Sonny, Missy,” he stammered. “A young girl walking along the street gave me this envelope. She asked if I’d give it to you.”

The big-bellied old-timer’s gloved hands shook as he placed the yellow envelope on the table.

“Thanks, old timer,” yelled Kendal.

The man wagged a gloved finger. “I might be old and bent, but I ain’t deaf.”

"The girl, the one who gave you the envelope, how old is she?"

"Ooh!" replied the old man stroking his beard. "I'd say maybe twelve or thirteen. I remember when I was that age, my old man used to give me a whippin' every night just cause, I was alive. His duty he'd say. I'd miss out only when he'd pass out from being too pissed."

Both detectives eyed the man suspiciously.

"Have a good night young fella, Missy." He dipped his wide-brimmed hat and hobbled towards the door.

"Interesting visitor," whispered Claire, scratching under her French cap.

Kendal watched the old timer disappear out of sight. He slid the envelope off the table and started to open it. "Let's see what the note says."

From across the street, a white van backfired.

"Sugar, outside, the white van looks and sounds identical to the one we've been searching for."

Kendal looked up. He pretended to stretch. Burying the note in his pocket, he slowly stood and walked to the front desk. Through the restaurant's window, he saw the van moving down the road. He sprinted to the glass front door shouldering new customers from his way. He drew his gun and yanked the door almost off its hinges. He ran into the middle of the road. A screech of tyres sent him diving for the gutter.

"Get off the road, you, drunken street bum," yelled a 'P' plate driver over the noise of the car's radio. His mates sitting on the rear seat joined in by swearing a colourful cocktail of words.

Kendal tumble rolled over the grassed nature strip, jumped to his feet, steadied his revolver at eye level and squeezed the trigger. The bullet from his gun buried itself in the van's taillight. The vehicle swerved, narrowly missing a light pole before it disappeared around the first corner. One hundred and three people walking along the street dived for cover. A few women screamed hysterically. One yelled for the police, and a baby in a stroller wailed. All eyes were on the man in the long black duffel coat holding the gun. The street filled to overflowing as shop after shop was emptied.

Claire caught him up. "Sugar, if Tegan was in the van the bullet could've hit her."

"The thought did enter my consciousness three seconds before pulling the trigger. Why else would I hit the van's taillight? At least we can ID the vehicle when we find it."

"Hopefully, we'll get some good fingerprints."

"There won't be any," stated Kendal. He slipped his gun back into his shoulder holster."

"Why not?" asked Claire.

"The driver, the old timer, and Patrick are the same person. Here, read the note."

Claire looked a little puzzled. She waved at the 'P platter' to signal him to drive off. Focusing on the crowd, she held up her hands to scatter the people.

"Folks, it is okay, go about your business."

The P-plate driver parked his car a short distance from the restaurant. The four car doors opened. Four blokes in their mid to late teens walked towards Kendal.

"You, ivory scum standing next to the momma in leathers. We want a word," yelled the driver. He started to smash his right fist into the palm of his left hand.

"Crusher, what we gonna do if he starts shootin?" quizzed the smallest of the four boys.

Crusher poked his finger at his head. "Squirrel, he won't shoot. We've been told he's a cop. You forget what we got paid for."

“What if he overpowers us and searches the trunk? He’ll find all the fags we hoisted.”

Crusher rolled his eyes. He lifted his long-sleeved shirt to reveal skull and crossbones tattooed on each forearm.

“Squirrel, you worry too much. One cop against us four, I don’t think so. Get behind us to cover our arse.”

“White scum, drop the gun onto the grass,” instructed the teenager on Crusher’s left. “We’ll smash your hands if you don’t.”

“Little Momma, go,” ordered Crusher. “You don’t want blood all over your black leather pants.”

“Boys, get your eyes off my thighs.”

“Wanna go for a ride momma? We’ll all show you a really good time,” hinted Squirrel.

Kendal studied the group. The one named Crusher had a few scars on his face. Squirrel too looked to have his fair share.

“I don’t have time for this. I need to find my daughter. The clock’s ticking.” He turned away from the boys and started walking towards the restaurant.

“You’re not going anywhere scumbag,” yelled Crusher. “I’m gonna take me razor blade off me ear and can cut your heart out.”

“Give it up fellas,” growled Kendal. “Except for your head banging music playing on the car CD you look like quiet boys.”

“I want an apology.”

“What for?” probed Kendal.

“I nearly ran you over, and I could’ve hurt my car.”

“Practice helps you to be a sharper driver.”

Claire clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle her giggles.

“Not good enough.”

“Crusher, let’s go,” whispered Squirrel in a timid voice. “I don’t care for the money. The night is young, let’s go.”

Kendal heard the noise of a metal blade extending. He pulled his police badge from his pocket. “Game’s over fellas.”

Four groans wafted into the air.

“Games we play,” squeaked Squirrel. “The games we play.”

“You, hero,” barked Kendal staring at Crusher. “Start talking.”

“I’ve nothin’ to say.”

He grinned at Claire, pulled his gun from his shoulder holster and pointed it at Squirrel. The lad squealed in agony.

“I haven’t shot you yet.”

“Look, Coppa,” moaned one of the other boys, his eyebrow ring twitching. “It’s all a game.”

“Hello, someone has a voice,” chirped Claire.

“Talk,” growled Kendal.

Crusher glared at the boy. “We’ve nothing to say, Coppa.”

Kendal sighed and waved his gun in the air. “Okay, we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Crusher shifted his weight from one leg to the other and scratched an invisible scab. He pointed to Claire.

“I suppose this is where we play good cop, bad cop. You must be the good cop.”

“You’ve been watching too much TV.”

Kendal walked to the car and read the personalized number plate. ‘CRUSHR.’ He grinned. “This is your last chance to talk. I don’t believe in the game you think I’m playing. I need to know who put you up to this confrontation and I want to know now.” He pointed his gun through the open window at the car’s hi-fi system. Displaying a poker face, Kendal’s trigger finger constricted.

The boys acted mummified.

He pulled the trigger.

“The head banging music crap has been permanently silenced. Detective Ambroso herd the boys over here to the car. I have five bullets remaining. Let’s see what my next target will be.”

She lined the boys up in a row with their backs to the car. Kendal walked towards Squirrel, gun pointing at his groin.

He started to wheeze.

“I can hear knees knocking,” reported Claire.

“Police brutality,” yelled Crusher.

“Another street-smart lawyer,” jeered Kendal. “Tell me, who’s going to know?”

“We have witnesses,” stammered Crusher.

Kendal grunted, looking at Squirrel.

“I heard a whisper about a robbery. Detective Ambroso, pop the trunk.” Kendal clicked his fingers. Crusher handed over the flick knife.

The four boys heard a click, and the car’s trunk lifted. Kendal made a loud whistle. He looked Crusher in the eyes.

“I’d estimate ten grands worth of fags supersedes your witness.”

“We’ll confess,” blurted Squirrel. “Please, I’m not a bad kid. If we tell you what you want to know will you forget about the fags?”

“I’ll think about it.”

Squirrel cleared his throat. “A hooded person wearing blue jeans came and threw a thousand bucks at our feet. Two-hundred and fifty bucks each to rough you up.”

Crusher’s shoulders sagged as he added to the story. “Yeah, we were to rough you up and deliver a message.”

“What’s the message?” asked Claire.

“It’s all part of the game,” advised Squirrel.

“Sugar, the message is identical to the note you were handed in the restaurant,” reported Claire.

“The hooded bloke drove a white van,” said Squirrel.

“Tell me the number plate, and I’ll forget about the fags.”

“The van didn’t have number plates. I did see a save the elephant sticker on the rear bumper.”

Squirrel doubled over and fell face first into the gutter. A metal arrow protruded from his back. A small puddle of blood formed under his shirt. He died where he fell. Crusher died moments later the same way. The remainder of the group dived behind Crusher’s car.

“Where’s the sniper?” whispered Claire.

“He must be on the building’s roof across the street.” Kendal used his right foot to flip Squirrel over. The crossbow arrow had lodged in his heart. He died with his eyes open. Kendal fished for his mobile phone, pressed 000 and requested backup, an ambulance, and the police helicopter.

“The act must be Patrick’s revenge for snitching,” mentioned Claire.

Kendal slapped his partner on the shoulder. “Stay squatting. Boys, you’re all under arrest for theft. Here Claire, catch. You’ll need an extra pair of handcuffs. Tether the

boys together by cuffing them to the car. We'll sweep the rubbish up later. I'm going after the sniper."

"I thought we had a deal?" moaned one of the two remaining hoons. "We talk, you'd forget about the fags."

Kendal's face looked cold and uncaring.

"You failed to inform me of the number plate. Be advised, I don't make deals." He buried his mobile phone in his coat pocket, looking at Claire. He gave her a short, sharp nod.

"Careful Sugar," whispered Claire.

"It's okay, I believe the sniper is Patrick, and he won't shoot me. Not sporting enough." His mobile phone sounded as he readied himself to run. He answered it on the first ring. "Patrick, I was wondering when you'd call. Why did you shoot the boys?"

"They snitched."

Kendal frowned. His mind whirled into overdrive. How did Patrick know the exact words Claire had spoken? He looked at her and saw her herding the boys together. She caught his gaze. He averted his stare by looking away.

"Is it a good enough reason to kill two of the four boys?" growled Kendal.

"Yes. It's your fault. You made me do it."

"How do you figure? You loaded the crossbow and pulled the trigger."

"You hung up on me at the lake. We're playing a very different game now. I remember what you said. It's your game and your rules. I've called it, 'The Games We Play.'"

"Did you shoot the arrow or did your accomplice?"

"Coppa, you do ask too much of me."

"Come on, you and me, right now," growled Kendal.

"You sound desperate."

"You're going down, Patrick."

"I don't think so. Here's a warning. I'll kill anyone who gets too close. Understand?"

The phone went dead.

Kendal sprinted for the building across the street, mentally calculating the line of sight of the arrow as he dodged cars and people. By the time he reached the building, he believed the sniper should still be on the fifth floor, apartment one or two. Sprinting up the building's seven front steps, the door to one of the two lifts opened. He pushed past a big man wearing blue overalls stepping out of the lift car.

"Make sure no one comes out of the other lift," Kendal yelled at the man.

"Get stuffed."

The lift closed to the man's middle finger pointing skywards.

Kendal flashed his police badge. "I can't get good help anywhere," he grumbled, starting to pace in tight circles around the lift's car. "Come on you bloody slow lift. If I'm quick Patrick will see the inside of a prison cell by tonight."

The door opened. Kendal took a moment to get his bearings. Apartment one and two were at the end of the corridor on his right. He raised his gun to shoulder height and closed in. He paused outside the door, listening. All was quiet. He kicked the door in and made a quick sweep of the apartment's interior. Finding nothing, he repeated the procedure in apartment two. The sliding glass balcony door had been left wide open. The curtains were slowly moving in the breeze.

Using a fast sweep of his arm, Kendal stepped outside.

“Nothing, no Patrick, and no sign anyone has stepped onto the balcony in weeks,” he mumbled. Slipping his gun back into the shoulder holster, he looked over the glass balcony wall.

The whole area was in the process of being blocked off. Police cars had been parked haphazardly and were spewing cops. They resembled blue ants running in all directions. The reverberating throb of the approaching police helicopter sounded to be less than thirty seconds away. He spied Claire running across the street towards the building. She stopped running. She raised her gun to eye level and pointed it at the balcony. He watched her take careful aim. His eyes widened in disbelief.

She pulled the trigger.

Mortar dust blew into Kendal’s eyes. He ducked. Claire squeezed off another bullet. The one-metre glass balcony wall shattered. His mind whirled, confused at the double cross. No wonder Patrick knew everything. Where he was in the day and what he was doing. He felt pain in his hip. His leg buckled and gave way. He dropped to his knees. He felt pain in his ribs. He doubled over and fell onto the shards of glass littering the floor. His gun fell first and hit the concrete footpath directly below. Kendal knew he wasn’t far behind. Patrick’s inevitable win cast a black shadow across his mind. He was convinced he’d never see his family again.

Something dark caught his gaze as Kendal started to follow his gun to the street below. He reached out in desperation. Tightening his grip, the object felt hard and cold. He heard a scream from the road. His feet swept the air. Whatever he was holding was strong enough to take his weight. Kendal looked up and found he had hold of the balcony’s metal frame.

A figure wearing a black hood was staring down at him. His blue eyes appeared to be laughing.

“Hey, what a shame I didn’t break your ribs. I have to improve my kicking technique.”

“Patrick!” snarled Kendal.

“I’m happy you know my name. Don’t wear it out.” He squatted, bringing his covered face close to Kendal’s. “Before I say goodbye, I have to say it’s been a pleasure playing your game.” He checked his watch. “It’s getting late. I have to find some rodents. It amazes me what they’ll do for money.”

Kendal’s fingers ached and were starting to slip. His left hand fell away from the balcony frame. He swung in mid-air by his right hand.

“I fall, you’ll fall,” he barked.

From the street below Claire started yelling.

“Hold on.”

Kendal swung back towards the building and groped for Patrick’s balaclava using his free hand. He missed by the width of a hair. Kendal swung harder and groped for an ankle. Patrick moved fast and stepped away from the edge. He tilted his head back and started a victory laugh. Slowly Patrick returned his gaze on his relentless posse. He spat a three-word statement.

“Good-bye, Kendal.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

PATRICK MARCHED out of the apartment. In less than a minute he had changed his appearance, stepped out of the lift on the first floor and walked casually down the stairs. Instead of exiting the building through the main doors he used the fire escape. Slipping behind the steering wheel of the white van he started the engine and eased the vehicle away from the curb. At the road block, he was waved through by a smiling cop. Patrick stopped the van three streets from the building.

"The female cop shot me. I'll fix her," Patrick groaned. He used a blue cloth to hurriedly dress the wound. "Lucky for me the bullet only grazed my arm." He spied a man walking towards the van. His collar was turned up against the cool breeze. Patrick whistled for him to stop.

"Phil Mason, what brings you out this time of night?"

The man walked over to the van, opened the passenger door and slid onto the front seat.

"I'm walking to the hospital to talk to Dr. Ashlee Clarke. I want to find out what she thinks of the band's latest CD."

"I've some sad news. I lost the CD."

"It's okay. I have a copy." Phil produced a CD identical to the one Kendal had found at the park. "I am determined my band 'Split Theory' will be famous one day."

"Hey, I've an idea. Drive this van to the hospital, dump it in a carpark and put the CD on the Doc's desk."

"Why don't you drive?" asked Phil.

Patrick picked up two large paper bags, stepped down from the van and stared through the open window. "I've some business to finish. Can you give Dr. Clarke a message?"

"Sure," said Phil.

"Tell her we'll catch up soon." Patrick banged the roof of the van with his hand then walked off in the direction of Melbourne's red-light district.

The long afternoon shadows from the buildings had long disappeared. Rodents were starting to come out of the back alleys looking for entertainment. Night Angels were busy scurrying for their usual haunt in shop doorways. Their half-naked bodies were fluorescent lights for males seeking affection in wrong places.

Patrick stood behind a tree to light his cigarette. A white Mercedes driven by a tall, thin man stopped at the corner two street lights away. A night angel wearing a black mini skirt and a see through top stepped from a doorway. She strolled seductively to the driver's door. She squatted to talk to the driver. Eventually, the young woman stood and waited for the Mercedes to be parked. The driver locked the car. After collecting her, he escorted the prostitute across the road towards a dirty cheap hotel.

Patrick's lips parted into a wide grin. He walked across the street and marched towards the hotel carrying the two brown paper bags. A crossbow handle protruded from each bag. After the tall man paid twenty dollars to a short, plump man he received a key. Patrick shadowed the couple to a small room where the prostitute always took her clients. The room was situated at the rear of the building a long way from the main establishment.

From behind a wide, medium size bush, Patrick watched the short man escort the female prostitute into the room and shut the door. In five minutes Patrick walked up to the door and knocked.

“Who is it?” growled a muffled voice.

“Room service. Someone has ordered a bottle of Champaign to highlight the romance of the night.”

The lock clicked. The door opened a tad.

“I don’t want to be disturbed,” explained the man through the crack in the door.

“Tuff,” bellowed Patrick, kicking out at the door. He pulled both loaded crossbows from their paper bags and pointed two arrows at the man.

The naked man lost his balance and fell to the floor. The prostitute screamed and started to dress.

“What do you want?” barked the man. He struggled to get to his feet. “If it’s money, I’ll pay whatever you ask.”

“I need to borrow your car. When I’m holding the key, I’ll leave you to enjoy the night.”

The man made a shaky nod, walked over to the bed and fumbled for the car key still in his trouser pocket. Staring at Patrick, he lobbed the key high in the air. Charging harder than a wounded bull the man rugby tackled Patrick, yanking the balaclava off his head. In retaliation for his disobedience, Patrick swiped the crossbow across the man’s face. The man resembled a discarded pile of rags on the floor. Hovering over the screaming man, Patrick wrapped his fingers around the second crossbow and leveled it at the man’s chest. Through swelling eyes, he looked up.

“I know you.”

“And I know you too Dr. Markovic. Things would’ve been alright if you’d have just given me the keys to your Mercedes.”

“I won’t tell anyone,” pleaded Markovic. He raised his hands to cover his face.

The young prostitute was now fully dressed and cowering in the corner. Patrick paced the floor.

“You have to understand if I allow either you or the female to live I’m positive you’ll describe my identity to Kendal.”

“Please, I have a family,” sobbed Markovic.

“You should’ve thought about them before you picked up the whore. Now I want both of you to sit on the bed.”

“Why?”

“Sit on the bed,” growled Patrick. “You can blame Kendal over your shortened future.”

The girl’s screams were quickly silenced.

“Goodbye Dr. Markovic,” said Patrick calmly.

Patrick left the room, spotted a dark lane twenty feet from the next corner and drove the Mercedes halfway down. At the end of the lane, a small globe directly above a pile of wooden pallets shone brightly. Flapping clothes hung out to dry on a rusty metal line was the only movement in the grimy, stinking lane. Graffiti covered everything from the cobble-stoned ground to the glass windows.

“Perfect place for rodents,” he mumbled, slipping the balaclava over his head. He stepped down from the car and walked to the edge of the car’s headlight beam carrying a readied crossbow hidden inside the paper bag.

Laughter echoed off the wall of the narrow lane as rodent after rodent flooded the lane. There were thirteen in total, nine males, and four females, ranging from twelve to seventeen.

“Look at what we have for dinner tonight, people,” taunted a brave rodent.

“It’s a masked creature,” snickered a young female street kid.

“A baker’s dozen,” snarled Patrick. “Perfect.”

“What’s a baker’s dozen?” asked a timid street kid. He stood in a doorway staring at the visitor.

“I won’t explain. You’d forget the answer by sun up.”

“I ought to knock ya block off,” barked the street kid in charge of the group.

“You the leader?” probed Patrick.

The boy made a fist and slammed it home in the palm of his hand. “Who wants to know?”

“Name’s Patrick,” he growled.

“Queer name. I hate Queers. I could stick you right here and now. You’d be dead before you hit the ground.”

A flick knife’s blade extended with a snap. Patrick curled his thin lips into a smile and raised the paper bag to chest height. The group broke out into laughter.

“You gonna use a paper bag to hit me?” questioned the bull rodent.

Patrick pulled the bag away. Twenty-four eyes widened. The whole group shrunk back into the shadows of the lane.

The bull rodent stood his ground staring at Patrick. He started to laugh.

“It’s the reason why I’m the leader. I’m not scared. You’ve only one arrow in the crossbow. If you take me down, I’ve twelve others who’ll make a mess of you. I can guarantee you’ll go home in boxes; very small boxes.”

The shadows erupted in cheers.

“You’ll be dead,” instructed Patrick.

“I’ll go to a better place, queer.”

“Are you sure? The after-life mightn’t look too kindly on a rodent.”

The leader took up a karate stance. “Bring it on.”

“I’ve a friend.” Patrick produced the revolver from a back pocket. “I persuaded a cop to give it up.”

“I don’t fight a person holding a gun. What do you want?” The lad folded his arms.

“One or two brave souls,” hinted Patrick.

A pimple-faced girl dug her elbow into the boy’s ribs she was standing shoulder to shoulder with.

“This is our chance,” she whispered in his ear. “The group will accept us if we do what he wants.”

The boy’s hands started trembling. “Are you positive it’s safe?”

The girl bravely stepped forward.

“Come,” called Patrick.

The girl took hold of the boy’s hand dragging him three steps closer. The boy yanked his hand free and started drumming his fingertips together.

“You wanna shoot an apple off our head?” asked the girl.

Patrick lowered the crossbow. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Although the group made a loud sigh, no one took their eyes off the hooded figure. The boy kept up his fidgeting.

“I’ve a proposition.”

“A what?” the girl asked.

“I’ve a paying job for you two,” growled Patrick. He roamed his stare between the boy and the girl.

Wide-eyed both kids looked at each other before returning their stare on the hooded figure.

“How much do we get?” asked the girl.

“You’ll do the job?”

The boy intensified his finger drumming. He looked mortified at having the chance to earn money.

"Show us the money. When I see the bucks, we'll decide," taunted the girl.

"You learn fast. I've never believed the rumours about street kids."

"What rumours?"

"That you're all stupid. Before you get all huffy, I'll pay you a thousand bucks."

"We need your word in writing," growled the girl.

"You'd make a good lawyer."

"Who do you want us to kill?" squeaked the boy.

"Nobody," replied Patrick.

After hearing what had to be done to earn the cash bonus street kids swarmed the lane. In moments, twenty kids were crowding around Patrick eager to help.

"The amount isn't enough," advised the leader.

"I'm not talking to you. In fact, you're too late." Patrick reached into a pocket, pulling out a wallet of notes. He threw it at the boy's feet. He quickly stopped drumming his fingers together and swiped the money off the ground. Patrick grinned as he repeated the sequence for the girl. "A thousand bucks each, no questions."

Both kid's eyes sparkled.

"What happens if we take the money and don't do the job?" asked the girl.

Patrick pointed the crossbow arrow directly at her heart. "I know where you live."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

CLAIRE AND six uniformed police swarmed the hotel room where they last saw Kendal swinging from the balcony frame by one hand. They were shocked to find him sitting quietly on the bed, head in his hands.

"Fan out boys. Search for Patrick. Sugar, are you okay?" asked Claire.

Kendal lifted his head and eyeballed the woman. "I'm upset I let my guard down. Of all people, I should've known."

"Don't cut yourself up. Be happy you're still breathing and not lying on a slab in the morgue." Claire walked to where the balcony wall used to be and looked down. "Yep, you wouldn't have walked away from that fall. How on Earth did you get back into the room?"

"When I lost my grip, and swinging like a monkey, I managed to sink my toes into the crack between the concrete slabs that make up the wall of the building. Fortunately, good height genes run in my family. I grabbed the balcony's metal post and dragged myself up. By the way, don't bother to search for Patrick, he's long gone."

Claire carefully stepped back over the shards of glass. She walked into the room staring at her partner. Kendal's face appeared drawn. He gave her a frozen look.

"Sugar, I didn't shoot you, did I?"

"No," he growled. "Just for a moment, I was thinking weird thoughts."

"What were they?"

"Forget it."

"Tell me. I'm a big girl; I can take it."

He admitted the six words he didn't want to say. "I thought you were Patrick's accomplice."

"You're joking. How could you even think such a thing? We've been friends forever." She shook her head and rolled her eyes.

"Being shot at by my new partner, what was I supposed to think? I thought when you kept the story about Peter secret you had changed."

Claire lifted her hand and slapped him on the shoulder. "If that's the best apology you're going to give, I'll accept." She squatted to study the carpet. "This is blood."

"It's not mine," announced Kendal. He walked over. "The red drops must belong to Patrick." He stooped and stared at the pale green carpet. He stood and gazed around the room. "There," he said, pointing.

"The bullet you shot is wedged in the wall."

"I shot two bullets."

Kendal walked over to the balcony. "Claire, stand next to the drops of blood."

She put her hands on her hips. "Can't you ask nicely? I'm not a puppy you've taken to obedience training."

"Please, take a small step to your left."

She shuffled her feet a half step closer to the spots of blood.

Kendal stood with outstretched his arms to form a straight line in an attempt to gauge the path of the bullet. "I believe the bullet came through the glass, skimmed Patrick's left shoulder and its journey ended in the roof." He stared at the ceiling.

"There it is; the second bullet." His words trailed off into mumbles.

Claire giggled at his hypnotic look.

"You nearly shot me. What were you thinking?"

"I saw a hooded person holding a crossbow sneaking up behind you. What did you expect me to do? I didn't have time to call you on the phone. Besides, Sugar, those ninety-nine bullets I pumped into the cardboard target, all hit the bull's-eye."

He groaned.

"My guess is, you knew Patrick was going to be here tonight," stated Claire.

"He was the one who blackmailed me into taking you out for dinner. If I hadn't, Tegan was going to die."

"You should've told me."

"I couldn't risk it. Somehow Patrick knows my every move."

"And I thought you were trying to be polite by asking me out for dinner."

Kendal rolled his eyes. "I wish you hadn't pulled the trigger. Patrick wouldn't have killed me. Not here, not today."

"How could I have known?"

"If you read the note the old timer gave you'd have known Patrick's not a killer, the fire is."

"Didn't he say he'd kill anyone who gets too close?"

"Yes, he did, however, I believe he wants to fight me, one on one."

"You were hanging by a thread. I don't think you were winning. Besides, 'the games we play,' doesn't make sense."

"Claire, this whole thing is a game. A fire game Patrick has devised to frustrate me. If he wanted me dead, why didn't he use my gun he confiscated?"

"All I know is; I saved my partner's life. All you do is whine."

"Okay. Thanks for missing us both. I'm positive Patrick is grateful just like I am. I think it's time to visit little Mike."

"You're going to let me meet little Mike? The one and the same person who taught you how to break into locked homes and police lockers?"

Kendal winked at Claire.

The police helicopter's sun bright searchlight was beamed at the building's rooftop opposite where Kendal and Patrick had their confrontation. The entire area looked like it was flooded in a net of light.

Kendal's mobile phone sounded.

"This is Officer Stanfield, the police helicopter pilot. There's a sniper on the roof opposite where you're standing. The sniper is lying prone, is six feet tall wearing a black balaclava and has a crossbow aimed at the street below. I can see a pump action shotgun at the ready."

"Everyone, let's go," yelled Claire.

One uniformed officer was standing guard at the lift holding the doors open when the group arrived. They marched in. The lift doors closed. Kendal, surprised at the smooth ride, quickly compared the lift's age to the building.

"New lift," he commented aloud. "I believe this is a waste of taxpayer money."

Everyone in the lift stared at him.

Claire displayed a blank look. "We're closing in on Patrick. In five minutes, you'll know of Tegan's where-a-bouts unless you're Patrick."

"How can I be?"

"You thought I was his accomplice."

Kendal raised an eyebrow. He made himself comfortable by leaning against the lift wall.

Constable Alderson greeted the group when the lift doors parted on the ground floor. Bringing the group up to speed she pointed to the roof of the seven-storey building across the road.

"The sniper hasn't moved since being discovered. The police chopper has backed away, so the sniper won't get spooked and do a runner."

"Lead on Sweetie," ordered Kendal, pointing at the street ahead.

"Keep a close watch on the roof," yelled Claire.

Police officers moved quickly into position, hiding behind anything for cover. The street outside remained deserted. Red and blue lights were flashing off everything. There was no noise, no people, and no cars.

It was an eerie sight.

The police closed in on the building where the sniper was watching them. An abandoned green and yellow tram made for good cover. Even though its single headlight was still burning bright, the interior looked to be a dark empty shell. Fifteen cops boarded the tram.

A team of ten officers led by Kendal and Claire skirted the side of the tram. They completed a squat run across the road and hid next to a parked car directly under the building's roof line.

They sprinted into the lobby through the main doors. Claire led the cops over to the lift. Kendal relayed a watered-down summary of events to the twenty frightened bystanders cowering in a corner. He ordered the small group to stay in the building and to remain calm.

The uniformed boys crammed into the lift. Kendal brought up the rear. The lift car creaked before ascending slowly.

Alderson stared at Kendal. When he returned her gaze, she began to tease him sarcastically.

"I think the lift is overweight. You need to start an exercise program. Why don't you join the foot patrol?"

"Constable Alderson, enough, we're on official police business. Everyone, check your weapons. Remember we want the suspect alive. No mistakes," warned Claire.

The lift car jolted then dropped a couple of inches to its level at the top floor. The doors opened. In single file, the group climbed the remaining four steps to the roof.

The first officer pushed the solid wooden door open and studied the rooftop. He nudged an officer standing behind him in the ribs and pointed at a large air-conditioner unit not far from the door. He aimed his gun at the sniper as he ran for the metal box. Quickly settling himself behind the unit, he kept his gun aimed on the sniper to give cover for everyone else.

Alderson ran straight towards the sniper. "Police, freeze sucker!" she yelled.

The hooded sniper didn't move. The helicopter returned to the building. The craft hovered fifty feet above the rooftop. The bright spotlight easily pierced the darkness. Kendal could feel its warmth. He felt positive if it were shone directly on him he'd achieve a suntan.

Alderson hovered over the man, her gun aimed at the sniper's back. She kicked a foot. The sniper didn't respond.

"You're under arrest you mongrel," she screamed over the reverberating throb of the helicopter.

More guns was pointed directly at the sniper. Housing her gun, Alderson reached for her handcuffs. Grinning sarcastically at Kendal she taunted him again.

"This is too easy for the foot patrol." She reached down and yanked the arm.

The sniper moved. She jumped, lost her balance and fell sideways landing on her left shoulder six feet from the sniper still holding his arm.

Kendal and the group cupped their hands over their mouths to muffle their laughter. Alderson's red face displayed how she felt.

"Constable, I think this sniper's dead." Claire dropped to her knees laughing.

Kendal laughed inwardly. "Congratulations, you've managed to arrest a mannequin."

Alderson threw the plastic arm at him, marching off to the other side of the building.

"Sugar, how did you know this was all a stunt?"

"The old timer, and..."

"The games we play," Claire recited, finishing the sentence.

"I had a hunch. Besides, this isn't Patrick's style. There's no way to win. There's no plan 'B.' He couldn't get off the roof."

"Okay people, clean this crap up and get back to finding the real Patrick," instructed Claire.

Kendal cupped a hand around his mouth. "Alderson, what colour is red?"

"Shut up," she yelled.

Everyone dispersed quicker than they had flooded the roof.

"Claire, let's go, it's time to visit little Mike."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TWO detectives shouldered a single glass door to a small shop situated in a narrow back lane not far from the Melbourne CBD. The sign on the door read; 'Little Mike's, Open.'

They looked at the bright jewellery cases framing the floor as they walked up to and stood in front of two men. They were guarding the way into another room. Both men displayed a frown. They stood with their arms folded.

"We'd like to enter," announced Kendal.

One heavy bearded guard unfolded his arms and clicked his fingers. The head of a tiger tattooed on his forearm protruded from under his long sleeved white shirt.

"Appointment card?" he growled.

Kendal opened his coat to show off his Smith and Wesson. The second guard, a shade lighter and shorter than his mate flashed the machine gun nestled snug under his arm. The first guard clicked his fingers. He again reached out for the invitation.

Kendal grinned and flashed his silver police badge.

Iron-faced, the second guard, opened the door.

Claire smiled at the guards as she followed her partner into the room.

"Sugar, I love the invitation."

The room resembled a scene straight out of the sixties. A large jukebox sat in one corner on a black and white striped floor. Plastic flower beads hung from the doorway. Two guards sitting behind a computer monitor, stood, folded their arms and watched the two detectives walk further into the room.

"It's okay," said a tall olive-skinned man sitting behind a large mahogany desk. "I know who it is by his cheap aftershave. Detective Kendal, come in make yourself at home. Long time no visit. If you want a drink help yourself. I'm up for another scotch on the rocks. I've only had three today. I'm already five behind in my daily quota. Your lady friend can sit on my lap."

Claire narrowed her eyes glaring at the man. The two gorillas repositioned themselves behind the computer screens at the far end of the desk.

Little Mike, a giant of a man, adjusted his dark glasses, slapped his leg and beckoned Claire.

"Come on, don't be shy, I won't bite."

"Water for me," snarled Claire. Seeing Kendal grinning she already despised the man they came to visit. "And I'm fine on this side of the desk."

"I'll stick to coffee. I don't want to set a bad example in front of my new partner," stated Kendal.

"Naturally," said Mike, pushing his chair back.

Steam rose from an Urn at the fully stocked bar not far from the desk. After the man upturned a mug and a glass he got to work pouring the drinks.

"We need information," blurted Claire.

"I know. It's the reason why you're here."

"How do you know what we're here for?" questioned Claire.

"All in good time, partner," said Kendal, looking at Mike. "I apologize. Detective Claire Ambroso is new to the game."

Little Mike displayed a tight grin. Walking towards the two guards, he seemed to float. His limbs swayed in time to the background music of the pop era.

"Boys, leave us."

The two solid built guards didn't hesitate. They lumbered out of the room to join their colleagues.

Again, the door was closed.

"Claire, you like my pad?" Mike raised his glass and waved it around the room.

"It needs a woman's touch."

Kendal shook his head.

Mike choked on a mouthful of Scotch as he brought their drinks to the desk. He leaned close to Claire and groped for her shoulder.

"I like my pad the way it is. For the record, I'm an easy-going bloke. I'm willing to overlook your remark if you join my harem? I could use another young woman. I wore out the latest one. I can slot you in every Friday night."

She eyeballed the tall man up and down. "Refusal often offends."

Mike made a deep belly laugh, returned to his chair and sat deep in the black leather seat. He polished off the remainder of his drink then placed the crystal glass carefully on the desktop. He clasped his hands together, staring at the woman sitting opposite him.

"Seeing how you like the look of me, it must be my charm you don't like."

Claire moved to the edge of her seat. "The lack of it," she reported.

Kendal leaned over to whisper in his partner's ear.

Looking up she suppressed a smile. "Mike, I do apologize. I didn't know you've been blind since birth."

"Your apology is accepted, little momma."

"Now kiddies, enough chatting, we have serious business to discuss," warned Kendal.

Mike ignored his statement. "So, Darling, may I call you Darling?"

Claire clamped her teeth together. "Careful, you're heading for a face slap." She glared coldly at Kendal. "Someone in this room knows how that feels."

He raised his eyebrows and patted his cheek.

Mike grinned and sniffed the air. "Darling, you sure do smell nice. May I stroke your hair?"

"Don't push your luck. To me, you're just another hood."

"Looks can be deceiving Sweetie."

"Name's Detective Ambroso."

"I love feisty women. Are you certain you won't reconsider my offer to join my harem? I have magic hands."

Claire bore her gaze into Kendal. Her face took on an ashen colour. She resembled someone who might commit murder at any moment.

"Why are we here? We're wasting time," she growled under her breath. She stood to leave. "Coming?"

Kendal leaned back in his chair and clamped his hands behind his head. He began to grin.

"What's so funny, partner?"

Mike opened the desk's middle drawer. Swiping out his silver police badge he dropped it on the desktop. "You're here because you need my help," he stated.

"You are a cop?" Claire scrunched her nose, glaring at the man.

"Yes, I'm the best."

"One of the best," coughed Kendal. Looking at his partner's fuming face, he burst into uncontrollable laughter.

Claire folded her arms. Only three seconds had elapsed before she yelled a volley of abuse at Kendal.

"You didn't tell me. Why?"

"If you give me a moment, I'll explain."

"You have four seconds."

"Only ten cops know of Mike's existence. You're the tenth. He pays for information to the underworld. Police pay Mike. This place is the hub of Melbourne. If the wrong person ever found out, he's a cop. He's dead."

"I'll have it known, I was a hood. Been one all my life up to three years ago." Mike's broad grin widened. "To cut a long story short, I offered my services to the police to help clean up the streets of Melbourne. They agreed to my terms and here we are. This place has its advantages. I get what I want." Mike took off his dark glasses and placed them gently on the desktop. "I was testing you Detective Ambroso. I have twenty-twenty vision. If I couldn't convince you I was blind how on Earth could I convince an assassin? If one actually made it past my bodyguards, the underworld would pay him a fortune to see my head in a plastic bag."

Still glaring at both men, Claire walked around the desk. "I'm happy to hear you have good eyesight, Mikey." She lashed out with a double slap across the face.

After rubbing the sting off his cheeks, his voice sounded slightly hoarse.

"I can't say I saw that coming sweet stuff?"

"Didn't you just boast you have perfect eye sight?"

"Maybe it's not quite perfect after all."

"Now the formalities are over; I need help." Kendal unclasped his hands and leaned forward over the desk.

"We need help," corrected Claire.

Looking up at the woman hovering over him Mike palmed his hand at the seat on the other side of the desk.

"Please, take a seat, Detective. If you sit out of arm's reach, I won't have to worry about another slap in the face."

"You had the slap coming."

"Yeah, I suppose I did."

Claire looked smug as she sat with her back slightly angled to Kendal. She folded her arms and stuck out her bottom lip.

"There's an old foe playing a new game," started Mike. "Wears a black hood and he has been burning houses to the ground for a long time. His name's Patrick and is more slippery than an eel. The word on the street is someone changed the rules. Now he's a killer. It could be why he's kidnapped Tegan."

"For someone who doesn't get out much, you seem to know a lot. Tell us something we don't know," suggested Claire.

Mike clicked his fingers. "I have a picture of Patrick wearing a balaclava. You want to see?"

"Yes," blurted Kendal.

The man moved his fingers at speed over the computer's keyboard. Hearing a faint hum, he swung a monitor around and sat back in his chair.

"How did you obtain this information?" asked Claire, her voice sounding hard.

"I have video cameras all over Melbourne. While you two cats have been playing chasey, I've been studying my videos. This picture was taken in a lane talking to a couple of street kids." Mike's fingers swept over the keyboard again. He pointed to a photo of a Mercedes parked outside a cheap hotel. "The latest emergency 000 call was for the fire brigade to attend the fire at that exact location. I searched the videos and found Patrick followed a man who was escorting a young girl, approximate age fourteen, into a room at the rear of the establishment. He left the area before the building went up in smoke. The fire was extreme. The plume of smoke almost reached the mountains two hours away. I'm surprised you didn't see it."

"We were busy chasing a mannequin," grumbled Kendal.

"I'd like to hear that story one day." Mike pushed a button on the keyboard. Under the desk, a printer buzzed. "Here bright eyes a small memento of your visit." He slid the

photo over the desk's surface. "My private phone number is on the back. You can call me anytime."

"Shame the balaclava covers the face," moaned Claire, snatching the photo up off the desk. "You should change your pick-up line too. It's lousy."

Mike grinned.

"You do know it's illegal to withhold information. A child's life is at stake."

"Keep your shirt on, baby; I found the videotape ten minutes ago. Photo's not much good. Just like you said it's a shame the balaclava covers the face."

Kendal leaned over to study the picture. "I need a photo of Patrick unmasked."

"At least it'll give you something to crow about," jeered Claire.

"We'll be waiting for your call," said Kendal. He stood and extended his hand.

Claire copied the move. Mike quickly grabbed her fingers and kissed her knuckles. Her eyes glistened as she followed her partner out of the room.

"I can tell by the grin on your face you gave Mike your phone number."

"A girl has to keep her options open. I dropped my number on pre-written paper on the desk."

"What about Daniel Weakom?"

"I'm over him. Besides, a romantic night on the town might be just what the doctor ordered."

Kendal shook his head to the rhythm of his mobile phone. He answered it on the third ring.

"Captain Hughes here," announced the voice. A short silence followed. "Kendal, there's been another fire."

"What's wrong?" questioned Kendal, picking up on the short delay.

"The fire happened to be *modus operandi*. Those words are Latin, meaning the fire was started using the same method as all the other house fires. You might want to check it out. The address is 41 Craven Street Clifton Hill."

"There's something you're having difficulty in telling me?"

The Captain's voice lowered to a decibel above a whisper.

"You're correct. I've just finished talking to the coroner. Two charred bodies were picked up from the hotel fire. They're at the morgue. One is an unidentified male. The other is a young female. Both have an arrow through their heart."

Kendal's reply came as static over the line. He gulped. His shoulders sagged. His limbs felt detached. He felt nauseous. He lifted his hand to hold up his head.

Claire watched the colour drain from his face while he dragged the mobile phone from his ear.

"What's happened? Does Hughes have news of Tegan's where-a-bouts?" Claire moved closer and pushed her arm around his waist. "Bad news?" she asked.

Kendal didn't acknowledge her question. His thoughts had entered a midnight black whirlpool with no inkling to an end. How could he contemplate ringing Marg? How could he say the possibility of seeing Tegan alive again had dramatically diminished? Where should he start? He folded his phone and dropped it into his pocket.

"What's happened?"

Kendal didn't have the strength to lift his eyes to look at his partner. He spoke in a sterile, detached whisper. "There's a corpse at the morgue."

"So? It's where we'll all end up one day."

Kendal couldn't conjure up the strength to return a cursory smile at Claire's crude attempt to sound humorous. His words started to falter. His eyes were soaked. "The corpse is a young female."

“Come on. I’ll drive to the morgue.” Claire looked her partner in the eyes. “I’m positive the person isn’t Tegan. If you’re not up to identifying the body, I’ll do it.”

“No, I’ll do it. I’m Tegan’s father; it’s my job.”

“It’s my job too.”

After a short, but heated discussion, Kendal slapped the key to his car into the palm of Claire’s hand and slipped into the passenger seat.

Inside five minutes Claire parked outside the morgue. The tall building looked unwelcoming. Kendal knew the building all too well. Glancing around he noted the entire area resembled a ghost town.

Entering the building through the main doors, they rode the lift to the lower floor.

The two detectives walked side by side down the narrow corridor. Their destination was the coroner’s office at the Melbourne city morgue.

There were four large steps between each of the thirteen overhead fluorescent tubes. The squeak coming from Kendal’s black leather shoes echoed louder the deeper they walked down the corridor. He felt like he was being escorted to meet the hangman’s noose.

When Claire and Kendal walked under the fifth light they heard a woman’s screams. Her wailing stabbed Kendal’s brain. His legs felt like steel girders. His heart pounded behind his ribs. His right hand clutched his chest. His left hand helped to prop himself up against the wall. He didn’t have the strength to lift his stare from the floor. Colour started to drain from his face again. The feeling of disorientation hit him hard. Everything around him appeared to be in a blurred spinning motion.

Kendal managed to force his eyes to look up when he heard the sound of slow shuffling feet coming closer. He witnessed a middle-aged woman being half carried by a man in his late teens. For a moment, Kendal held the man’s gaze. His eyes were flooding tears. Kendal watched them shuffle past. Raising his hand, he massaged his temple. A lift door slid open. The noise it made added to his throbbing head.

Claire placed her arm around his waist. Eyeballing her partner, she pushed him against the wall. Her knees buckled under the big man’s weight.

“Snap out of it. Call it woman’s intuition. Call it what you want, I’m betting Tegan’s alive.”

Kendal couldn’t smile. Fear over phoning his wife to tell her the possible grim news of Tegan’s death added to his nightmare. He lost his footing and slid down the wall to the vinyl floor.

“Wait here I’ll go identify the body,” said Claire. She made certain her voice sounded confident.

Kendal groped for her arm and clawed his way to his feet. Looking Claire in the eyes, he straightened his coat.

“No,” he croaked. “You stay here. I’m Tegan’s father. I have to do this.”

“I thought we settled this argument ten minutes ago,” cautioned Claire.

“We did.”

Kendal displayed a brave expression. Together they struggled on to the end of the corridor. Without stopping both detectives stepped through the automatic opening door and entered the room.

Inside the shoe box size office, the wiry man sat at a large wooden desk behind a computer screen. He stood when Kendal and Claire entered the room.

His nametag read, ‘Ivan Fulton,’ coroner.

“Can I help you people?” he mumbled.

His husky voice didn't match his physical appearance. His black bushy eyebrows quivered as if he was upset at the ongoing intrusion to his half-eaten meal. The remnant of a tuna sandwich and a half empty coffee mug was on the table.

Kendal channeled his strength to his voice box. He cleared his throat.

"I'm Detective Kendal. This woman is my partner, Detective Ambroso."

They both flashed their police badge.

"I don't get many live visitors," hinted Ivan, chuckling at his own joke. He swallowed a mouthful of food before shaking their hands.

Kendal failed to hear the humor.

"I'm kidding Detective," chuckled Fulton. "I'm just trying to lighten the air."

Claire shook her head glaring at the man.

"I believe two bodies have recently arrived, one male, one female. One corpse has an arrow through the heart. I wish to identify the female," ordered Kendal.

"So, military," reported Fulton. "I'm impressed. There is a slight correction. An arrow through the heart killed both people."

"We'd like to view the female," said Claire.

"First, I'd like to apologize for the screaming woman. She lost her son in a road accident last night. I hate screaming women. The noise unnerves me. If I didn't have to pull a double shift, I would've been home before she came in. It has been one of those days."

Kendal could barely hear the man's ramblings. He nudged his partner in the ribs.

"We don't mean to sound rude. We'd like to view the body. My partner doesn't feel well."

Fulton frowned, ushered the Detectives through a thick plastic door and led them over to a series of narrow fridges. He opened the first one and pulled out a long trolley. The noise from the scraping metal board lashed Kendal's brain. He'd never come close to fainting in his life, but everything started to turn dark around him. He began to envision invisible hands closing black curtains in front of his eyes. He understood the term; 'blacked out.' He leaned on the fridge's stainless-steel wall, willing his brain to shake off the darkness. He stared into Fulton's eyes and wondered how the man could enjoy his job.

The coroner reached over the corpse's head. Clasping the white sheet in both hands, he slowly peeled the cover back to reveal the face.

Both Detectives stared wide-eyed at the charcoal face of the young woman.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A SHOPPER wearing a long blue coat placed two large brown paper bags on the floor in front of the bright glass jewellery case.

"Hey boys, can you help me select a nice piece of jewelry?"

"We're security guards; the owner is on the phone. He'll be back in a minute. I'm positive my companion standing on my left will be more than happy to help."

The shorter of the two guards stepped away from little Mike's door and walked three paces to the counter. The other guard sidestepped to block the entrance to the door. Folding his arms, his expression turned to steel.

“Do you like any of these diamond necklaces?” the first guard grumbled. “Any of them will make a nice present.”

“None of these will do. Maybe you have some in the back room?”

“You must possess an invitation to enter the back room.”

“I’ve an invitation,” chirped the shopper. “Little Mike said to come see him the next time I’m in the area.”

“Let’s see the invite.”

The shopper reached into both shopping bags. The first guard scrunched his face as he slid off the glass counter and onto the floor in a growing pool of blood. Realizing what was going down, the second guard reached for his semi-automatic machine gun. A steel arrow fired from the second crossbow finished its journey in his heart. The shopper watched his lifeless body crumble to the floor. Both guards displayed the same surprised expression when they died.

The shooter pulled two more arrows from a quiver hidden under his coat and re-loaded the crossbows. He stepped over the dead guard and opened the door to little Mike’s lair.

The two internal guards met the same fate as their two mates outside.

“Don’t move,” yelled the shooter. Dropping the crossbows, he pulled Kendal’s .38 caliber Smith and Wesson from his back pocket and pointed it at Mike’s head.

“Don’t shoot. Take everything. I’m a lousy witness. I’ve been blind since birth.”

“What an interesting statement,” announced the shopper, sarcastically.

Mike nodded vigorously. “May I sit?”

“Sure, you can. I’d hate to see you uncomfortable.”

Groping for the desk, Mike groaned when he fell into the chair.

“Keep your hands on the desktop,” growled the shooter, opening the door.

Mike fidgeted in his seat. Slowly he brought his hands into view.

“Hey Doc, it’s safe to come in now.”

“Let me introduce myself; I’m Mike. You are?”

“Dr. Ashlee Clarke.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. What name do you go by, Sir?”

The shooter paced back and forth in front of Mike. He stopped in front of the desk. With a swipe of his hand, he pushed the phone scattering a pile of papers across the room. “Call me Patrick.” He snorted and recommenced to pace the floor.

“Sir, please sit down. You’re making me dizzy.”

Patrick immediately stopped pacing to stare at Mike.

“Explain to me how I’m making you dizzy when you’re blind.”

Mike sat straight-backed. He looked glued to the seat. His breathing sounded laborious.

“It’s your walking. I can hear your footsteps pacing the floor.”

“It’s fortunate for you, Mikey, you can’t see.”

“Why?”

Patrick took three steps closer to the desk. “I’m not wearing my balaclava. You’d have seen my face.” He pointed the gun between Mike’s eyes. He pulled the trigger.

The gun clicked.

Mike jumped.

“How careless of me, I forgot, I unloaded the gun after I swiped it from Detective Kendal.”

“I’m amazed he allowed you to take it.”

“He had no choice,” stated Patrick. He quickly reloaded the gun.

“We all have choices in this world.”

"I suppose if I thought about your statement I'd have to agree."

"Let us leave," said Dr. Clarke.

"I'm not ready. I've unfinished business."

"Enough people have died already. Besides, the man is blind, what harm can he do?"

Patrick stared at Dr. Clarke. Mike saw his opportunity and slowly moved his left foot towards a camouflaged button on the floor. When he felt the top of the button, he pushed his foot down hard, depressing the button.

"I think Mikey is hiding something. Do you agree, Doctor?"

"No."

Patrick switched his attention back on Mike.

"I sense you and Kendal happen to be good mates. Care to elaborate?"

"Taking a gun off a cop isn't something you hear about every day."

Patrick leaned on the desk and waved the gun under Mike's nose.

"You're good, real, good. Tell me, what are all these computers used for?"

"They're talking computers."

"All twelve?" questioned Patrick.

"Yes."

"Why do you need twelve computers?"

Mike fidgeted in his chair. Beads of sweat broke out on his forehead. Patrick watched a droplet tumble near his left ear.

"Mikey, are you getting nervous?"

"I have heard enough. If you do not come now, I will leave you here," insisted Dr. Clarke.

"Take no offence when I tell you I'm going to ignore your statement. Mikey take off your dark glasses. I want a Doctor's second opinion on your blindness."

"I don't know what you expect to see?"

Patrick stepped back from the desk and leveled the gun at Mike's heart.

"Take the glasses off, now, or suffer the consequences." His finger constricted on the trigger.

Mike rolled his eyes and removed his dark glasses. "Satisfied?"

"Doc, come see."

"I believe he is telling the truth."

Patrick wagged a finger at Mike's face. "I have inside information you've been very naughty. You haven't been playing by the rules."

"What rules are you referring to?"

"It is time, we went," said Dr. Clarke, more urgently, walking towards the door.

"Hold it, I almost forgot, I've something to show Mikey."

"Patrick, come on, or I will leave you here."

"No, you won't. Stay calm this won't take long. Let's see what you showed Kendal and his Sheila partner he's got licking his shadow." He leaned forward over the desk and pressed twelve monitor buttons to the on position. He watched Mike's face as the monitors revealed their secrets. "Hey Doc, look at this beautiful colour picture of me talking to the two skinny rodents from the lane? How clever. And there's a photo of me unmasked standing at the door to the hotel room, the one I burnt to the ground. It's where Markovic got what he deserved." Patrick glared at Mike. "These computers don't talk, do they?"

Mike's Adam's apple bobbed up and down. "I didn't know the pictures were there."

"You shouldn't have talked to Kendal about me. I know everything about his life. Understand?"

Mike sat frozen to his seat.
“Nod, if you understand.”
Mike slowly nodded.
Patrick’s phone jingled to a short sharp made up tune. “Yeah, who is it? Talk fast; I’m busy.”
“I’ve got some information.”
“RA. Good to hear your voice. Hey Doc, it is RA.”
“My information is very important.”
“Speak.”
“It’ll cost you more money.”
“How much more?” quizzed Patrick.
“A thousand bucks each time I call.”
“Are you trying to blackmail me?”
“I call it a business agreement. Do we have a deal?”
“It depends on how important the info is?”
“Do we have a deal or do I talk to the Police Commissioner?”
“My impatience is growing.”
“Yes or no?” growled RA.
“Deal,” hissed Patrick.
“A silent alarm has gone off. A place called little Mike’s. I thought it might be important for you to know.”
“Have you told Kendal yet?”
“Yes.”
“You shouldn’t have called him.”
“I had to; it’s my job.”
“How long before he arrives?”
“Five minutes.”
“Doc, it’s time to go. RA has called Kendal, and he’s on the way. She’s very naughty. She’ll receive her dues after Mikey.” Patrick picked up the crossbow and quickly reloaded it. “Bye Mike. It’s been a pleasure meeting you.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KENDAL SKIPPED down the front steps of the morgue two at a time. His face portrayed a magical appearance. His voice couldn’t contain his excitement.
“Claire, hand me the car keys. We have to get to 41 Clifton Street.”
“I can’t see why you’re happy all of a sudden?”
“Why shouldn’t I be? The dead female isn’t Tegan. Even though the dead girl was burnt beyond recognition, she’s too tall. Besides, Tegan doesn’t have a nose ring or wears high heels. All these facts add up to; she’s alive.”
Claire resembled a thunderstorm. She pushed her fists onto her hips glaring at Kendal.
“What’s wrong?” he probed.
“The young dead woman lying on the slab in the morgue is someone’s daughter. Don’t you care?”

"Of course, I do. There's nothing I can do about it. When the coroner has made a positive identification, I'll convince Captain Hughes to hand over the case to Philips. Finding the parents of a missing person is his specialty."

"I'm certain, he'll love you," growled Claire, sarcastically. "I get the feeling he doesn't like you."

Kendal walked to the driver's side of his car and accidentally kicked a stone. He watched it skipping across the road and into the gutter. He saw several more stones and repeated the kicking sequence.

"Sugar, what are you doing?"

"I'm kicking stones."

"Why?"

"Every stone I kicked ended at the same place."

Claire slapped the car's roof. "I don't have to major in a science degree to understand why stones, when kicked end up at the same place."

"The destination of the stones represents a particular place and time in the future when Patrick and I will face each other, one on one."

"I think you should visit a shrink. You've been watching too many detective movies." Claire slid into the passenger seat and slammed the door shut. "Coming?"

Kendal slipped behind the steering wheel. "You don't understand. Why are we always one step behind Patrick?"

Claire displayed a blank look.

"He's playing games. We have to think about what he'll do next."

"And where."

"Acknowledge this. Patrick could have killed me several times, yet he let me off the hook. Why?"

Claire kept up her blank look.

"He wants to infuriate me. He wants me to beg to die. I'm supposed to go into the next world not knowing his identity. It's the ultimate win."

"Why? What have you done?"

"Something about the fight my father and I had."

"What fight?"

"When I was seventeen I tracked my father to a sleazy nightclub named Miss Finns. After I had broken his nose, Chuck, the bouncer had me thrown out."

"You interrogated and forced me to spill my guts, and you've never told me of your grey past. I don't think that's fair."

"Sorry, it's personal. I didn't even tell my mother."

Claire remained tight-lipped watching the houses fly past as they drove to 41 Craven Street.

Kendal parked his car behind a fire truck. The smell of smoke was heavy in the air. The firey's had done a great job to contain the fire. Even though the house still looked intact, it was extensively damaged.

"Sugar, I want to apologize for snapping. You're entitled to secrets." She leaned sideways, puckering her lips.

Kendal leaned her way and yanked her cap over her eyes. "I should've said."

Claire opened the car door and caught him up trying to grab the attention of the fire chief who had taken a breather from barking orders into his radio.

"Chief, have you any news?" asked Kendal for the third time.

"Yeah, I estimate the fire's caused damage totaling one hundred thousand bucks. We saved the house just in time. A few more minutes and she'd be an expensive mound of ashes." He pulled a cigar from his pocket, bit off the end and spat it on the ground.

“Have you seen anyone lurking about?” asked Claire.

The over-weight fire chief lit his cigar. “Look doll face, unlike you cops, I’ve been a trifle busy.”

“I think he’s having a bad day,” whispered Claire in Kendal’s ear.

“Probably losing at a poker game and the fire interrupted his first big win of the night.”

Looking at the fire chief’s black-eyed stare, Claire giggled. He retaliated by lifting his middle finger.

“Come on Tiger,” she yelled, shaking her fist. “I haven’t had my workout today. I’ll vent my frustrations out on you.”

Kendal grabbed Claire by the arm and walked several paces away from the fire.

“The time it took you to harass the loser, I’ve been surveying the area. There are two kids squatting next to the big Elm tree across the street counting money.”

“From now on I’m going to call you Eagle Eye,” chuckled Claire.

“Give me a pat on the back later. I’ll grab the girl. Don’t come back alone.”

“Why do you have to nab the girl?”

“The boy looks fitter.”

Both kids saw the Detectives making a beeline for the tree and sprinted off in opposite directions, stuffing money in their pockets as they ran. The boy sprinted up a narrow lane fenced on both sides. The girl ran up the road towards a park.

Kendal stopped at the park gate. His gaze roamed the bushes. He heard a groan. Two feet were poking out from under a hedge, not more than nine feet from where he stood. He grabbed the ankles and dragged the kicking girl to her feet.

“Hello,” she said, sounding innocent.

“Don’t hello me,” Kendal growled. He flashed his police badge in her face. “You’re under arrest for arson.”

“It’s not my fault. I’m innocent. I saw the fire and wanted to watch.”

“Empty your pockets.”

“I know my rights. I’m telling my lawyer you’re harassing me. I’m innocent,” she repeated.

“Empty your pockets,” ordered Kendal.

The girl complied by slowly turning out her pockets.

“I reckon there are a thousand bucks on the ground.”

“If you let me go, I’ll split the money with you,” she whispered.

“Don’t try to bribe your way out of this one.”

The girl made a loud snorting sound, drew back, and spat in Kendal’s face. He grabbed her jumper to wipe his face.

“Stop, you’ll make my new jumper dirty,” she yelled.

“You probably stole it out of the house before you set it alight.”

Unable to break free of the vice-like grip the girl’s shoulders drooped.

Kendal looked around and saw a pool behind a low wire fence. He grinned mischievously at the girl.

“What are you snickering about Coppa?”

“You’re going to give me the information I seek.”

“Never,” she spat.

Kendal dragged the girl by the arm, opened the small wire gate and stared at the pool.

“Any time you want to tell me who put you up to starting the fire, be sure to let me know.”

The girl's eyes widened, watching the gap to the pool shrink. At the edge of the pool, she squirmed against her captor's grip. She grabbed hold of his coat in an attempt to force him to stop pushing her towards the water.

For the umpteenth time, the girl looked over her shoulder. She gulped.

"You wouldn't be so mean."

Kendal shuffled her backwards and made her stand on her toes as she hovered over the edge of the water.

"Try me."

"I can't swim," the girl stammered.

"Good, it'll give you a great reason to start talking. Now tell me who paid you a grand to burn a house?"

The girl clamped her jaw shut.

"I can't hear you."

Kendal spun the girl around and forced her to stare down at the water. Her toes hung precariously over the edge.

"I'm not scared," she advised. "The pool only looks a metre deep."

"You're correct. The other end looks a whole lot deeper," barked Kendal.

"You don't mean what I'm thinking?" she screamed.

"In fact, I am." He dragged the screaming girl to the other end. "You've one last chance before you go for a swim."

"I've nothin' to say."

The look of horror on the girl's face when she overbalanced captured the moment.

A sleeping dog woke to the sound of the splash. Its constant yapping was annoying. The girl screamed obscenities and slipped under the water for the second time. Eyeballing Kendal, she thrashed about the pool, her limbs flying in all directions. He grinned, amused at her pathetic attempt to stop from drowning.

An outside light brightened. A man in his mid-forties parted the curtains over a glass sliding door. Shaking his head, he closely watched the scene. Kendal flashed his police badge at the man.

The girl went under for the third time, re-surfaced and glared at the owner of the pool.

"Help me, I'm drowning," she wailed.

The man opened the sliding door. He stepped outside yelling verbal diarrhea.

"Sir, all's fine, this is police business."

The girl's feet scraped the pool's tiled floor. She stood, pouting. Kendal did all he could to stop from laughing.

"I didn't think you'd drown in half a metre of water." He pointed at a sticker on the pool's wall. "You should've read the fine print. 'Caution, 0.5m deep.'"

"I thought you were letting me drown?"

"You're too valuable a witness. Come out; you look like a drowned rat."

"You could at least give me a handout. I'm half frozen."

"No way, kids love to splash."

The girl pouted and folded her arms.

Kendal sat in the chair he nearly fell over, boasting a smug expression. "Freeze, I've got all night."

The man who had gone back inside the house reappeared. He marched over to the edge of the pool. After looking at the girl, he focused on Kendal.

"You can't leave the young lady in the pool. It's cold."

"The girl has chosen to stay where she is."

"I'm calling the police."

“Sir, use my mobile. Ask for Captain Hughes.”

The man snatched the mobile and walked off whispering into the phone only to return several moments later. “Are you Detective Kendal?”

“Yes.”

“Captain Hughes explained you have everything under control.” The man marched back inside the house, slamming the glass sliding door shut. Hiding behind the curtain, he kept up a silent vigil on the scene outside.

The girl puffed out her cheeks. She started jogging on the spot to keep warm. Occasionally she splashed water at her warden. She soon tired and stood like a statue, sobbing.

“What’s your name, girl?”

“I’m not sayin’ nothin’,” she stammered.

After five long cold minutes, the girl’s lips were blue.

“I’m freezing; please help me out. I don’t think I can walk.”

“What’s your name?”

“Samantha, my friends call me Sam.”

“I don’t trust you, Samantha. The water looks cold.”

As if summing up her options her shoulders slumped. She walked to the pool’s steps and climbed out of the pool.

Kendal displayed a fox like grin and led Sam by the collar back to the car. He opened the rear passenger door and pushed the girl onto the seat next to the boy.

“Did I miss a pool party?” giggled Claire.

“Samantha here insisted on going for a swim.”

“Sam. Name’s Sam,” yelled the girl from the back seat.

“Sam wanted me to join her. She got all upset when I refused. Sam got all huffy and decided to jump in. I was content to be her personal lifeguard.”

“Sounds like a fictitious story, Sugar.”

“Sam’s boyfriend?” asked Kendal, pointing to the boy.

“I don’t know. He hasn’t muttered a single word. The way he stopped running so quick, I thought he was a sheep.” Claire used her fingers to block her nose. “He could use a bath.”

“I thought the smell came from you.”

Claire faked a laugh. “Funny, Sugar, very funny.”

Kendal drove the car a short distance up the road. He parked a stone’s throw away from the burnt house. Facing the kids, he glared at their sullen faces.

“Sugar, nice office, clean windows, love the drapes, bit cramped, though.”

“Do you mind? I want answers to my questions.”

“I’ll make a deal,” said the boy.

“I’m not into deals, but I’m listening,” said Kendal.

“Don’t tell ‘em nothin’,” bellowed Sam.

The boy started sobbing. He frowned at the girl. “I’ve had enough of the street. I’m going home. I want to go back to school. I want a life.”

Sam spat at the boy’s face. “You never did fit into the gang.”

“What’s your name boy?” asked Kendal.

“Brandt.”

“What can you tell us about the fire?” asked Claire.

“All I know is a tall person wearing a black balaclava threw money at our feet. To keep the money, he told us to burn a house to the ground.”

“Go on,” urged Kendal.

“You want to write all my words down?” asked Brandt, bowing his head.

"I'll remember what you have to say, word for word."
The boy looked up. A blank look plastered on his face.
"I have a gifted memory. If it makes you happy, my personal secretary is good at taking dictation." He handed Claire a pocket-sized notebook and pen then faked a grin. Sam rolled her eyes and looked out the window.
"What's your full name, Brandt?" asked Claire.
The boy bit his lower lip. He began to tremble as he shook his head.
"I'm not going to say. The hooded figure said he knows where I live. I will say the job was easy. Find a deserted house. Burn it to the ground."
"Was there anyone home when you torched the house?" asked Claire.
"Nope," insisted the lad. He started to drum his fingers together. "We searched every room just to make sure."
"Why that particular house?" asked Kendal, pointing at the smoldering pile of rubble.
Sam turned from the window. The expression on her face looked sullen. She appeared to be ready to finish her nightmare. "The house has no significance to anything. It was the first one we found empty."
"The person behind the hood, I need to know his identity?" said Kendal.
"There's nothing else to add."
Brandt started sobbing. He again looked at his feet. "Scary. I felt scared of the voice."
"Everyone out," ordered Kendal. "Go, you're both free. Tonight is your lucky night. Let me warn you. If I see either of you again, I won't be so nice."
The kids started to walk off. Brandt turned and ran back to the car.
"Thank you," he sobbed. Extending his hand, he appeared relieved.
"I've just had a thought," advised Kendal. "How would you like a lift home?"
The boy nodded and jumped back into the car.
"Which way is home?" asked Claire.
"At the end of this road turn left. There's a train station not far from here. If I could have some money, I'll catch the next train to Riddles Creek."
"Shame Sam didn't heed my warning," mentioned Kendal, watching the girl sprint towards Melbourne's red-light district.
"She'll come home," said Brandt confidently. "She's my sister."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SEVEN MINUTES, after receiving RA's message, Kendal parked outside Mike's jewellery shop. The two detectives sprinted inside.

Claire was the first one to see the dead security guards. Two red blood-stained arrowheads pointed skywards, one from each lifeless body. She struggled to keep down the vomit rising in her throat.

Kendal toed one guard, depressing the flesh. "They haven't been dead long." He stepped over the corpse and stood pushing his back against the wall.

Claire, still fighting the urge to vomit, covered her mouth, closed her eyes and stepped over the same lifeless guard to join her partner at the door. She reached for and twisted the doorknob. Looking at Kendal, she sent him a short, sharp nod.

Kendal kicked the door open. He only half expected the murderer to be on the other side.

"Police," he yelled.

Holding his gun at arm's length his gaze swept the area. Claire, in a squat position, mirrored his sweep, her finger more than ready to squeeze the trigger of her revolver.

They scrutinized the room. Another two guards to their left died where they fell. The computer monitors had been thrown about the room and smashed. Nothing else looked to have been disturbed. Both Detectives eyeballed Mike's body slumped in the chair.

Claire looked under the desk for more feet. Finding none, she whispered. "This room's clear."

Kendal checked the second room then slipped his handgun back into his shoulder holster. He walked around the room, touching nothing, observing everything. He walked over to the desk. He found the arrow had pierced Mike's heart. He died sitting in the chair.

"Call the coroner and back up; I want this place sealed."

"This is Patrick's handiwork," snarled Claire.

"How on Earth could he have known?" grumbled Kendal.

"He has to be a cop; a bloody angry cop. There can't be any other explanation."

A noise outside in the room forced the Detectives to dive behind the half-open door. A pale skinned man, of medium build, wearing a black suit hesitated at the door. Eventually, he cautiously entered.

"Freeze sucker," yelled Claire, pushing the barrel of her gun between the visitor's shoulder blades.

The man raised his hands.

Kendal handcuffed the man and spun him round. They stared into each other's eyes.

"I've been waiting for you."

"Have we met?" asked the man.

"We met at the house fire. Weakom, start talking. Tell us where you've been?"

"Daniel, start explaining," barked Claire.

"I've been at a business meeting."

"What sort of business?" quizzed Kendal.

"I'm not at liberty to say."

"We have five dead bodies in this place, I think you need a convincing alibi," suggested Claire.

"Honey, you don't, you couldn't possibly think I'd be messed up in all of this?"

She glared at her boyfriend. "I don't know what to think."

"Sit down, Weakom," growled Kendal, pushing him into a chair. "I've some serious questions I want to know the answer to."

"I'm not going to answer any of your questions. In fact, I don't feel good. It must be the stench." His face turned paper white. "I need some fresh air."

Kendal grabbed the man by the shirt collar. "Claire, let's take your friend outside for some fresh air."

Leaning his back against the police car, Weakom's colour slowly returned.

"I've thought things through on the way out. To convince you of my innocence I'll forego a lawyer and explain everything if you take these handcuffs off. They're uncomfortable."

Kendal stepped forward and un-cuffed the man.

"Detective Ambroso, could you leave us for a moment?"

"Why?"

“I’ve my reasons.”

She folded her arms, marching into the jewelry shop.

“Tell me something about the dead men inside?” growled Kendal.

“As I’ve already stated, I’ve been in a very important business meeting. Three influential blokes were also present.”

“Yeah, likely story,” moaned Kendal. “What did you say the meeting was about?”

Weakom lit a cigar and looked away. “I didn’t.”

“Tell me why you left the scene of the fire last night when I told you not to?”

Kendal’s mobile phone rang. He answered it before the second ring. “Hello,” he barked.

“There’s been another fire,” said the deep voice.

“Captain Hughes, how goes there?”

“Shut up. This is serious. The fire is at Lochiel Drive Altona. Go check it out.”

“Yes, Sir,” replied Kendal.

“Claire lives on the same street, doesn’t she?”

“Yes.”

“Is she with you?”

“She’s here.”

The Captain’s sigh came over the line as static. He abruptly hung up.

Refocusing on Weakom, Kendal buried the phone deep in his pocket.

“Don’t move if you know what’s good for you.” He gave the man a fixed stare as he sprinted back inside the shop. He spied Constable Alderson studying the jewellery.

“When did you arrive?”

“Just now. I thought you might need back up.”

“I want you outside, watching Weakom.”

Satisfied she had Weakom in her sights, Kendal marched into Mike’s office.

“Claire, there’s been another fire. This time, the address is in Altona.”

“Where exactly in Altona?” she asked.

Kendal slipped his left arm around her waist, forcing her to keep moving. Time was running out to find little Tacca alive. Patrick seemed to be turning into a violent and volatile arsonist. He was now intent on killing anyone who got too close. He thought back to the dream he had and started to tremble at the thought of accidentally killing Tegan. He didn’t want to arrange her funeral.

Claire dug her heels in and twisted out of his grip.

“Before we take another step I want you to tell me where exactly in Altona the fire is?”

“Your street,” Kendal announced.

He pushed her forward into a run. Outside, he stared wide-eyed at Alderson.

“Where’s Weakom? He was about to inform me of the reason for his leaving the scene of the fire the other night.”

“He ran off before I could reach him.”

“I told you to watch him.” Kendal’s voice sounded hostile.

“The bloke gave me the slip. I started to chase him, but I lost him in the dark.”

“Call it in. I want Weakom found.”

“Sugar, let’s go. We can’t do any more here,” advised Claire.

Wide-eyed Kendal looked at her. He nodded and ran to the car.

In silence, they drove at breakneck speed to Altona.

The fireys were starting to mop up at the block of units in Lochiel Street when Kendal and Claire arrived. Several police cars had the area blocked off, forcing them to walk two hundred feet to the burnt-out apartments. The lack of wind caused the stench

of burnt material to lay dormant over the area. The once attractive apartment block resembled a bombed war zone. The grandeur of the barbecue area hadn't escaped the fire's wrath either.

"Detective Kendal," called Fire Chief Bradwood, walking over. "It's a gruesome sight inside units one and two. You might want your female partner to wait outside."

"What's the total number of bodies?"

"It looks like husband and wife in the first unit. The second apartment is a mirror image of the first. The four corpses were elderly. No great loss."

Claire's face turned anger red. She grabbed the fire Chief around the throat, blocking off his air supply.

"If I hear you speak those words again I won't hold back my fists."

The man gulped for air under his full salt and pepper beard.

"Claire, let him go," ordered Kendal. He made a flippant hand gesture to dismiss the man's sarcastic comment.

She dropped him and marched off in the direction of unit one.

"You ought to keep a leash on that woman."

Claire whipped around on her toes. Sprinting back to the man massaging his neck she sent him a double-fisted punch, one to the jaw, the other to his beer gut. The bloke dropped to his knees and studied the ground close up. Claire caught up to Kendal walking to unit one's front door. When he looked at her, she was displaying a proud expression.

"You really should control your temper. It'll get you into trouble one day," announced Kendal.

"He asked for it."

"Yes, he did. I'm glad you're on my side."

Both Detectives entered unit one simultaneously. Water was still dripping from the ceiling. The smell of cooked flesh hovered like a cloud. They immediately started searching the two-room apartment looking for clues.

"No prizes for guessing the arsonist," said Claire.

"There's not much left to look at. As usual, Patrick's done a good job."

Unit two was exactly as fire Chief Bradwood had described; 'a burnt-out shell and a total wreck.'

"Sugar, it's late. Let's go back to your place. I'm tired. We can think clearer in the morning after a few hours of sleep."

This time, it was Kendal who agreed. Twenty minutes after walking into the house Claire fell onto the bed. She was asleep in a microsecond. Kendal happened to be the opposite. He paced the study floor most of the night going over clues. He climbed the stairs and fell into bed at 4:00am.

Kendal woke to his home phone ringing at 6:31am.

"Morning," he moaned into the phone.

"Hey Coppie, did I wake you?" asked the excited voice.

"In fact, you did."

"Good. I want you to guess what today is."

"I'm not about to join in on a guessing game at 6:32 in the morning."

"You're such a wet blanket. Now I know why you can't catch me. I'm bursting at the seams to tell you my news. I'll give you a snippet of a clue."

"Go ahead, tell me."

"Today's the day."

"The day for what?" Kendal started pacing the floor to force his brain into wake mode.

“Guess.”

“Patrick, you scum bag. Your days of freedom are numbered.”

“How do you figure? You haven’t a clue of my identity.”

“Yes, I do,” Kendal lied. “Now tell me the news?”

“Let’s play a new game.”

Kendal flopped back onto the bed. “I’m listening.”

“Let’s play, catch me if you can before the next fire, my big finale.”

“Only if I can talk to Tegan.”

“She’s asleep.”

“Prove it.”

“No,” Patrick hissed.

“I won’t play.”

“Be warned, you should agree. You have until 10:00pm tonight.”

Kendal heard a click. The phone went dead.

Claire had trudged along the hallway the moment she heard the phone ring. Hearing Kendal talking she opened the door. She stood at the threshold. Kendal noted her bed hair formed a bird’s nest on top of her head. She looked how he felt, lousy. Claire stood rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

“Coffee?” she grunted.

Kendal nodded. Returning his stare to the phone, he wondered how Patrick always knew of his where-a-bouts?

He dressed and walked downstairs and into the kitchen to watch the antics of an over-tired woman rummaging through the cupboards for the coffee jar. She turned her head and saw his glazed look.

“What, Sugar?”

“Nothing,” he replied.

Kendal’s mobile phone rang. For several moments, he let it ring.

“Sugar, answer the bloody phone. My head’s throbbing enough.”

He counted three more shrills then snatched it from his pocket.

“Kendal,” he growled.

Constable Alderson’s cheerful voice came through the receiver.

“Hughes wants to see you and Ambroso in his office. You need to move your arse; he sounds pissed off.”

“Thanks for the message. Before we arrive at Police Headquarters, I need you to look up all the tattoo parlors and archery clubs in the vicinity of The Children’s Hospital.”

“I’ll have the addresses by the time you arrive.”

Kendal snapped his mobile phone shut. Slipping it back into his pocket he heard it ringing again.

“Hey kid, talk,” bellowed Patrick.

“Dad,” said a sobbing voice.

Instantly alert, Kendal stood to full height listening for a clue to Tegan’s location.

“Tegan, are you okay?”

“Yes. Patrick said I’m only to say what’s written on the paper in front of me.”

“I understand, little Tacca.”

Tegan cleared her throat. “I’m okay. I’m not hungry or thirsty. I don’t know where I am. Love you. Bye.”

The phone went dead.

Kendal appeared to be on the verge of crying. Seeing Claire staring at him he blinked his tears away.

“Sugar, did you just speak to Tegan?”

“Yes.”

“Excellent,” chirped Claire.

“Yes, it is. We have a busy day ahead. First off is breakfast. According to Alderson, the Captain wants to see us at Police Headquarters. She stressed, ASAP. I want to visit the archery range, and later, we have to pay a visit to Dr. Ashlee Clarke. All this has to be completed before 10:00 tonight.”

“Why by then?”

“Patrick’s big finale is at 10:00pm. I believe Tegan will be there.”

“Did you ask her where she is?”

“No. Patrick made her read from a pre-written note.”

“Scumbag,” growled Claire. She walked back across the room to recommence making breakfast.

The smell of bacon and eggs soon wafted into the air.

Kendal impatiently paced the floor, staring at the clock every few minutes. At 7:00am, he phoned his wife at Aura Lakes. In a couple of minutes, he had brought her up to speed on the case. She could only manage a few grunts at her end of the phone. He changed the subject and mentioned he’d talked to Tegan. He could feel her hope rise. He naturally left out many details of the case and all the dangerous scenes. He talked with Tani and his mother-in-law, who couldn’t resist giving her ugly opinion of it all.

At 7:23am, he ended the call.

Both Detectives walked into Police Headquarters at exactly 8:00am. A drunken man handcuffed to a constable and nursing a bloody left ear was in the process of being dragged towards a closed door. A woman in her early twenties looked to be trying to hide a black eye. At some time in the night, her dress was torn. A rough knot couldn’t stop the material from hanging off her shoulder. A rookie cop was helping her walk to interview room five.

“Obviously, a domestic dispute,” said Kendal, in Claire’s ear.

She nodded and turned her nose up at the lift door. “I’ll see you upstairs.” She smacked her backside. “I need the exercise.”

Kendal chuckled nervously at the thought of physical exercise. It certainly wasn’t his strong point. When the lift doors opened, he stepped into the lift. He leaned forward and pressed the fourth-floor button.

The first thing Kendal saw when the doors opened was his partner’s grin. He shook his head.

“You should be in the Olympics,” mentioned Kendal.

Claire grabbed him around the waist as she pushed him along the corridor to the Captain’s office. Her knuckles tap-danced against the timber door.

“Enter,” bellowed a deep voice.

Kendal opened the door. Stepping into the room, Claire brought up the rear and closed the door. Captain Hughes was standing at the window wearing a tan, open-necked shirt, and black trousers. He turned to face the arrivals.

“Two of my favourite detectives are here. Come in and take a seat.”

“Said the spider to the fly,” remarked Claire under her breath.

“Morning Cap. I like what you’ve done to the office. I can see you have a new desk, new filing cabinet and I love the view of the traffic outside.”

“Shut up Kendal. You know this place is only temporary. I’m moving into my refurbished office at lunchtime. Now sit.” Switching his attention, he smiled at Claire. “I want a full update on this pyromaniac you’ve been chasing.”

Kendal was about to sit on the vacant chair on Claire's left when he spied a photo of Captain Hughes on the desk. He stopped and studied it.

"What's wrong?" growled the Captain.

"Nice photo. I didn't know your middle name started with P. Captain William P Hughes. What does the P stand for?"

"Shut up and sit down."

"I was only wondering?" Smiling at Claire, Kendal sat at the desk, leaning forward on his elbows. "What does the P stand for, Cap? I didn't hear what you said."

"None of your bloody business," he barked. "It's my secret, and you, Kendal, will never find out. I want to know how close you two are in finding Patrick."

"Cap, I agree on the idea Claire said at our last meeting."

She glared at her partner. Her fingers slowly curled in on themselves showing white knuckles.

"What did she say?" probed Hughes.

"I think Patrick's a cop."

"I don't pay you to think. I pay you to know. Have you discovered any proof of this preposterous accusation? Or is this a fantasy you've conjured up to protect your partner and save your own arse?"

"No. I don't have proof, yet."

The silence in the office felt nauseating. The iron-faced Captain started drumming his short fingernails on the desktop. Kendal felt certain everyone in the room could hear his heart pounding.

"I need proof," yelled Captain Hughes. He leaned forward, the volume of his voice dropped to a tolerable level. "My hands are tied until I see proof. Kendal, I'm giving you to the end of the day. If you haven't found Patrick by then, I'll handball the case to Philips. Now get out of my office."

Both Detectives marched towards the door. Kendal noticed Claire twisting the doorknob like it was his neck. He could sense her fingernails had bypassed the claws and gone straight to daggers. Very long sharp daggers. He shuddered. Inwardly he could hear her screaming. You crossed the floor, why? You're a traitor. The murderous stare would come next, followed by the silent treatment.

Kendal stepped into the corridor and gently shut the door. He flashed Claire a cursory glance waiting for the vocal volcano to erupt. He didn't have to wait long.

Claire raised her voice to fever pitch. Her poison words quickly flooded the air.

"What the hell was that all about? You deliberately stole my idea so you can receive all the glory. You're just a lowlife traitor."

"Claire, settle. I can explain." Kendal hoped the calm sound of his voice might be enough to tame the savage beast. He looked into his partner's angry black eyes. They chilled him to the bone. It was like stepping from the warm Captain's office, into a freezer. If it were possible for her eyes to change to the colour of storm clouds, he would've sworn it in a court of law.

Claire leveled her fist at her partner's nose. "If you don't make the explanation fast, we're through as partners. Be warned my fist is going to wipe your nose from your face."

Kendal beckoned his partner to follow him to the lift doors. He pressed the lift's call button and faced the woman's anger head on.

"I'm waiting," she barked, tapping her foot on the floor.

"You heard the Captain. He didn't believe the story that Patrick's a cop. I don't either."

"So why did you mention it?" she spat.

The lift doors rolled silently sideways. Kendal waited for three office ladies to exit the lift and walk off in the direction of the tearoom before recommencing his explanation.

"You'd have been yelled at. Your good reputation might have been shot. On the other hand, I've nothing to lose."

"You're a bloody good cop," Claire whispered. "Sorry Sugar, I didn't know you were protecting me."

"Think nothing of it. If we don't obtain proof, we have nothing. I need you to visit the morgue. I want an autopsy report on the old couple. I need to know if they died of smoke inhalation or by another means. I'm going to take Constable Alderson to the archery club. I've a hunch Patrick will turn up."

"I'll catch you up in two hours."

"Claire, don't be late. My life might depend on it."

She nodded, and they went their separate ways.

Kendal watched her run out of the building's main exit. He then switched his attention to the main desk.

"Constable Alderson, let's go. Bring the addresses I asked you to find."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE GARDEN Lodge nursing home where Marg's father, Earl Armanti had been living out the remainder of his days was an easy twenty-minute drive from Aura Lake. The home just happened to be top of the range. The facility included great security, excellent food, and friendly staff. After surviving the war years, Earl worked hard. He planned down to the letter where he and his wife would see out their lives.

"Good morning Dr. Clarke," called the security guard. He was standing at the main door to the foyer. "Please forgive my staring at your chest I'd been trying to read your name tag. I haven't seen you here before, and I've misplaced my glasses."

"You are forgiven."

Three steps from the main entrance the guard reached out and opened the glass door. Open palming his hand at the interior of the building he smiled at the good Doctor.

"It's going to be a warm day," he mentioned, making idle chatter.

"Yes, it will be," replied the doctor. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness."

"The pleasure is all mine," said the guard, his smile widening. "Will you be long?"

"No. I'd say no more than twenty minutes."

The security guard frowned. He appeared to be contemplating why anyone, especially a doctor would go out of their way to make a cursory visit.

"I am here to visit an old friend before I start another busy day," stated the Doctor.

"Enjoy your visit," replied the guard.

Dr. Clarke gestured a friendly wave. Marching past the front desk, she watched the middle-aged woman typing on a computer keyboard. The woman's blonde hair stopped vibrating the moment she lifted her head.

"Excuse me," called the receptionist.

The doctor flicked a blue stare at the woman.

"Is there something wrong?"

"You forgot to sign in."

"Forgive me it is my first time here."

The receptionist stepped from behind the computer. Her skirt brushed the branch of a bonsai plant on her approach to the small open glass window.

"I'm sorry to have to stop you, Doctor," said the woman. "The nursing home has rules." She picked up a red leather-bound book and dropped it firmly onto the ledge of the office window. "After you've signed in, don't forget to wear the visitor's tag."

Dr. Clarke smiled and printed her name in the book. She downed her pen and snatched up a visitor's tag out of the small white plastic basket next to the window.

"Thanks for your help," jeered Doctor Clarke. Turning her back to the receptionist, she started to walk away.

"Doctor, you forgot to write down the name of the person you're visiting."

"I am seeing Earl Armanti."

The receptionist thrust the book at Doctor Clarke. Back stepping she quickly snatched up the pen and scribbled his name.

"You're the second visitor to see Earl this morning."

"Is the visitor still here?"

"No, Patrick signed out ten minutes ago."

"Who did you say the visitor was?"

The woman rolled her hazel eyes. "I do hate repeating my words. I thought doctors were supposed to have good hearing. I can understand the general public, but a doctor?"

"Please, it is extremely important."

"Patrick," blurted the receptionist.

"In which room can I find Earl Armanti?"

"Take the elevator at the end of this corridor. Room seventeen is directly opposite the lift door on the first floor. You can't miss it."

"Thank you for your help."

Settling back behind the computer screen, the receptionist watched the doctor walk to the elevator.

Inside the lift, Dr. Clarke pushed the first-floor button. She watched the doors close.

The doors slid open opposite room seventeen. It was a bright, warm, two-bed, room. Clarke strolled up to and stood over the bed closest to the door. The male occupant appeared to be asleep.

"Earl Armanti, are you awake?"

Doctor Clarke waited a moment before calling his name again. The man didn't respond.

"You are a very heavy sleeper, Earl." She looked across the room towards the window. "Do you know where the person is who occupies the other bed?"

Again, Earl didn't respond.

Dr. Clarke sighed and took hold of Earl's hand. "You have very cold hands." She checked his pulse. "Now I know why you did not say hello." She gently placed his hand back onto the sheet. Bowing her head, she walked back to the reception desk.

"Back so soon?" chirped the receptionist.

"Yes. Mr. Armanti has passed away. Could you inform his wife?"

"Certainly, Doctor," whispered the woman. "You needn't worry; I'll arrange everything."

"Thank you."

Dr. Clarke turned and walked towards the main door. The security guard stepped across her path and stabbed the buttons, 21450, on the security pad and opened the door.

"Goodbye, Doctor. Come again."

She nodded and walked to her car parked seventy-nine easy paces from the front door. The guard watched her open the driver's door and slip behind the steering wheel.

"Excuse me Doc," said a deep voice from behind her.

The woman cringed. Her pupils darted back and forth.

"Yes," she choked.

"Take me home."

Looking into the rear-view mirror, Doctor Clarke stiffened. "How did you get in here?"

"Hey, you left the door unlocked. Hold on; I'll climb into the front.

"Patrick, why are you here?"

"I came to visit Earl."

"Did you murder him?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I hate what Kendal did to you. He's a monster. He had no right to grope you like he did."

"Earl Armanti is innocent of all this mess."

"His daughter married Kendal."

"The accident happened a long time ago. I have forgiven Kendal. You should too."

"Never," growled Patrick.

"I have told you countless times over the years the incident was nothing more than an accident," explained Doctor Clarke.

"It was no accident," barked Patrick.

"Give up the chase."

"No. Besides, you need me more than I need you," stated Patrick. "Hey Doc, do you want me to prove it?"

Patrick produced a syringe and pointed the needle at Dr. Clarke's leg.

She squirmed in an attempt to move her leg away.

"Do you agree?" probed Patrick. "By the expression on your face, I can tell you need more convincing?" The point of the needle touched the Doctor's leg. "I reckon you've forgotten about all those tears you cried from the stress, the anguish and the pain Kendal put you through. How one forgets."

"Time heals," sobbed Doctor Clarke.

"Have you forgotten how I witnessed your nightmares first hand? For months, I heard you crying in your sleep, 'why me?' Your anger, your pain, they ate away at me too. No, Dr. Ashlee Clarke, I won't stop. Vengeance is mine. All mine."

Dr. Clarke lifted her hands and covered her eyes. Her sobs quickly escalated.

"You win Patrick. You are right as usual. You were there when my parent's house burnt down. You were the one who told them we were playing hide and seek. You were the one who told them you were inside searching and I was outside behind the woodpile. You were the one punished; not me." She dropped her hands. Tears streamed down her face. She stared at Patrick. "You should not have taken the punishment for me."

"You're scared of me, aren't you?" quizzed Patrick.

"Yes."

"Good."

"It's not good. When we first met, you were a handsome, decent, kind, caring person. You were always there when I needed you. Now, after all, the years I've known you, anger has turned you ugly."

Patrick grinned and threw the needle on the floor.

"I'd never hurt you, Doc. Here, wipe your eyes," said Patrick handing over a tissue. She obeyed. Through the rear-view mirror, she saw the security guard studying her from a window. She watched him walk to the building's main entrance, step outside and talk on his two-way radio and point to the car.

"Patrick, talk fast. Tell me about your visit; we have to leave."

"Drive, I'll tell you on the way."

The car's engine roared to life. The guard's large stomach swayed as he broke into a run. A shower of stones from the car's spinning wheels forced him to double over and cover his head.

Dr. Clarke watched the guard's expression in the rearview mirror as she drove towards the front gate. He waved his arms as if he had surrendered. Patrick moved the rear-view mirror and watched the guard walk back to the building's main entrance. After the car had turned the corner, he studied the reflection in the mirror.

"Forget what I said earlier. You'll always be handsome to me," said Dr. Clarke.

Patrick grinned and slapped her leg. "I love the new perfume you bought last week. Your new hairstyle is tops. The blonde ponytail makes you look ten years younger."

"Stop stalling. Tell me about your visit?"

"Why?"

"So, I can cover your tracks."

"I arrived early in one of my many disguises."

"Which disguise did you use?" questioned Doctor Clarke.

"The full beard grey hair, dark glasses and I used my old walking stick. The woman at the reception desk couldn't do enough for me. She fetched the sign in book, escorted me to the lift and walked me to where Earl Armanti was lying in bed, staring at the ceiling. After she left, I introduced myself. I did feel annoyed when he didn't respond. As fate would have it, my beard became itchy. I took it off and placed it on the bed."

"Did he see you?"

"Yes, he discovered my identity. I did the only thing I could."

"You murdered him. You murdered a harmless old man."

"He helped breed a Kendal. I gave him an injection; Euthanasia. I told him it's for his own good."

When Patrick started to laugh, Dr. Clarke lifted her left hand and massaged her temple.

"You should've seen the look of anger in the old man's eyes when he realized he had seconds to live."

"You should not have done it."

"Hey, I did him a favour. The stupid old man had dementia and was going to die anyway."

Dr. Clarke stopped the car at the side of the road. She lowered her gaze to look at her feet.

"Hey, that's not the exciting part," chirped Patrick.

Doctor Clarke stared into Patrick's murderous eyes.

"There is more?" she asked.

"Yes. It's not my fault Kendal changed the rules."

Two buses, each one packed to the roof of screaming school children going on an excursion zoomed past. The majority of the boys were hanging their arms or head out of the window. Others were throwing rubbish at the people walking along the footpath.

"Those kids are our future," spat Patrick. "They're brats. I've no time for brats. They will all be adults someday. After the flogging, I received from my cop father over the accidental fire, he said I started deliberately when we were kids, I hate all male

adults. I made sure my father died in the next fire. I don't reckon nothing can squeal louder than he did. If you're wondering about the man who attacked you after the 'accident,' as you called it, in the nightclub where you were dancing, he died the same way as my father."

"Do you know anything about what happened to the old man who sleeps opposite Earl Armanti?" asked Doctor Clarke.

"Sure, I do. It's the exciting part I haven't told you yet. The old fella shuffled out of the toilet at the wrong time. He saw me give the injection to Earl. He was appalled at what I was doing. He croaked he was going to tell the security guard. He forced me into breaking his neck. Someone will find him sitting on the toilet sooner or later. Whichever of the two is first, I don't care. He should never have threatened to snitch on me."

"Patrick, I have decided I do not want you in my life anymore."

"Doc, I don't believe you. You broke the rules when you were seven by touching the petrol can. You asked me for help. I took your punishment, and now you say you don't want me in your life. You owe me. I told you back then no one will touch you again. If they do, I'll punish them. Kendal broke my rules; he must be punished. Now if you don't mind. Thanks for the lift. There's the hospital. You can walk the remainder of the way? I've a few loose ends to tie off. Don't forget one important thing, I didn't change the rules."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KENDAL SNATCHED the address he asked constable Alderson to find out of her hand.

"The tattoo parlors will be our first destination. We'll visit them on the way to the archery club."

"Ambroso is your partner. Why must you drag me along?" she probed.

"If my hunch is correct, you'll find out." He turned his back on the woman waiting for the verbal response.

He didn't have to wait long.

"What hunch? What are you up to?"

"Soon all your questions will be answered."

Alderson marched up to Kendal. She grabbed him by the arm.

"Does Captain Hughes know I'll be missing from the front desk?"

Kendal returned a non-committal expression.

"If Hughes finds out about this your head will roll."

Kendal squared his shoulders. "Let me worry about Hughes. To answer your question, 'why you,' let me say, I have a few 'whys' of my own. Besides, think of the big bucks you'll earn when you do the overtime."

"Give me one minute," said Alderson. "Nature calls."

Eight minutes of silent driving and Alderson started again.

"Detective, you are an asshole."

Kendal parked his car in Lygon Street not far from the children's hospital. Stepping down onto the footpath he immediately marched towards a small shop. He read the sign someone painted on the glass front door.

‘Tattoos here.’

The dirty shop window, papers and yellowing envelopes littering the floor, revealed the shop had been vacant for a long time.

“Alderson, don’t get out of the car, this isn’t the address we want,” called Kendal.

He drove around the corner and parked outside the next address. The shop looked sandwiched between a small chemist and a liquor store. Overhead fluorescent tubes lit up the eighty square feet of interior shop space. Eight chairs had been lined up along the glass shop front, four on each side of the door. Every seat was vacant. A wrestler-sized man wearing faded blue jeans and thongs on his feet looked busy applying a tattoo of a woman’s head to his forearm. He stopped his work and looked up when Kendal and Alderson opened the door and walked in.

“G’day. Help you, folks?” The man’s stool squeaked as he stood. His dyed jet black off the shoulder hair and beard were the same length.

“I’m Detective Kendal; this is Constable Alderson.” They both flashed their police badge.

The man puffed out his large stomach and big chest. His voice sounded gruff.

“I’ve done nothin’ illegal Coppa. If you’re here to harass me or give me grief, two bkie mates are on their way. As a matter of fact, me mates are here now.”

“Sir, we’re not here to cause trouble,” advised Kendal.

His words were drowned out by the tattooist’s yell.

Two men, displaying colourful tattoos under their black leather vests, yanked open the glass front door. A tall, thin woman biker in heeled boots and tight fitting blue jeans strolled in seconds later. Her long hair was the colour of beach sand. Each strand appeared to have been green tipped. She locked the front door and stood next to her companion. She pushed both her palms onto her hipbones. Roaming her murderous stare between Kendal and Alderson she spat at the floor they stood on.

Reaching for her gun, Alderson took two steps back. One bkie cracked eight finger knuckles. In a show of anger, he slammed his fist into the palm of his other hand.

“I repeat what I just said,” insisted Kendal.

“What did you say?” asked one of the bkie men.

“We’re not here to arrest anyone or cause trouble.”

The rough sounding bkie relaxed slightly. “Name’s Ted.”

Kendal stepped forward, pushing out his hand. The biker showed sixteen yellow teeth. Reaching out they pressed the flesh.

“I hope the dog in blue is as friendly,” growled the woman biker, staring at Alderson’s gun.

“Constable put the gun away. We’re all friends here,” ordered Kendal.

She exhaled and housed her gun. Ted’s black leather clad mate stood in an attack stance.

The owner of the tattoo parlor waved his hand in the air.

“Jake, settle. Give the coppa’s a minute.”

Uncoiling his curled fingers, he appeared to relax, if only slightly.

Kendal faced the owner of the tattoo parlor. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“Fred,” snarled the man.

“Obviously, a false name,” suggested Alderson.

“How many years have you been in this place?” quizzed Kendal.

“Two,” replied Fred.

“Ever been in trouble with the law?” questioned Alderson.

“I refuse to answer. I’ll have it known; I resent your question.”

“Have you any idea of the name and whereabouts of the last tattooist who ran this shop?” asked Kendal.

“Yes, Fawkner Cemetery. Clive died two years ago just after I took over. He was my older brother.”

“My condolences to you, and your family,” said Kendal. “Do you know if Clive ever spoke about drawing a tattoo of a butterfly on a seven-year-old girl some years back?”

“Not that I’m aware.”

“Thank you, for your time. Constable, let’s go. This hunch is a dead end.”

Thirteen minutes later, Kendal drove onto the grounds of the only archery club on his list. He parked his car next to a sky-blue weatherboard shed, estimating the size of the building at being no larger than a small bedroom.

Walking into the office, a wiry built man wearing black jeans and a plain black T-shirt stepped from behind an old table. The usual cordial welcome came next as the man extended his hand. Kendal flashed his police badge at the man, introduced himself and Constable Alderson.

The man’s nostrils flared as he pulled his hand away.

“How can I help you?”

“I’m not certain if you can,” quoted Kendal.

The man roamed his stare between the two Detectives. Alderson glanced at her temporary partner. Kendal felt a chill descend to the floor of the small office.

“Your name is?” asked Kendal.

“Sweed,” he replied.

“What’s your full name?”

“You can call me Mr. Sweed or P.S. Ask anyone around here they know me by my initials.”

“What does P.S. stand for?” asked Kendal.

Sweed remained tightlipped.

Constable Alderson balanced her weight on both feet. Her right hand touched her gun. “You were asked a question.”

Sweed put his hands into the air. “Okay, okay. I’m Patrick Sweed. Satisfied?”

“Didn’t your mother like you?” probed Alderson.

“No, she didn’t. Before you start on the jokes, I was bullied at school over my name. I’ve heard the lot by people like you, so you needn’t bother.”

“Interesting name,” stated Kendal. “What is it you do around here?”

“Sir, I own and run this place.”

“Do you have good insurance?”

“If you’re referring to life insurance, yes, I have plenty. One can’t be too careful. An arrow might accidentally stray off its prescribed course.”

“I’m searching for someone.”

Alderson coughed into her clenched fist.

“Correction, we’re searching for someone.”

Glancing sideways Kendal noticed her face had taken on the look of a thundercloud.

“We have a lot of people on the books,” advised Sweed.

“The person we’re looking for is an excellent archer?”

“Male or female?” asked Sweed.

“That’s the million-dollar question.”

Sweed sat on a plastic chair, reached into an open drawer and extracted a large green folder.

“In here are the names and addresses of everyone who comes to this archery club.”

“May I have a look?”

“No. I mean yes. Let’s put it this way; it wouldn’t do you any good, they’re just names on paper. However, the small black book in my pocket has the names of our elite archers.” He produced the book and dropped it on the desk.

Kendal picked up the thin book. Opening it, he flipped through the lined pages. After dropping it on the desk he looked directly at Sweed’s blue eyes. “Four names. There are only four names in the entire book.”

“Yes. There are only four elite archers who use this facility. Why do you want to find them?”

“I didn’t say I want to find them.”

“I took it for granted you wanted to question them about something.”

“Only one. Is it okay for us to take a look around?”

“Feel free, Detectives. Be warned don’t walk too close to a target. We have a few bad archers in today. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I’ll keep your statement in mind.”

Constable Alderson kept up her stare on Sweed while they walked out of the office. Kendal pointed to a young girl archer lining up a bull’s-eye target. He beckoned the rookie to follow as the girl let the arrow travel to the target.

“It sounds like Sweed is hiding something,” mentioned Alderson.

“Yes.”

“Tell me why you want me here?”

“You’ll know soon enough. To bide our time, let’s move closer to the archers.”

“What are we waiting for?”

Kendal put his finger to his lips.

“Okay wise arse, you win. I’ll shut up.” Alderson threw her arms up in defeat.

The girl archer looked to be in her late teens. Kendal folded his arms and watched her re-load another arrow. She raised her bow in readiness to shoot at the bull’s-eye.

“Great balance and poise,” commented Alderson. “Her professionalism is second to none.”

Studying the area, Kendal grunted. His brain dropped into overdrive. Ten targets were lined up at various distances. The car park had eight cars. One had to be Sweed’s, the other was his, and the other remaining cars belonged to the two young archers. He frowned. The other four vehicles had no drivers. His frown worsened. He squinted in the sunlight.

“What’s wrong?”

“Sweed reported there are several bad archers in today. Several are more than two.” Kendal rubbed his chin. “The ends of the string don’t meet.”

“You’re a weird man.”

Kendal ignored Alderson’s taunt by looking around more carefully, taking in every detail.

“Where are the other archers?” He mumbled louder than he intended to.

“Maybe one car belongs to Patrick?”

Kendal flashed Alderson a sinister look.

“Or maybe he has another accomplice?”

“Maybe,” mumbled Alderson.

“There’s not enough breeze to fill the wind sock mounted on the office roof. Let’s move closer to the girl.”

Kendal waited for the arrow to hit the bull’s-eye before talking to the girl. The hair on the back of his neck began to prickle. He had a gut feeling things were about to get bad, real, bad. The missing drivers had to be the missing link. He stepped forward.

“Excuse me, Miss.”

“What do you want? You’re breaking my concentration and interrupting my practice.” She lowered her bow and displayed an angry stare.

Kendal flashed his police badge, stepped off the pea stones and onto the grass. He introduced himself. The girl gently placed the bow on the grass.

“Can I ask you a few questions?”

The girl nodded, positioning herself into a relaxed stance.

“Have you ever used a crossbow?”

“No never. I like a bow and arrow. I love the way it feels. The power it has in the taut string.”

“Have you ever seen anyone using a crossbow in this place?” asked Alderson, stepping onto the grass.

“No only a bow and arrow.” The girl reached up and re-tied her dull red ponytail. “If anyone uses a crossbow around here it might be on another day. I only come here when I need to. I find it therapeutic. Shooting arrows always help me to let off steam if I’ve had a hard day at work.”

Kendal raised his eyebrows. Alderson scrunched her nose.

“You look like you should try it some time, Detective.”

He raised his hands in alarm. “I prefer my Smith and Wesson.”

The girl grinned and battered her long eyelashes. “Maybe we should get together. I could give you a private lesson.”

Before he could answer, Kendal heard a moan. He turned in time to witness Alderson dropping to her knees. Blood was pouring onto the ground. His eyes widened. His hunch was right on the money. Things were about to get real ugly. Searching the area, Kendal’s hand pulled out his Smith and Wesson that was nestled under his arm. He knew he had to be fast. He couldn’t afford to fumble. His fingers eased onto the gun’s trigger. In one quick movement, he dropped to one knee. His eyes and gun swept the area. Nothing, he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

Kendal saw a figure step from the office and start to walk his way with one hand behind his back.

“Freeze, Sweed,” yelled Kendal. He reached out his hand and dragged the girl down. “Lay flat.” He aimed his gun at Sweed’s torso and yelled. “Lay on the ground, Sweed. This is your last warning.”

A bloodstain formed on Sweed’s shirt as he too crumbled to the ground. Kendal leapt over Alderson’s body. Her face had already drained of colour. She started coughing up blood.

“I have to confess something before I have to explain my intentions to my maker. I only hope he can forgive me.”

Kendal didn’t hear her. He was already on his mobile phone requesting backup and an ambulance. He looked up to study Sweed’s body. It already looked lifeless.

“I have to finish my confession before it’s too late,” Alderson repeated.

Kendal looked into her dying green eyes. Blood started dripping down her cheeks.

“Come closer,” she gargled.

Kendal sat Alderson’s limp body against his leg. The crossbow arrow had missed her heart by a full three millimeters.

‘Not quite the perfect shot after all,’ he thought.

Alderson’s breathing sounded quick and shallow.

“Rookie Alderson, there’s a good chance you’ll live,” Kendal lied.

She groped for his coat. “Patrick and I teamed up three months ago.”

“Why? Tell me why?”

She gulped for air as her body lurched upwards. The pool of blood on her uniform enlarged.

"To bring you down," she mumbled. "I never thought it would end this way."

"I don't understand."

"Shit. You arrested my sister for prostitution four months ago. Her first night in jail was her last. Because of you, she died in prison." Alderson reached up, grabbing Kendal's coat sleeve. "She was sent to the wrong prison. She was only sixteen."

"Who is Patrick?"

Alderson's eyes closed. "Patrick is...!" her chest heaved as she gasped for air. "Patrick and....!" Her body slumped when she exhaled her last breath.

"Rookie Alderson, tell me Patrick's identity? Come on RA, tell me."

Feeling Alderson's body slump, Kendal placed her head gently on the grass and closed her eyes.

The shadow of a person covered RA's face. Standing in front of Kendal the person spoke in a gruff voice.

"Hey Kendal, don't move, my gun is already aimed at your head. Drop your weapon and toss the snub nose strapped to your ankle to the wind. No games, no tricks, and don't say you lost the Beretta, or it's at the police station for cleaning. I made sure RA gave you another when you were at Police Headquarters."

Kendal's gaze darted upwards. He needed to squint in the sunlight. "Patrick," he snarled.

"Throw your guns away."

Kendal switched the safety on, threw the Smith and Wesson and the snub nose onto the grass. He raised an eyebrow at the approaching sirens. Inwardly he hoped Claire was leading several police cars. He needed to find a way to keep Patrick occupied, even if it meant taking a bullet. If he moved fast enough, there was a good chance he'd only be shot in the leg.

Kendal stood and moved a half step closer.

Patrick stepped back. "I hear sirens. It's time for me to say good-bye."

"Leaving so soon? The party is only just warming up."

"You're too much of a wet blanket. You'd spoil any party."

The girl archer squatted behind one of the target squares thirty feet from where RA was shot. She snuck a look around the target's edge, lifted her bow and lined up the hooded person. She pulled back on the string.

"You won't shoot," bellowed Patrick. He swung the gun around and pointed it at the girl. "On the other hand, I will. Drop the bow and get your arse over here. I need help to leave."

The girl lowered the bow, dropping it in the short grass.

"If you come now you won't get hurt."

"Don't listen to the creep," spat Kendal.

"Shut up Coppia. The clock is ticking. I have to leave."

"I demand proof Tegan's alive."

"I've done that already."

With the police sirens closing in fast, the girl walked slowly, each step hesitant.

"Hurry up girlie; I haven't got all day. The sirens are getting too close."

The girl stood on Patrick's left. A gloved hand reached out and grabbed her ear. She screamed in agony.

"Coppia, drop to your knees, or I'll shoot them." Patrick's balaclava brushed the girl's ear. "The next time I call, you run."

Kendal dropped to his knees. He watched helplessly as the girl was pulled screaming by her ear towards the car park. If he tried to stand or go for his gun, he'd be shot. He'd be no good to the girl or Tegan, dead.

"Where's my daughter?"

Patrick answered by tightening the grip on the girl's ear. She screamed again.

"If you want to see your daughter again, you won't follow. A word of warning, don't shoot my car, the kid might be in the trunk."

Kendal acted out what Patrick said. His body might be a prisoner to Patrick's poison words, but his mind was free. Scenario after scenario of how he might change the scene into his favour churned over in his brain.

He grinned.

Patrick reached a car. Sliding behind the steering wheel of a dark blue sedan he released the girl by pushing her onto the pea stones. She screamed for the third time when her knees bit into the stones. A few feet of crawling on bloody knees forced her to curl into a tight ball and sob uncontrollably.

Kendal seized the opportunity to implement his plan. His timing needed to be perfect. He bent sideways and, snatching up his gun, he jumped to his feet and sprinted for the car park. Not taking his stare off his target, he moved his gun's safety switch to the off position took aim and fingered the trigger.

The blue sedan's engine roared to life.

He heard the crunch of stones under his feet. He picked up the pace. Each breath he took his windpipe reddened. He shut out the pain. He had to catch the blue sedan before it reached the main gate.

The car started moving. Though his legs felt like lead, Kendal pushed on. Seeing the gap between him and the car was widening. He realized he was losing the battle. It was time for part two of his plan.

The gap between him and the blue car increased rapidly. He had no choice. Patrick's words flooded his mind. 'Don't shoot. Your daughter might be in the trunk.'

So as to have a larger target, Kendal ran wide of the car like a water skier setting himself for a record high jump. He needed to jump over a knee-high log fence. The jump unbalanced him, he re-aimed his gun at the car and squeezed the trigger. The gap between the car and his gun appeared to be at least sixty feet and quickly widening.

The bullet smashed the rear driver's side window. Shards of glass rained on Patrick's balaclava. He brushed off the glass. The engine roared louder. Kendal squeezed off two more rounds, a second apart. One bullet smashed the rear window. The second ricocheted off the car's roof and embedded in a tree. Glass littered the car park. Kendal stopped his run, estimating the gap between him and the car to be more than one hundred feet. He doubled over in pain. His breathing sounded quick and shallow.

From a squat position, Kendal observed the car stopping. Patrick dived onto the back seat. Kendal's jaw fell open when he saw a blonde-haired person appear in the front passenger seat.

The unidentifiable figure signaled Patrick to stay low and threw a blue blanket over from the front seat to the rear seat. Slowly the car was driven past seven police cars and a small car driven by Claire.

"Patrick, the chase isn't over," yelled Kendal, recommencing his sprint. Seeing Claire, he waved at her. She immediately screeched her car to a stop. He opened the passenger door and slid into the seat next to her. "You just past the car Patrick was in, let's go."

"I only saw a woman driving."

“Did you recognize her?” He pointed. “Turn left at the entrance.”

“No. The only thing I saw was a blonde, middle-aged woman.” Claire hammered the accelerator.

“No wonder we’ve been one step behind. Patrick has a second accomplice.”

“There were two accomplices? Who was the first?”

“RA,” announced Kendal.

Claire sent him a puzzled look. She steered her car at breakneck speed through the open gate and turned left.

“I saw Patrick dive onto the rear seat, and the driver threw him a blanket.”

“Where’s Rookie Alderson?”

“Dead,” reported Kendal.

Three hundred feet from the main gate the blue sedan had been parked on the side of the road, its shattered windows were the positive ID Kendal needed to identify that it was the correct vehicle.

“Shattered windows?” questioned Claire.

“I missed.”

“Sugar, I’m surprised.”

“It’s a long story.”

Claire jerked the car to a complete stop. Both detectives stepped onto the road and stalked the blue sedan, guns at the ready. They circled the car twice then stepped up to look inside.

After checking the trunk, Claire spoke seriously. “Patrick’s long gone.”

Kendal nodded. Focusing on the ground at the side of the road, he studied the tyre tracks in the dirt.

“Did you notice any cars parked here on the way in?”

“Saw it, yes.”

He rolled his eyes.

“Sugar, it was a standard parked car.” She emphasized the last three words.

Kendal exhaled his anger. Together they scrutinized the car’s interior and trunk space. They needed to discover anything that might give them a lead. Disappointed, they moved onto the surrounding area.

When Kendal finally spoke, he sounded frustrated.

“I was hoping Tegan would’ve been in the car.”

“Patrick’s played a bluffed hand.”

“Yes, and he’s won again.”

Claire glanced up when she heard an ambulance rumbling along the road. When the vehicle sped past, Claire drove Kendal back to the archery club’s office.

“I wonder why they’re in such a hurry?” she quizzed.

“Step on the gas pedal, maybe Sweed’s still alive.”

A crowd of onlookers had gathered by the time the Detectives stepped up to the rear of the crowd.

Kendal pushed his way through the sea of faces to the front. “How’s Sweed?”

“Just gone,” announced the ambulance officer.

“When we arrived, I took his vitals; I gave him a one percent chance of survival. The rookie cop was DOA,” advised the second ambo.

“Sugar, we should go and inform RA’s family.”

Kendal looked at his watch. “9:00am. We can be there by 9:30 if we hurry.”

Seeing movement, Kendal watched a man in his early forties slowly walking towards him.

“Excuse me, Sir, Miss. I want to give myself up. I want to confess to killing the young woman cop and Mr. Sweed.”

Both Detectives gave the man the once over. Short black hair, black coke bottle glasses, over-sized grey pants and he wore a moth-eaten faded green jumper.

“Who might you be?” asked Kendal.

“I’m the killer.”

Claire shook her head. “Sweetie, what’s your name?”

“Dava,” whispered the man. “Everyone knows me as GD. I’m the one you’re looking for.”

“Dava, Eh!” growled Kendal. “Convince me you’re the killer.”

“I snuck up on Sweed. I used me gun, to shoot him and the Sheila cop.”

“Where’s the gun now?” asked Claire.

“I threw it away. Arrest me. I’m a menace to society.” Dava held his hands out to be handcuffed. “Arrest me and throw away the key.”

“I don’t have time for this. Claire, let’s go.”

“What about me?” Dava screamed.

Claire put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “Sir, you couldn’t possibly be the person we’re looking for. Sweed and our good friend Constable Susie Alderson were both shot by an arrow fired from a crossbow.”

“Yes, yes, now I remember. I did use a crossbow. I have these sudden blackouts causing memory loss.”

“Dava, stay in the office, I’ll talk to Captain Hughes to assign Detective Philips to take your statement. He won’t be long. Claire, I need the keys to your car. If you’re coming, get in. You can inform me of the autopsy report on the elderly people as we go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

ROOKIE ALDERSON’S parents lived in an old house in the busy part of Melbourne. A small cottage garden containing a one and a half metre tall windmill greeted the two Detectives. Azalea plants boarded the short gravel path to the front door.

“Sugar, this isn’t going to be pretty.”

He grunted and rang the front door bell.

“Claire, I hear footsteps. In ten words or less tell me the autopsy report on the elderly couple.”

“All four died in their sleep of smoke inhalation. They never knew their fate.”

The front door lock clicked, and the door started to open.

“Your report contained fourteen words.”

“Smart arse,” she murmured.

Kendal smiled at a tall, thin grey-haired woman. He extended his hand. “Mrs. Alderson, may we come in?”

The woman patted flour off the pink apron she wore around her waist and shook his hand.

“Certainly, you can. Alan, Claire, it’s good to see you again. I’m cooking scones. Do you have time for a cup of tea?”

Kendal's smile fell. He hated this moment. If he agreed to the woman's request, she might not want him to stay and was only being polite. If he said no she might take offence. He tactfully decided which road to take.

"I'll delay my answer for the moment."

Mrs. Alderson displayed a worried look.

"Very well, Alan. Just to let you know, I have no bad feelings towards you over my baby's death. On the other hand, Joe is very angry. He hasn't had a good night sleep since the funeral. I'm not sure he'll ever get over the death of our daughter. Fortunately, he takes his anger out on the wood pile."

When Claire stepped into the lounge-room she spied a large picture of RA and her sister, Kate, hanging off the wall. Sepia and colour photos were hanging like a shrine off every wall. At least a dozen small candles with a dancing flame were dotted about the room.

"That picture you're looking at was taken the day Susie graduated from the police academy," explained Mrs. Alderson. "Kate, my baby, was sixteen. I never knew she'd fallen into the prostitution trap. Easy money, she explained."

Kendal studied the photo then he switched his attention to the woman.

"Kate happened to be high on drugs when the photo was shot. My words might sound cruel; it's a fact. The whole mess wasn't anyone's fault. I was only doing my job."

The woman looked up into his eyes. "You sound convincing. I'm positive in time I'll be okay."

Kendal knew she lied. He felt numb knowing she'd soon learn the fate of her only remaining daughter. He watched tears cascade down over the woman's cheeks. He buried his emotions by looking away.

Sniffing back a tear, the old woman fumbled for a crumpled tissue she had buried in her apron pocket. She unraveled the white square and wiped her eyes.

"Come and sit down. I've something important to say," whispered Claire, in a soothing voice.

"Mrs. Alderson, while Claire explains what's been happening I'll wander outside and talk to Joe."

The rhythmic cracking of someone splitting wood grew louder the closer Kendal walked along the narrow hallway to the outside. At the back door, he watched a short, stocky, balding, unshaven man, wielding an eight-kilo wood splitter high in the air. In one tremendous downward stroke, the thick wooden log split in two. The man reached for another log to repeat the performance. When Kendal heard the sounds of a crying woman from deep inside the house, he stepped outside.

"Mr. Alderson, can you spare a minute for a chat?" called Kendal.

The man picked up another log and went through the motions of splitting it. Kendal called again.

The man stopped the downward thrust of the wood splitter. He stared at Kendal through angry eyes.

"I heard you the first time," he growled. "Leave me be."

"I've something important to discuss."

The man spat at Kendal. "Get out. Get out of my house."

"It is important I speak to you."

The man tightened his grip on the splitter and stepped closer.

"Joe put the splitter down."

"Coppa, I warned you to leave. Now it's too late. I'm gonna do to you what the prison inmates did to my daughter. I'm gonna cut your knees off. I won't kill you like

they did my youngest daughter. When you beg me to finish you off, I'm gonna let you live. I want you to suffer more than I have."

Alderson started swinging the wood splitter in circles above his head. Kendal had a perfect close-up view of a snake tattooed on both of his forearms. The speed of the splitter's revolutions quickly increased.

"I can tell you're scared, Coppa. Now beg. I wanna hear you beg. I wanna hear you squeal louder than a pig. The prison guards told me my daughter did. Are you petrified yet?"

Kendal returned a casual gaze in an attempt to diffuse the scene. He didn't want to shoot. However, Alderson looked determined to see his threats accomplished. Kendal pulled his gun from its holster and leveled it at Alderson's heart.

The big man shuffled closer. "Come on, squeal for mercy."

Kendal slid his gun back into its holster. He waited for the splitter to pass his head before lunging. He pushed Alderson in the ribs. Joe overbalanced fell backwards and dropped the splitter. Eight kilos of metal and wood crashed to the ground. Kendal stepped forward, swung a clenched fist, hitting Alderson square on the chin. Instead of going down, he grabbed Kendal's wrist and pulled hard sending him over his broad shoulders. Kendal managed to complete a tumble roll before being squashed against the shed door. The doorknob embedded in his stomach, winding him.

"Don't move Coppa."

Kendal checked for his gun.

"Don't fret; this is yours. I snatched yaw gun from its cradle, just like the law snatched my baby from her cradle. I did it when you'se was flyin' over me shoulder." Alderson let out a wicked laugh. "Prepare to have your knees blown off."

Kendal remained stone calm. He hunched into a boxer's stance and stepped towards Joe.

"Come on big fella; I'm ready for a re-match."

Alderson displayed a murderous grin as his finger constricted on the gun's trigger. "I'm not goin' to fight you, Coppa. You won't beg I'll shoot you where you stand."

"I wouldn't pull that trigger if I were you, sucker," yelled a deep voice from behind Alderson's left shoulder.

The big man turned around to face the voice. Kendal relaxed his fists, allowing his arms to hang loose. Slowly he reached for the Beretta strapped to his ankle.

"Nobody moves, including you, Kendal. I've a Smith and Wesson sweeping the air between you and the gorilla." The mouth behind the balaclava laughed. "You should be thanking me, Coppa."

"Why?"

"Hey, I just saved your existence. This big goon was about to pull the trigger."

"I'll never thank you, Patrick," jeered Kendal.

"Maybe I'll shoot you myself to save Alderson the trouble."

"I doubt it. You'd break the rules."

"On second thought, I'll let you two chaps fight it out."

"How did you know I was here?" questioned Kendal.

Footsteps from inside the house interrupted the standoff. Claire resembled a greyhound chasing a rabbit around a racetrack. She pushed the back door nearly off its hinges. She was airborne before anyone could move and collided with Patrick, knocking him to the ground.

Chaos erupted.

Alderson charged at Patrick and Claire. Kendal heard a click from his gun as he sprinted to intercept. He belted Alderson in the jaw using a right jab then handcuffed

him in one slick move. Claire's left knee bumped the ground. She screamed and started wallowing on the ground. Patrick leapt high in the air yelling for everyone to freeze. He pointed the gun at Claire. The chaos instantly subsided.

Kendal threw his snub nose gun onto the ground. Patrick bent down and pulled Claire to her feet by her hair.

"Hey," she yelled.

"Hey, is my word," bellowed Patrick. "Everybody stop moving or this Sheila cop accepts a bullet." To prove a point, he pushed the barrel of the revolver into Claire's ear.

"Patrick, I see you're left-handed," growled Kendal.

Hearing RA's mother, screaming and seeing her standing in the doorway, Patrick growled at her.

"Shut up and join the others." He waved the gun at her. "I'd love to stay and party, but I have plans to finish. The game will soon be over. Hey, Alderson, I forgot to mention why the cops are here. You had a daughter named Susie. She's dead." He laughed and dragged his hostage towards the back gate. "Kendal, once again, it's been a pleasure. Next time we meet things will be different."

Patrick pushed Claire towards the group and disappeared through the closing gate.

After Kendal successfully blocked Claire's fall, he sprinted up the drive. By the time he reached the road Patrick was gone.

Still handcuffed Alderson curled up on the ground. Claire squatted and filled him in on the few remaining details.

Kendal stooped and unlocked the handcuffs. Alderson coiled his fingers into white-knuckled fists.

"Except for me wife, I've got nothin'. I'm ready to finish you off."

"It's not my partner you need to fight, it's Patrick," said Claire.

The big man uncoiled his fists. He extended his arm. Both men shook hands.

"S'pose I'm in big trouble?" Alderson moaned. He watched Kendal retrieve his gun from the ground.

"Forget it. I'd do the same if it happened to me."

"I don't understand something," said Alderson. "I pulled the trigger of ya gun. You'se should be dead."

Mrs. Alderson put her arm around her husband.

Kendal extracted six bullets from his coat pocket. "Not even close."

"What's all this?" bellowed a voice from the back gate. The big-bellied man stared at each person in turn.

"Captain Hughes," chirped Claire, her face turning bright red. She grabbed her cap and hurriedly placed it on her head. "Good morning. What a pleasant surprise."

"I sure did surprise you all," he bellowed for the second time. "I don't like what I see."

Kendal slid his gun from sight and slipped the bullets undetected back into his coat pocket.

"Patrick's disappearance is a mystery," said Kendal.

He eyeballed the Captain suspiciously. Claire's idea flashed into his mind and wondered if she had been right from the start. After all, Captain Hughes did have blue eyes, is left-handed and came through the gate soon after Patrick absconded. He buried his thoughts. "I can explain."

"No need. As of now, you're off the case."

"Cap, I can explain."

"I don't care. You're goofing off, and I don't like it. What would your wife say if I told her you weren't looking for your daughter?"

"But I can explain."

"Don't you want Tegan found alive?"

Claire jumped to her partner's defense.

"Al was explaining RA's death to her parents when Patrick turned up."

"Is that true?"

"Yes."

"Did you catch the bum?"

"No."

"It's another good reason why you're off the case. Claire, the case is yours. Now if you'll excuse me, I want to see first-hand where RA died. I then have to speak to the big brass and make peace. When the dust has settled, I have to arrange Susie's funeral." He switched his attention to her parents. "That's if it's okay?"

Through her sobs, Mrs. Alderson thanked the Captain. Her husband's shoulders slumped as he shook everyone's hand.

Kendal made a mental note the man's hands were rougher than sandpaper. He presumed they had seen a lot of the wood splitter's handle since the loss of his eldest daughter. Kendal looked him in the eyes, wondering how many hours were still to come.

"Kendal, go home. Sit the remainder of this case out," bellowed Hughes.

Both Detectives watched Hughes walk towards his car and drive off. They gave their condolences to the Alderson's, wished them well and marched up the drive.

"I thought the Captain acted strangely," said Claire.

"Me too," mumbled Kendal. "We need to uncover proof your idea is correct. We need to unmask Patrick."

"We?" questioned Claire. "The Captain ordered you off the case."

Kendal displayed a mischievous grin. "When do I listen to Captain Hughes?"

Claire slipped her arm around his waist. "Sugar, I've been around you too long. I knew you'd say that. Where to now?" she quizzed.

"First, back to the archery club for my car. Patrick conveniently let the air out of a tyre. Second, I want to confront Hughes on losing this case. He didn't give me a chance to explain."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CLAIRE DROVE through the archery club's open main gate. Police, ambulance, and reporters had polluted the area making parking any closer a nightmare. The young girl archer who had been Patrick's hostage sat on a stretcher in the back of an ambulance.

Seeing the driver was about to slip behind the steering wheel Kendal ran to stop him.

"Hold it. I need to talk to the girl."

"Leave the young woman alone. She has been traumatized enough."

He ignored the man's protests and jumped into the rear of the ambulance. He flashed a friendly smile at the girl.

"Are you okay?"

The girl flicked mouse-coloured hair from her eyes.

“Yes. At first, I said no to medical help. I went to collect my bow and arrows and collapsed onto the grass. Someone called an ambulance. They said I’d gone into shock. Detective, could you do me a favor? Please, look after my equipment.”

“Yes, of course.”

Kendal smiled, patted the back of her hand and jumped from the ambulance. He waved at the driver and watched the vehicle turn left at the gate and onto the main road.

“Sugar, look over at the office.”

He turned and squinted in the sunlight, watching the two men closely.

“I wonder what Captain Hughes is talking to Weakom about?”

“Let’s go find out,” suggested Claire, starting to make a move.

Kendal blocked her path by extending an arm. “Hold on a minute, let’s watch.”

They saw Philips escorting Dava from the office. Weakom and Captain Hughes were engrossed in a lengthy conversation.

“Too far to lip read,” whispered Kendal. “Studying the body language of both men, arms by their sides, relaxed facial expressions, they seem like old friends.” He frowned. “Hughes just checked his watch. They’ve slapped each other on the shoulder and are now walking into the office. Okay, let’s go.”

They were half way to the office when there was a massive bang followed by a fireball. The black smoke mushroomed into the sky. The news reporters stopped packing up their equipment and turned towards the explosion. Instinctively they all scrambled for their cameras.

Simultaneously the Detectives dived for the ground.

“My car is on fire,” jeered Kendal. His hateful stare swept the area. “Patrick has to be behind this. He has to be.”

Kendal grabbed his mobile phone from his pocket and called for a fire truck. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw movement. He watched a small white car enter through the main gate then came to a halt. The engine died. A woman slid from behind the steering wheel. He studied her as she started to walk towards him. Her stroll looked majestic and confident. The woman’s long blonde hair bounced as she navigated her way through the crowd. She looked calm, her smile and face radiated sophistication.

“We have a visitor,” he announced.

“Is anyone in need of a doctor?” the woman called.

“No one was hurt in the explosion,” yelled Claire. She brushed the dust from her leathers and cap as she stood.

When the woman stepped up to Kendal he extended his hand and spoke a cordial welcome.

“It’s good to see you again, Doctor.”

Ashlee Clarke extended her right hand. The gap between Kendal and Clarke appeared close enough for him to smell the shampoo in her hair.

“Detective, I’ve been looking forward to seeing you again.”

“I was hoping for an appointment to see you later today.”

The doctor pulled her hand away and stepped back.

“I will be in my office at the Children’s Hospital at five o’clock this afternoon.”

“We’ll see you then, Doctor.”

“Are you positive I cannot help in any way?”

Kendal rubbed his chin. “Maybe you can. I have a question.”

“Sounds intriguing,” she replied, flicking her hair from her eyes.

“What brings you here at this precise moment?”

Ashlee Clarke folded her arms and stared into Kendal's eyes. Her face lost all warmth and friendliness. "I do not like the tone of your voice. I am not guilty of any wrongdoing. I am here purely by coincidence."

"I'm not accusing you of anything."

Kendal studied the woman's every twitch as she explained her timely arrival.

She pointed to a paddock adjacent to the archery club. "I am here to feed my stallion. Raol is the big grey. A stallion is a horse, Detective."

"I know what a stallion is. Are you left handed?"

"Right handed. Why?"

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"I am an only child. I do have a male cousin."

"Is your cousin right handed or left?"

"Left I think." She flashed a flat smile. "You have unique pick-up lines, Detective."

"I'm only thinking out loud."

"You think too much."

"Does your cousin live locally?" asked Kendal.

For the first time, his questions made her look uncomfortable. If he read her body language correctly, he'd have to assume she felt insecure. He needed to keep them flowing. He repeated the question.

"Yes."

"What's his name?"

"Phil Mason."

Kendal's eyes widened. Phil Mason's name happened to be on the CD Tegan managed to throw out of the white van.

"What's Mason's address?"

The woman's shoulders slumped. She reached into her bag and extracted a gold cigarette case as she said the address.

"I thought smoking is bad for the body?" commented Claire.

The doctor exhaled her answer in a cloud of smoke. "It is."

"You seem a trifle nervous of my questions," said Kendal.

"No not at all. They sound stupid, and stupidity irritates me."

"Why?"

"It's personal and none of your business, Detective. I am not in a position to answer any more of your questions." Dr. Clarke glanced at her watch. "Thanks to you I am late for an appointment at the hospital." Producing a small pocket diary, she turned to a page with a few handwritten words on it. She looked up. "This is my appointment book."

Kendal watched her scribble in the book. Kendall 5:00pm today; my office.

"We'll be there," chirped Claire.

Kendal stared at Dr. Clarke's back while she walked away.

"Sugar, her beauty is only skin deep."

He ignored the taunt and ran after the woman. Claire ran after her partner. Kendal leaned against the doctor's car door, peering through the open window.

"Excuse me," said Kendal.

"May I help you, Detective?" Dr. Clarke lifted her gaze towards him.

"Can I change my appointment time to 4:30 this afternoon?"

Dr. Clarke rolled her eyes and re-opened the small black book. After a careful study, she looked up.

"Very well, Detective, I will see you then." She turned the ignition key. The engine roared to life.

"Before you go, I have three more statements I have to say."

The doctor displayed a forlorn expression.

"I don't use pick-up lines, and I'm happily married."

The woman stared coldly at the man looking at her through the open window.

"You said there were three more statements. You have mentioned only two."

Kendal pointed to her appointment book. "Kendal is spelt with only one L."

Dr. Clarke slammed the small black book shut, threw it on the passenger seat, switched her stare onto Claire and drove away. Both Detectives stood watching the car speed through the gate.

"Sugar, the way you ran towards the beauty queen I thought you were going to ask her out on a date."

"Claire, don't be silly. Like I told the good doctor, I'm married."

"You told her you were happily married. Which is it?"

"You think too much." Kendal chuckled. He checked his watch. "It's now 1:06pm. We need to talk to Captain Hughes and Daniel Weakom, a quick lunch, meet with Clarke's cousin, and get back to the hospital for our Doctor's appointment. She knows more than she's saying." Staring into the distance his brow wrinkled.

Claire slapped him on the shoulder. "You've got the look of a man deep in thought."

"What did you say?"

"I said kiss me, big fella," she lied, puckering up.

Kendal looked her square in the face. "That's exactly what's bugging me."

"You're not making any sense."

"What you said."

"Has anyone ever said you talk in riddles?"

"It's how the doctor spoke."

Plastering an angry expression on her face, Claire shook her head. "Does this mean you won't kiss me?"

"Not now, this is important."

"I'm not following anything you're saying."

"One minute the doctor said words like; 'I've,' the next she used words; 'I will.'"

"Meaning?" asked Claire.

Kendal shrugged. "I'm not sure."

At 1:08pm, the detectives were hovering over Weakom. He was sitting on a chair in the archery club's small office. Kendal started pacing the floor. Claire folded her arms glaring at Weakom.

"Honey, what's wrong. If you're angry at me over something, can't we kiss and make up?"

"Don't you honey me, Daniel, and we certainly won't be kissing. I think we should break up."

"Weakom, tell me the reason why you keep disappearing?" insisted Kendal.

A big man blocked the doorway, plunging the office into a full eclipse. "I can answer your question."

"Captain Hughes, it's good to see you," quoted Kendal, looking over his shoulder.

"It's not good to see you," he bellowed. "I remember throwing you off the arson case. Why are you still around polluting the air?"

Kendal opened his mouth to defend himself. Before he could utter a word, the Captain interrupted.

"Seeing how you're here, I want a word. Weakom, Claire, wait outside."

Hughes walked behind the office desk and sat in the plastic chair. He shuffled forward and cleared his throat. Claire snuck back into the office.

“Ambroso, wait outside. Close the door on your way out.”

Kendal waited for the room to empty before walking across the room. He sat leaning on the table. “Cap, I’m certain I know Patrick’s identity. If you take me off the case now, he might never be caught.”

Captain Hughes drummed the tabletop using the tips of his fingers.

“Don’t tell me some crap story about Patrick is posing as a cop.”

“He’s not a cop.”

“Speak. Convince me why you should stay on the case,” snarled Hughes. He clasped his hands behind his head and leaned back in the chair.

Kendal explained his theory in two minutes. “It fits. All the pieces fit.”

“You only have circumstantial evidence.”

“At the moment, I do. Give me time to find the proof.”

“Okay, you’re back on the case. I hope you’re right. The Commissioner’s on my back demanding results; as is the media. They’re sniffing around like bloodhounds on a hot trail.”

Kendal marched across the small room. He reached out and yanked the door open. “Weakom, you’re wanted inside. Claire, let’s go.”

Claire almost needed to trot to keep up as they marched towards the target area.

Kendal picked up the young girl archer’s bow, loaded the arrow and pulled back on the string.

“Sugar, what are you doing?”

“I’m having a turn at archery.”

“Why are you playing Cowboys and Indians instead of questioning Weakom?”

“The Captain said he has everything under control. The girl said I should try archery sometime. I thought now might be a good time. She’s not here to complain about what I’m about to do wrong.” He lined up the target with the arrowhead and let go. The arrow stabbed the grass nine feet wide of the target.

Claire giggled profusely. “You need a lot of practice.”

“Yep, a good archer sure must put in a lot of practice hours. Be a gem and fetch the arrow.”

“Why should I be your little puppy?”

“Because you’re my partner; my new, partner.” Kendal grinned behind her back as she huffed and puffed on her way to picking up the arrow.

“Here, partner,” she scolded, thrusting the arrow at Kendal’s face. “You can carry the equipment to my car. To set the record straight, going to fetch a wooden arrow is not a good way to impress a woman.” She poked him in the gut and marched off.

“That’s it.”

“What?”

“This arrow is wooden. The arrow Patrick used in the park was made from surgical steel.”

“So?” she questioned.

“I’m positive the Doc knows more than she’s admitting.”

“No matter what, we need a photo of Patrick unmasked. Furthermore, you should’ve fetched the arrow.”

It was Kendal’s turn to ask why.

“I’m in charge of the case, remember?”

“Claire, I’m back in charge. After we’ve eaten lunch, we’re going to catch Patrick.”

Staring at her partner’s smug look, she frowned.

“How did you convince Captain Hughes to officially reinstate you back on the case?”

“I fed him a bullshit story.”

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

TEGAN HAD woken and fought off the Ether effect by 11am. After scouring her small prison room from top to bottom for two hours, which included countless futile attempts to escape, she fell exhausted onto the bed. The chain tethering her to the cast iron bed frame appeared to be unbreakable. She tried to break the chain a dozen different ways, from smashing a link by lifting the bed time and again and slamming it onto the floor, to cutting a link in half by scraping it along the bed’s metal frame.

“Dad, what would you do to get out of this predicament? Even though I know you’re not here, I can feel your presence watching over me.” She scrunched her nose. “Great, now I’m talking to myself.”

Tegan sat quietly on the bed thinking. After a few minutes, she looked up through sparkling eyes. Her face slowly altered from an expression of despair to a look of someone who was in complete control.

“I know what to do,” she whispered. “I have to be brave, and I must be convincing. I can do this. When the time comes, I mustn’t hesitate.”

A muffled scraping noise downstairs wafted upwards and through the closed door. Tegan sat motionless listening. When two minutes finally ticked off, she stood and walked over to the window. The chain tightened. Studying the view, she saw a bird sitting on a tree branch.

“It must be about 3:00pm,” she whispered at the bird. “What day, I have no idea.”

The sparrow took flight and banged head first into the window. Tegan jumped back. The chain clanged against the floor. The floorboards on the stairs creaked. She stared at the door. The stairs creaked again, only this time the noise sounded close.

Tegan quickly gathered the chain and vigorously rubbed the metal shackle against her ankle. Her skin turned sore and red. Painting an innocent school girl’s expression on her face, she sat on the bed. Using her body and the bed to camouflage the chain she allowed it to dangle from her right hand.

Un-seen feet forced another step to creak.

Tegan stiffened.

“The noise came from the top step. Be ready; you won’t get a second chance. Dad, please help me to be brave.”

Tegan clutched the chain tight in her right hand. She heard it clink against the side of the bed.

The lock on the bedroom door made a clunk. The door swung open. The kidnapper seemed to take up most of the doorway. He adjusted his balaclava and stared at Tegan through slits.

Tegan let out a low squeal.

“Hungry kid?” growled the kidnapper.

She nodded.

“You’re not very talkative today. Cat got your tongue?”

“I’m tired,” she confessed, slouching on the bed.

Patrick walked across the room carrying a small tray. “It’ll be the Ether drug.” He stooped and placed the food tray on the bed.

"Bacon and eggs again?"

"Hey, don't complain. The Doc's the good cook in the family, not me."

"What's she to you?"

"Kid, it's none of your business. Now eat." He stared at the girl. "You're up to no good. What is it?"

"Nothing," mumbled Tegan.

"You're planning something."

"No, I'm not."

"Yes, you are. You're just like your old man, always thinking." He wagged, a gloved finger at her. "Thinking is a bad family trait."

"Why?"

"No more questions."

"I was thinking my ankle feels sore."

"Tuff," barked Patrick. "Soon we'll be going for a drive."

"How soon?" probed Tegan.

"Three or four hours," jeered Patrick.

"Where to?" questioned Tegan.

Patrick started to pace back and forth across the room. On a return trip, he stopped to stare at Tegan through crazy wild eyes. He pointed at the girl. "I told you, no more questions." He turned his back and started to walk out of the room.

Tegan moaned. She covered her eyes with her hands and pretended to cry.

"My foot hurts. I don't think I can stand the pain for too much longer. Please, unshackle my ankle. It hurts."

"Shut up. I hate kids. I especially hate you."

"It's sore. I beg you to stop the pain."

"If I free you from the shackle, you'll try to escape."

"No, I won't. I promise."

"I don't believe you."

"What about a compromise?"

"It's a big word for a child. Convince me."

"Put the shackle on my other foot."

Patrick walked back to the bed. Reaching out he grabbed Tegan's reddened ankle. He studied the shackle where it and her skin were touching. He stared at the girl through narrowed slits.

"Do you promise not to escape?"

"Yes, I promise."

"Don't you move, don't flinch, don't even breathe. I don't trust a Kendal."

"Okay."

Patrick pushed his hand into his pocket and produced a small silver key.

Tegan blinked several times to get rid of her tears. Displaying a painted smile, she closely watched her warden. Patrick grunted and set to work unlocking the padlock. There was a loud click. Patrick placed the padlock on the bed in readiness to re-lock. He opened the shackle and removed it from Tegan's ankle.

Clamping her teeth together Tegan whipped the chain over her shoulder and down on Patrick's head. Hearing the chain rattle, Patrick moved fast. Instead of hitting him in the head the chain fell across his back. He collapsed onto the bed. Tegan swung her legs over his body and jumped onto the floor. She was free. Free to run like the wind. Her plan had almost been flawless. For several agonizing seconds, she stood in the open doorway watching the motionless figure. Patrick started to stand, his gloved fingers

curling into a fist. He searched the room. His thin lips parted. He moaned. Glaring at the closed door, he heard the key turn in the lock.

"You told me you wouldn't try to escape, you, little brat," he growled.

Tegan casually dropped the key over the balustrade and waited to hear the clang as it hit the tiled floor.

"Tuff," she spat.

"You lied," yelled Patrick.

"I did no such thing. I crossed my fingers."

Hearing Patrick beginning to kick a hole in the door, Tegan sprinted downstairs. She just stepped onto the tiles at the foot of the stairs when Patrick opened the door.

Leaning over the balustrade he shook his fist at her.

"You can hide kid, but you can't run. Be warned I will find you."

Tegan grabbed hold of the front door knob and twisted. Her victory smile collapsed. Several times in rapid succession she turned the front door knob.

"Dad, please help me. I don't know what to do; the door is locked. Dad, I can't hear you."

Patrick, already halfway down the stairs, stopped. He tilted his head back and created a horrid laugh.

"I've got you now, kid."

Tegan screamed and ran into the first room on her left behind the stairs.

Closing and locking the door she grabbed the only chair in the small room, wedging it under the door handle. Forcing her mind to push the fear away, she glanced at her surrounds. The room consisted of a wall full of medical books. All appeared to be stacked in alphabetical order. A small desk was in the middle of the room.

"I have to work a miracle using nothing?" Tegan groaned.

When Patrick started pounding and kicking the door Tegan's eyes grew wide.

"Don't panic," she whispered. "Don't panic. Think, think." She spun in slow circles scrutinizing everything. "Yes, I remember. Dad, I remember the game we played. The spinning game; spin three times, observing what's in the room and work out a way to escape a bad situation." She smiled. "I don't get dizzy like Mother does. I see the door, the chair, the books and the desk."

Patrick's foot broke through the door, pushing the chair out from under the door knob. Squatting, he stared through the hole. He was in time to see Tegan grab a thick book. She watched Patrick watching her.

He opened the door.

Unblinking they held each other's stare.

Tegan raised the book she had swiped from the bookcase over her head and glared into the eyes behind the balaclava. She turned and threw the book at the window.

Lunging for the girl's ankle, Patrick managed to grab air.

Shards of glass littered the garden bed. Tegan dived through the smashed window and completed a forward roll between two rose bushes. At full tilt, she sprinted towards the back fence. Patrick growled and jumped through the window in hot pursuit.

Tegan was swift. Her pursuer looked stronger. He quickly closed the gap between them.

The fence grew higher the closer the duo approached. Patrick reached out, managing to grab only a rogue strand of hair.

Tegan climbed the fence and didn't look back.

"Stay calm," she puffed. "Stay calm. Dad, I escaped, I'm free." She bit her bottom lip and picked up the pace.

Patrick easily leapt the fence. He landed heavily, sprawling face first onto a rock garden.

Seeing a gate built into the front fence of the neighboring house, Tegan made a beeline for it. Beyond the front fence, she knew the narrow road boarded a small park.

"I hope that gate is not locked."

Tegan's wish was a whisper of words. She reached the gate and pulled hard on the handle. The lock clicked. The gate swung open. She slipped through the gap, slamming it in her wake. Footsteps pounded the grass behind her.

"Surely Patrick won't follow me beyond the gate, someone might see his balaclava." Looking over her shoulder for the first time, Tegan slowed to a walk. "I'm alone. It is decision time," she puffed. "Hide in the park or knock on someone's front door." She paused to think. "I'll take the later."

Tegan ran to the front door of the house and knocked. The small black dog pushed its head between the narrow gap between the curtains. A continuous yap quickly escalated. Tegan walked to the window, cupped her hands against the glass and looked into the house.

"Nobody's home," she whispered, crumpling onto the paved verandah. For the first time, she cried.

The sound of a car approaching buzzed inside her ears. She stopped sobbing and looked up. The car came slowly around the corner and stopped three houses away.

"Oh no!" she mumbled. "It can't be?"

Tegan hid behind a small bush growing out of a medium sized terracotta pot and watched Patrick survey the area. She hugged her knees every time he looked her way. Tegan watched him take off the balaclava and throw it under the front seat of the car. Her eyes sparkled.

"Patrick, I know your identity. I'm positive my dad will be all smiles when I tell him."

In her excitement, she lost her balance. As she fell, the pot plant toppled off the verandah and onto the paved path.

Patrick heard the crash. He looked her way. In a heartbeat, he started running towards the house. Tegan jumped the small bush lying on its side, easily jumped the low front fence and sprinted for the park. Her posse flanked her right side, cornering her at the junction of two park fences. Tegan whirled around to face the unmasked Patrick square on.

"Give up kid," he bellowed. "There's only one gate to the park. You've nowhere to run or hide."

"Never," growled Tegan.

"If you come quietly, I won't hurt you."

"I bet you've said those words before."

"You're a smart little brat."

"Smart enough to know you'll kill me overseeing your face. If you come any closer, I'll scream."

"Take a look around. Who's going to hear? No one will ever know you were in this neighborhood."

"Dr. Clarke knows I was chained to the bed in her house."

"I'll shut her up. She always listens to me. She's weak. I'm strong. She owes me." Patrick took a step closer.

Tegan glanced at the park. Patrick was right; she had nowhere to run. The park consisted of a swing set and a slide. The grass looked short and expertly edged. A small drainpipe seemed to be the only possible sanctuary.

“Patrick, believe it or not, dad’s standing directly behind you, pointing a gun at your head.”

He let go of a deep belly laugh. Just for a moment, he moved his gaze away.

Tegan immediately saw her chance. She sprinted through the open gate and ran for the pipe. She crawled into the dark tunnel, scrunching her nose at the smell. She winced each time her shoulders brushed the sides of the pipe’s rough surface.

Patrick saw her move. Just before she completely disappeared into the pipe, he managed to catch her up and wrap his fingers around her ankle. Tegan screamed. She kicked hard using her one free foot. Patrick yelled and lost his grip. Tegan slithered along the pipe on elbows and knees. When she was out of arm’s length, she stopped long enough to look back.

Patrick was staring at her from the entrance to the black tunnel.

“You should be proud of yourself, kid. Stinking storm water pipe to slither along. Come out; and I promise to set you free.”

Instead of replying, Tegan crawled deeper into the pipe.

“If you’re not out by the time I count to five, I’ll smoke you out.” He slapped the inside wall of the pipe. “One, two, three, four, five. Enjoy the smoking vermin home,” he spat, slapping the inside of the pipe again.

Tegan heard the rustling of leaves. The daylight dimmed. Hearing a match scraping the side of a matchbox, she muffled her scream by covering her mouth with her hand. When she smelt smoke, Tegan decided to push further into the dark.

“I hope there are no rats, or worse, snakes,” she moaned. “The further I go the darker this pipe is getting. The worst part is that the smoke is thickening.” She coughed. “I sure hope this pipe leads to somewhere safe? And soon, it’s getting hard to breathe.”

She travelled a further twenty feet when she saw light. Hurriedly Tegan got the end of the pipe. Carefully parting the branches of a small bush growing over the entrance, she peered out. A trickle of water flowed from the entrance to the pipe which ended at a shallow creek slowly flowing a short distance from a small shopping centre.

A dozen people couldn’t stop staring when they saw the dirty, smelly, girl emerge from the pipe.

A quick survey of the area and Tegan left the onlookers gossiping, frowning and pointing at her running towards Melbourne Central still wearing pink pajamas. She didn’t stop running for a good half hour. She jogged past a building. The clock hanging in the display window read 4:00pm. She rounded the building and walked down a darkening lane. Invisible fingers switched on a single incandescent light at the end of the lane revealing graffiti had been scibbled on everything.

Stopping under the light, she leaned against the wall. A few seconds later she slid downwards. She sat on dirty blue cobblestones, closed her eyes and fell asleep.

“Look what I’ve found,” reported a voice from the shadows.

Tegan woke, took one look at the face and screamed.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

CLAIRE PARKED her car at a 24-hour convenience store and watched businessmen and women standing outside office buildings. Glancing at her watch, she mumbled.

“3:30pm.”

“Our lunch, their smoko time,” Kendal announced.

The two Detectives entered the building through automatic opening doors and marched to the rear of the store. Kendal stood in front of the coffee machine imitating an expectant father, waiting for the arrival of his first-born child. Claire raided the large glass door fridge for a cold bottle of water.

“Health fanatic,” he taunted.

Claire patted her partner’s stomach. “Need I say more?” She glanced at the front counter. “Sugar, forget the coffee, look who’s come in out of the cold.”

Kendal looked to where Claire was pointing. He spied a man starting to count \$100 notes. The man behind the counter seemed unperturbed and kept serving customers.

“Claire, walk up the window side to the front of the store, I’ll flank the other side.”

She hid her gun between folded arms and walked up behind the man, who was still busy counting money.

Kendal pulled his revolver from his shoulder holster and moved fast. He knew he must reach the front of the store before the man spied either of them.

At the shelf, closest to the counter, Kendal spied tins of dog and cat food. He counted to five and hoped Claire was in position. He switched his gun safety off then needed to wait patiently for an elderly male customer to finish paying for his petrol and leave.

Kendal stepped away from the food shelf.

“G’day Weakom; I want you to start explaining what you sold to receive so much money?”

Weakom looked up and saw the detective’s sly grin. He proceeded to stuff the money in his coat pocket and prepared to leave the store.

“Leaving so soon? And not even a goodbye,” snarled Claire.

“Detectives, hi, fancy meeting you here.”

“Yes, fancy us meeting here at this time,” growled Kendal. “Start talking about the money.”

“What money?”

“The few thou’ you stuffed into your pockets,” snorted Claire.

Weakom slipped a hand inside his coat and pulled out a semi-automatic Glock. Reaching out he grabbed hold of Claire.

“Nobody moves or Claire will accept a bullet.”

“I’ve heard those exact words before,” advised Kendal, raising his gun.

The elderly male customer shuffled back into the store. He was concentrating on recounting his change for the third time and didn’t see the developing disturbance. Weakom pushed Claire away and grabbed the man by the shirt collar, thrusting him in front for protection.

“Checkmate,” Weakom advised, walking backwards to the door.

Clutching his chest, the elderly man dropped his change. His breathing sounded laborious. The automatic sliding glass doors opened. The elderly man closed his eyes. Weakom dropped him and ran.

“Claire, go,” yelled Kendal.

She sprinted for the door, gun raised. She saw Weakom running down the road. He turned, leveled his gun and fired. Brick mortar exploded out of the convenience store’s brickwork. Claire dived behind an old rusting Ute. A second bullet smashed the car’s passenger window. Glass fragments showered the ground. A car’s engine roared to life. The vehicle sped away. She gave chase on foot, aimed her gun, and fired twice. The first bullet smashed the rear window. The second went through the trunk.

Without slowing, the car entered an intersection and turned left.

Claire sprinted down the road and into the next. She slowed and stopped in the middle of a roundabout looking down four empty streets. An old man sleeping on the bench in a glass bus stop sat up, stroked his long grey beard and waved at her. She waved back. The homeless man lay prone, grabbed the coffee-stained newspaper and used it as if it were a blanket. She raised her hands in frustration, turned tail and trotted back to the convenience store.

Upon entering the store, she found Kendal giving the elderly man CPR. One look at her face, Kendal knew Weakom had escaped, yet again.

"We need an ambulance," he yelled.

Seeing the man opening his eyes, Kendal took the man's pulse.

"Welcome back. You'll be okay. The ambulance is on its way."

Claire's red painted fingernails stabbed the buttons on her mobile phone.

After the ambulance had arrived, the ambos took over. Satisfied the man was stable, they bundled him into the ambulance. Finally seeing the ambulance leaving, Kendal followed Claire back into the store. Kendal glared at the nineteen-year-old standing behind the cash register. He flashed his police badge under the lad's nose.

"Start talking, buddy."

"About what?" he asked.

"Talk to me about the bloke counting the money. I'll give you a moment to collate your thoughts." Kendal winked at Claire as he walked towards the rear of the store.

"Listen to what I'm about to say. My partner has a very short fuse. His daughter was kidnapped, and the clock is ticking. We need answers to our questions."

"Good cop, bad cop, Eh!"

Kendal returned carrying his coffee and a bottle of cold water for Claire.

"Now you've had a moment to devour my question, tell me everything you know," jeered Kendal.

The young man displayed a 'who cares attitude' by shrugging his shoulder.

Kendal leaned over the counter, grabbing the teenager by his shirt collar.

"Tell me everything. I'm running out of time."

The lad gasped for air. His eyes bulged as he spoke. "The man you saw counting the money came in ten minutes before you. He was standing in front corner of the store talking to my boss on the phone when you walked in. I heard the offer. It was a great deal."

"What was the deal?"

"It's not my place to say."

"We can take you to Police Headquarters to finish your story."

The young man raised an eyebrow. He answered in a low voice.

"The deal went something like this. The man would supply twenty-thousand dollars of brand named cigarettes for eight-grand."

"Good discount," said Claire.

"Black market more likely," reported the teenager.

"You seem to be in the know," probed Claire.

"I know a black-market deal when I hear it. I suppose you'll want to take the evidence?"

"Keep it under wraps for now," suggested Kendal. "I'll have Detective Philips swing past and collect them and your statement. The man counting the money was Weakom. Daniel Weakom. If you see him again, call the police. Tell them to contact Detective Kendal or Ambroso. One of us will be here in minutes."

The Detectives shook the boy's hand and walked out.

"Sugar, where to now?"

"I think it's time we had a chat to Phil Mason."

Kendal parked his car outside the small house not far from the Royal Children's Hospital. The house displayed a plain front garden, a white picket fence, and a small rusting metal gate. He glanced at his watch.

"4:00pm," he announced, loud enough for Claire to hear. "A quick interview in here and a record three minutes to the hospital will see us in Dr. Clarke's office on time." He looked up and down the street. "All the houses are dog boxes. Who'd want to live here?"

"They're beautiful. They have great character. All are worth a fortune."

Claire's enthusiastic comment took Kendal by surprise. He leaned his thumb against the doorbell.

"I'd never want my house touching my neighbours," he groaned.

The front door slowly opened. A short, frail man stood in the doorway.

"You look like cops," he jeered.

Kendal flashed his police badge. "Detective's Kendal and Ambroso, may we come in?"

The man nodded and led the way down a narrow hall.

Claire noted the walls were in need of a paint job. Looking into each room as they walked past a doorway she saw the interior of the first room. It too looked in desperate need of painting. The house comprised of two bedrooms. The TV in the lounge was showing a re-run of an old western. A small lamp was highlighting a chair in one corner.

In the kitchen they sat on chairs at a rickety unpainted table.

"Drink of something?" asked the man.

"No thanks." Kendal looked at the remnant of a meal still on the table. "We're not interrupting your dinner?"

"No, I've just finished. Please, sit." The man swiped the remaining meal into the sink, snatched up his can of beer off the table and sank into a chair.

"I'll come straight to the point. Are you Mr. Mason?"

"The last time I checked my birth certificate, I was."

"Do you have a son, Philip?"

"What's he done now?"

"We need to locate your son," cut in Claire. "Do you know of his where-a-bouts?"

"Why?"

"We hope he can shed some light on our investigation."

"I don't know where he is. He comes and goes when he wants."

"Does he have many close friends? Or maybe a girlfriend?" asked Kendal.

"The band he plays in turn up on the odd occasion. They jam for a few hours, pack their gear and leave. They've just cut a new CD. I must admit I don't like their style of music, however, each to their own. On the subject of girlfriends, I'd have to say there aren't any. He talks regularly with his cousin. He says she's his music critic."

"What's her name?" asked Claire.

"Ashlee Clarke. Dr. Ashlee Clarke."

"Does Phil know a bloke going by the name of Patrick?"

The old man dropped his can of beer on the floor. Staring at the two detectives, he resembled someone who feared for his life.

"How do you know Patrick?" he whispered.

"We need to talk to him," said Claire.

For nearly a minute the elderly man rocked from side to side then picked up his can of beer with trembling hands.

"I can't tell you anything more. The walls have ears."

Kendal leaned forward on his left elbow. "I can take you down to the police station where the walls can't hear."

The man bowed his head. He spoke in a low tone.

"Patrick lights fires. He always has and always will."

"Go on," urged Claire.

The man studied the room as if he was looking for someone. Settling his gaze back on Kendal he continued, speaking in whispers.

"Do you know the story about Phil and the house fire?"

Both detectives shook their heads.

"When Phil was a lad the police accused him of starting the house fire. When I asked him to tell me the truth he told me Patrick did it."

"What's the whole story?" asked Claire.

"I don't know anything more."

Kendal eyed the man suspiciously. It was clear he felt petrified of Patrick. He quickly changed tact.

"Do you have a photo of Phil?"

Mr. Mason nodded. He walked to a cupboard and grabbed a large photo of a man in a casual pose.

"Phil?" probed Kendal, studying the picture at length.

"Yeah, that's him," replied his father. "Hanging from his name is a long string of offences, ranging from, auto theft, robbery, breaking and entry, to assault and arson. Every one of those accusations is unfounded. None were ever proven. As they say, mud sticks. Deep down he's a good bloke."

"Tell us about Ashlee. I'm extremely interested?" asked Kendal, staring directly into the eyes of the man.

"Phil was a two-year-old tyke when Ashlee came into the world in the hospital not far from here. He took to her like a duck to takes to water. They'd play hide and seek all the time, ring each other every few days and see each other at least three times a week. He used to call her Doc."

"Interesting," mumbled Kendal.

"What did they talk about on the phone?" asked Claire.

"Teachers, school, the usual stuff kids talk about. They went to the same primary and secondary school. Ashlee stayed over here every Saturday night. They'd play games and listened to music all night. Phil loves music. He's in a band you know. The group just cut a new CD."

"You've mentioned the band," advised Kendal.

"The CD will probably be another lead balloon." The man exhaled. "I feel sorry for him. I'm positive his life would've been different if it wasn't for the house fire he allegedly started all those years ago."

"Mr. Mason, you mentioned Phil was a loner," said Kendal.

"Please, call me Brian."

"Brian, is it possible Phil has seen Ashlee Clarke lately?"

He pursed his lips. "I don't know. She's a doctor now. She got her break and was able to make something of her life."

"You mentioned arson," said Claire. "Care to explain?"

Showing no emotion, Mason stared at the two Detectives in turn.

"I've told my story to the cops too many times. If I tell you, the outcome won't change."

"Try me," hinted Kendal.

The old man looked around the room again, swallowed a mouthful of beer and fidgeted on his seat.

"The story goes, when Phil was nine, he visited Ashlee Clarke at her house. A few hours later the house burnt to the ground. Phil told the police he didn't do it. The local detective at the time, his name I can't remember, hounded my son for months." Brian sighed heavily. He swallowed the last mouthful of beer, squeezed the can and threw it into the sink. "Phil told me exactly what he told the cops."

"That is?" asked Kendal, leaning closer to the man.

"Patrick started the fire. When I asked the same question a few years later, Phil clammed up and refused to talk about it."

"What do you think is the truth?"

Mason leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I have a gut feeling Patrick started the fire and had been trying to frame Phil all his life."

Kendal stood and extended his hand. "Thanks for giving us an insight. May I borrow the photo of Phillip?"

"Keep it."

Away from the house, Kendal looked at Claire, noting the weather seemed to be cooling. Soon the temperature will be perfect for a house fire.

"Claire, what are you thinking?"

"Phil Mason is our man. He's Patrick."

"I'm not convinced."

"Don't swim against the current, Sugar."

"If I do what you suggest, sometimes the waterfall is a long one. It's time to visit Dr. Ashlee Clarke."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

THE DARKENING lane started to bulge at the seams as more street kids joined the party. Each one stared down at the new arrival sitting on the dirty blue cobblestones.

Tegan pushed her shoulders hard against the wall, studying the hostile faces looking at her. She looked ready to scream.

"Shh," insisted a girl, placing her finger against Tegan's lips. "You'll bring the cops."

"Exactly," Tegan replied.

"We're your friends," the girl advised.

"You won't hurt me?"

"No never. We look after each other." The girl extended her hand. Her long hair hung heavy. "I'm Sam."

"I'm Tegan." She took hold of the girl's hand and stood.

Sam eyed the visitor up and down, displaying a doubtful look at her ripped and dirty pajamas. "My guess is that your name is Kendal."

"That was a lucky guess."

"Not really. Your father and I met recently. He wanted me to talk about a character named Patrick. When I refused, he pushed me into a pool."

Tegan's eyes widened, looking around the lane. "I need a phone. It's vital I talk to my dad."

Sam vigorously shook her head.

"Is there a phone close to this lane?" Tegan asked for a second time.

"The rules on the street are simple to follow. No talking on a phone when you're close to this lane. Looking like you do, the local shopkeepers won't let you use theirs. They'll think you're another stupid street kid. Come on, if you're quick, you'll get a warm shower. I stole some clothes from an Opp. Shop yesterday. They might fit."

Sam escorted Tegan to an outside laundry. The narrow old brick building consisted of a toilet and a shower.

"Word of warning, don't let Mr. Foo catch you using his shower. He'll expect you to pay for the privilege, and I don't mean he wants money. If you refuse, he pulls out his meat cleaver. To escape his clutches, you have to run like the clappers."

Sam stood guard while Tegan enjoyed a fast-warm shower. An even quicker change of clothing followed.

"Are you hungry?" asked Sam.

"I'm starving," replied Tegan.

"The Night Creepers should have food ready by now."

"Who are the Night Creepers?"

"The gang, the street kids you met in the lane."

"Weird name," snarled Tegan.

Sam yanked on Tegan's shoulder, turning her around. Stepping closer, Sam stared shark eyes at her face. "We're not weird. We're survivors. You and me, we're different. Opposite sides of the coin, understand? You've got a good life, the education, the unbroken family. The Night Creepers and I are the same. Some of us come from homes where parents don't want them around. Some of us were abused, some just want to belong. Let me tell you something, Tegan Kendal. I was given a thousand bucks to burn a house to the ground."

"Did you do it?"

"Bloody oath I did, and it felt bloody good. Then your father caught me."

"One to pops," muttered Tegan.

"Stuff you. A grand would've set the gang up for months."

"Why don't you go back home?" asked Tegan. "It has to be better than living on the streets."

Sam spat on the ground. "Never, I'm on the streets to get away from my abusive drunken piss head father."

"Tell me something, who gave you a thousand dollars to burn a house down?"

"Patrick."

"I was held prisoner by him."

"I'd like to see the face behind that balaclava. The info might get me some big bucks, seeing how your father kept my money."

"Sorry to disappoint you. I've seen the face behind the mask."

"You have elevated yourself to be a prime target. You have to get to the nearest cop station before Patrick finds you. I can't take you; the Night Creepers have rules I'm not allowed to break." Sam nodded at a park. "The cop shop is on the other side. Allow me to give you a word of warning. Be careful. Be very careful."

Tegan waved goodbye and headed for the park.

"Tell me. What you, gonna do when you leave school?" called Sam.

Tegan yelled back through cupped hands. "I'm going to be a detective."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KENDAL DROVE towards the hospital. Shadows from the buildings were growing. The temperature had cooled a few degrees. Men wearing business suits were walking swiftly on their way to the train station. Women were clutching shopping bags and rushing from shop to shop. They looked annoyed at having to stop their skirts from flying up in the wind.

“Early Christmas shoppers,” Kendal chuckled. “Claire, any thoughts on what you’d like for Christmas?”

“A new boyfriend, the last one turned out to be a looser, spelt with a capital ‘L.’ The only other man I want in my life is married.” She flashed Kendal a pacified look.

He returned a broad grin and slapped her leather-clad knee.

“What about you, Sugar?”

“I want my daughter home alive.”

They drove past a couple of rookie cops walking the beat. The younger appeared to be staring at every scantily dressed female they could see.

“There’s a Christmas present for you.”

“No thanks, he’s a classic rubberneck,” said Claire.

Kendal steered off the road and into the hospital’s underground car park. Adjacent to their car and with an unrestricted view, both detectives stared at a white van. Stuck to the rear bumper was the words; ‘save the elephant.’

Kendal and Claire carefully walked towards the van. Seeing no one inside they opened the driver’s door. A quick search of the vehicle’s interior revealed it had been abandoned some time ago.

“Claire, call forensic and have them go over the van inch by inch. I want any evidence discovered.” Kendal surveyed the area. Spying a young male in the car park ticket booth, he wandered over.

Standing at the narrow window, Kendal stared at the tall, thin acne faced youth sitting on a high back stool stacking silver coins on his left, gold ones on his right. The ticket booth reeked of petrol fumes.

“Busy?” asked Claire, stepping next to Kendal.

The young man looked up. “It’s nearly the end of my shift. I have to tally the money before I go home.” He hunched his shoulders and lowered his head closer to the coins.

“How many hours have you been working this shift?” asked Kendal. He dropped his police badge under the lad’s nose.

The young man looked up again. He displayed an unhappy expression. “I have just about finished a busy day and your presence has caused me to lose count.”

“Our apologies,” chirped Claire.

“Your apology won’t help. Go away. I think I’m a dollar short.”

Kendal pushed his hand into his trouser pocket and pulled out a dollar coin, placing it on what appeared to be the uncounted pile.

“Don’t fret. I’ll give you a dollar. It might save you an ulcer later in life.”

“What’s the catch?”

“I need a question answered.”

“I’m listening. It’s the least I can do.” The young man straightened, adjusted his open-necked shirt and looked down on the two detectives.

“Your name is?” asked Kendal.

“Todd.”

"How long have you been here?"

"I started at seven this morning."

"Do you remember the person who parked the white van out there? The one I'm interested in has a broken taillight?"

"Yes. It was parked by Phil Mason fifteen minutes ago, give or take five minutes."

"Are you positive?"

"Yes. Phil came over to say G'day. We've known each other for years."

"Can you guess at the number?" Claire asked.

"Ooh! That is a hard one," said Todd, rubbing his soft stubble. "Let's see, I arrived in Australia from England fifteen years ago and started at Syndal Secondary. Yes, about fifteen years at a guess. Before today, I haven't seen Phil in months."

"Don't tell me," cut in Kendal. "Three months."

A bewildered look swept the boy's face. "Are you psychic?"

"It's a long story. Do you know where Phil Mason went?"

"I suppose he went into the hospital."

"But you're not sure?" probed Claire.

"No. There was a build-up of cars, and I had to get back to work. I saw him wave as he walked in the direction of the kitchen."

"Kitchen?" echoed Claire.

"Yes, he always enters the hospital through the kitchen."

"Why?" Kendal asked.

"Probably to chat up a female cook, get a free meal or a cup of coffee. How the hell do I know?" Todd leaned out of the glass booth and counted the cars waiting in the queue. "If you don't mind, I have customers."

"We're leaving," said Claire.

"Which direction is the kitchen?" Kendal asked.

Todd pointed towards the rear of the hospital. "The entrance is next to loading bay number seven."

The two detectives found the kitchen door. Marching along the corridor, Kendal studied his watch.

"4:40pm we're late."

He used his fist to pound on the first door on his left. He hesitated only long enough to push his ear against the door.

"I hate incompetence," snarled Kendal. He pulled his gun from his shoulder holster. "Claire, step back. If Phil Mason entered the kitchen here, we will too"

Kendal's finger slipped around the trigger. He raised the gun to eye level and took careful aim at the lock. As his finger started to constrict, the lock clicked, and the door was swung open. A plump Italian woman wearing a blue uniform peered out, grumbling. She took one look at the revolver and screamed. Kendal slid the gun back into his holster and greeted the hysterical woman.

"Good afternoon," he said, red-faced.

The woman ran down the corridor screaming Italian dialect. Kendal had heard some of the words spoken by his mother-in-law in the past and quickly followed her down the corridor. Claire brought up the rear.

They entered the room opposite the lift where five male cooks, each holding a steak knife confronted Kendal and Claire.

Flashing his police badge at the lynch mob, Kendal managed to stop the fight before it escalated into a violent travesty.

"I thought I understood the words, terrorists are here," he explained to Claire.

After each cook shook Kendal's hand and apologized in English, they dispersed; except one.

"You nearly got your balls cut off mate," stated a thirty-year-old unshaven male.

"Are you an Aussie?"

"Sure, am mate. From me head to me toes. Got here in Melbourne seven days ago, been lookin' after the shearers. This sheep shearing season is done and dusted. I need to work, so I applied for a cook's job in this hospital."

"Can I ask you a question, mate?" asked Kendal.

"Shoot."

Claire needed to look away to hide her giggles.

"Do you know a bloke by the name of Phil Mason?"

"Yeah, the bugger came through 'ere three days in a row asking for a free meal. I complained to the head poncho upstairs the first day I started. The only thing she said was to feed the bloke."

"Who's the head poncho?"

"Some Sheila doctor," groaned the bloke.

"Do you know her name?" asked Claire.

"No. Who cares anyway? Not my problem. I'm only the cook."

"Seen Mason lately?" asked Kendal.

"Yeah, 'bout fifteen minutes ago. I'm surprised he didn't stop for a meal."

"Which way did he go?"

"I saw him enter the lift. After that, I've no idea."

"Thanks, mate." Kendal walked out of the kitchen and stepped up to the lift.

Reaching out, he pushed the call button.

"Hey sweetie, name's Bazza. If you wanna date, I'm always available."

Claire grinned at the tall, broad shouldered man. On her way out, she faced the Italian woman at the door. "Sorry about the scare."

As the woman began another round of verbal abuse, Claire ran into the lift. She made it just as the doors were shutting.

"I think we should interview Bazza the cook down at Police Headquarters," giggled Claire.

"I don't. I think we'll find who we're looking for in the office of Dr. Clarke."

"Are you positive?"

"Mason is there," stated Kendal.

"I think you're wrong."

"The trouble is, the cookie maker asked you for a date, and you've gone all doughy." Kendal glanced sideways at his brooding partner. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong, I'll tell you what's wrong. The cook might know something important, and you don't want to interview him."

"The cookie maker isn't going anywhere. Besides, we're late for our doctor's appointment. I know what's wrong. You're upset you didn't have the opportunity to give dough boy your phone number."

"I had enough time," mumbled Claire, looking a little sheepish.

Kendal massaged his throbbing temples.

"Tell me something, why are you putting all your energy into finding Patrick?"

"You'd do the same."

"What about Tegan?"

"I've already explained she's safe. Patrick and I will meet. It's his overall game plan. He wants the two of us to play off. Winner takes all. Tegan is a pawn."

"Maybe she has already escaped," suggested Claire.

“If that’s true the game’s drawing to a bloody conclusion. I’ll make you a deal. If Mason isn’t in or close to Clarke’s office, I’ll put you in charge of the case. Ok?”

“Deal,” chirped Claire.

The lift doors slid open opposite the general enquiries office. Both Detectives walked up to the glass window where a young girl sat behind a computer screen. Displaying a cheerful smile, the girl stared at the two Detectives. Kendal thrust his police badge at her.

The girl’s smile instantly fell. She bit her bottom lip.

“Good afternoon,” she stammered.

“I recognize you,” said Kendal.

Claire stepped forward, cutting in. “Don’t worry sweetie; we’re only here to find the location of Dr. Clarke’s office.”

The girl hesitantly brought back her smile. “This will only take a moment.” She glanced at Kendal and started trembling.

“You’re Tegan’s best friend’s sister, Karen Somers,” Kendal said, drumming his fingers on the glass.

“Yes, you’re correct. Hello, Mr. Kendal. It’s good to see you.”

“What are you doing here?”

“Working,” she replied.

“You’re too young to be working?”

“My fifteenth birthday was last week.”

“You did have a birthday last week. I believe you turned fourteen. Your younger sister invited Tegan to the party. I picked her up at a third past midnight. Kendal raised an eyebrow at the girl’s reddening face. “You’re illegally working, but your secret is safe. I won’t inform your boss.”

“I won’t either,” said Claire, poking her head through the gap in the glass window. “I know he looks meaner than a crocodile, but he’s okay.”

“You can find Dr. Clarke’s office on the second floor. Take the lift on your right. It’ll bring you out opposite her office.”

“Thanks, Sweetie,” chirped Claire.

Inside the lift, Kendal tapped his partner on the shoulder. “What did you say to Karen Somers?”

“That’s none of your business, Sugar.”

The second floor boasted tinted windows. The walls were painted cream and had a highly-polished caramel coloured vinyl floor.

“This part of the hospital must be set aside for offices,” stated Claire.

Kendal thoughtfully studied the nameless office door directly across from the lift. Turning his head, he looked along the length of the corridor.

“All the doors have no names,” he grumbled.

Seeing a reception area at the end of the corridor Kendal beckoned Claire to follow. His coat swayed slightly as they walked military style. Standing at a half wall dividing off the reception area and the corridor they found a woman sitting hunched over a desk reading a magazine.

“Excuse me,” barked Kendal.

The woman looked up over her reading glasses. She waved the two Detectives away and dropped her gaze back onto the glossy woman’s magazine.

“Excuse me,” growled Kendal, for a second time.

The woman threw her glasses down and looked up. “What is it you want?”

“Information,” Kendal replied.

“Downstairs at the front desk,” said the woman.

"I'm Detective Kendal. Standing next to me is Detective Ambroso." He pushed his police badge under her nose.

"Why didn't you say?"

"I need to find Dr. Clarke's office."

"Take the lift to the third level. Clarke's office is opposite the lift."

"Are you certain? I was told her office is on this floor."

"It usually is. This week her usual office is in the middle of a major renovation. Administration shipped Dr. Clarke to the third floor this morning."

"Thank you."

Kendal mumbled something incoherent under his breath and returned to the lift.

Claire needed to power walk to keep up.

"Her incompetence was overwhelming," she said.

"Yes, it was."

When the lift doors opened on the third floor, Claire and Kendal stepped into the corridor simultaneously.

"At least we found the correct office," advised Claire, reading the name on the nearest door.

Kendal knocked. He counted to three and knocked again.

"She must've gone for a walk. By my watch, it's past five."

Kendal paced the corridor. He stopped to look out of a window.

The woman from the second-floor reception area poked her head out of the lift.

"Excuse me, Detectives. I have a message from Dr. Clarke."

"Dr. Clarke?" repeated Kendal.

"Yes. The Doctor was called to the emergency ward. She said to tell you she's on her way and to make yourselves at home in her office."

The woman trotted up the corridor and used a silver key to open the door. She smiled and trotted back to the lift.

The two Detectives marched in. Claire shut the door.

The temporary office looked neat. A desk, three chairs, and a filing cabinet were the only contents. The single door next to the window was locked.

"It's a normal office Sugar."

"On the outside," he replied. "Keep an ear out for Dr. Clarke I'm going to snoop around."

"That's illegal."

"Only if I'm caught," whispered Kendal.

He walked across the room to the desk and searched the three drawers before scouring the room from top to bottom, walking towards the filing cabinet.

"What precisely are you looking for?" Claire whispered, standing at the door.

"Anything that might connect Clarke to Patrick," replied Kendal.

Pulling on each drawer in the filing cabinet, Kendal discovered the filing cabinet was locked tight. He quickly picked the lock and hastily rummaged through hundreds of medical files.

"Sugar, I hear footsteps."

Kendal closed the filing cabinet and sat next to Claire, waiting for the person to open the door.

"Find anything?"

"Nothing," he whispered.

A tall woman wearing a white coat, hair in a French bun, opened the door. She strolled across the room to the desk. Her voice hummed from the moment she spoke.

"Detectives, I do apologize for keeping you both waiting."

“Quite all right, Dr. Clarke.”

“Please, call me Ashlee.” She sat behind the desk and pulled the top drawer out a tad, reached in and opened a gold-plated cigarette case. She thrust the case forward. “Cigarette?” she asked.

Both Detectives waved a hand in the air, dismissing the invite.

“Nervous, Doctor?” asked Kendal.

“Smoking soothes my nerves, especially when I’ve had a heavy load like today. Been waiting long?”

“A couple of minutes,” announced Claire. “Don’t doctors preach smoking is bad for one’s health?”

“We’ve already been through all this. I’m certain you aren’t here to quiz me on my smoking habits.”

“No, we’re not,” said Kendal.

“How can I help you, Detective?”

Kendal faked a smile. Sitting deep in his chair he began to study the woman’s body language.

“Dr. Clarke, tell me more about the fire.”

“Straight to work, I like that in a man. Please, I insist you call me Ashlee. It sounds less formal.” She stood and strolled seductively to the window. Her stilettos seemed to lightly touch the carpet. She turned side on, obviously to show off her womanly shape. The lifting of the cigarette to her mouth appeared to be a smooth, seductive action. She inhaled deeply then slowly exhaled. The cloud of grey smoke hovered above her head like a crown.

Claire watched the chemistry radiating from the doctor and shook her head.

Ashlee walked back to her seat, sat and crushed out the cigarette.

“You’re right Detective.”

“About what?” he asked.

“Smoking is bad for one’s health. I’ve been trying to give up the fags for years. I have tasted my last cigarette.”

“I thought it helps to soothe your nerves,” probed Claire.

Ashlee glared savagely at her. The static in the air felt thicker than fog. “Detective Kendal, may I call you by your first name?”

“I’d prefer to remain formal.”

She nodded as if agreeing. Opening the desk drawer, she buried her cigarette case.

“The night of the fire?” questioned Kendal.

The woman resumed a serious posture by clasping her hands on the desk.

“I was driving past the court and witnessed the house burning. Even though I felt tired from my long shift, I called 000 while driving towards the house. Hearing a splash, I ran around the burning house. I saw your partner in the pool, face down, holding a baby.”

“Anything else?” asked Kendal. “For the record,” he added.

“Such as?” quizzed Ashlee.

“Any details you want to add?”

“I jumped into the pool, checked Detective Ambroso and the baby’s pulse. Both were fine. I stayed in the pool waiting for them to regain consciousness.”

“Ashlee, I’m thankful you stopped,” said Kendal.

“Call me Doctor, or Dr. Clarke, Detective. You needn’t frown at me. You hinted earlier you wanted our meeting to remain formal, did you not?”

“Yes, you are correct.”

“Did you see anyone lurking near the house?” asked Claire.

“Yes, Detective Ambroso, I did. I saw a person standing close to the fence.”

“Can you describe the person?”

“No, it was too dark.”

“This person you saw was he tall, short, thin?” quizzed Kendal.

“I was too busy saving the baby and Detective Ambroso.”

“You’re a Doctor, have a guess.”

“I must insist I do not know. The answers to all your questions are in the statement I gave. You should have read it.”

“I did read your statement,” growled Kendal. “I’d like to hear your version one more time. Did you see the person leave?”

“Yes. The man jumped the fence and disappeared. I saw and heard nothing else.”

“Doctor, you’re a real saint?”

Leaning forward in her chair, Dr. Clarke stared coldly at Kendal.

“Detective, what are you implying?”

“I’m not implying anything.”

“I hope not.”

“You mentioned only hearing one splash. Could you have been mistaken?”

“Did I only say one splash?”

“Yes.”

“You have a good memory, Detective.”

Kendal watched the woman more closely. He knew she was hiding something; he just couldn’t prove it. He felt convinced she was playing games. She had to know Patrick, and he felt confident Phil Mason was mixed up in all of this too. Dr. Clarke’s words crushed his thoughts.

“If there are no further questions, Detective, I have patients to attend to before I leave for home.”

“I have a few more.”

“Please be quick. These questions are quite tiresome.”

“I want to know why you heard only one splash the night of the fire.”

“You’re extremely persistent.”

“It’s my job.”

“Why should there have been more than one splash?”

“There were two people in the pool.”

“Perhaps Detective Ambroso jumped carrying the baby. She did have her arm around it.”

He looked at Claire.

“I don’t recall.”

“Detective, you forget, I was on the phone requesting for all three emergency services. I presumed Detective Ambroso was holding the baby and had jumped to save their lives. I heard the splash when I rounded the house carrying my medical bag. You do remember seeing my medical bag near the pool?”

“Yes, I do. Why do you carry a medical bag when you don’t know if you need it?”

Ashlee put her hands behind her head and leaned back in the chair. She inhaled, causing her breasts to rise. She fixed a blue seductive stare on Kendal. He was determined to be unshakable. He had a goal in mind and knew how to reach it.

“We can finish our conversation down at Police Headquarters,” hinted Kendal.

Dr. Clarke exhaled. She resumed a business-like position with her hands clasped together on the desktop. “This office will do fine.”

“Please answer my question.”

“I always carry my medical bag. I never know when I might need it.”

“May I take a look inside the bag?”

“Certainly,” she chirped. Ashlee shifted her chair back, stood and strolled towards the single closed door near the window.

“What’s behind that door?” asked Claire.

“Hello, Detective Ambroso is awake,” said Dr. Clarke. She opened the door and reached for her medical bag, firmly closing the door and returning to her desk. “To answer your question Detective, beyond that door is a toilet and shower.”

Kendal stood and held out his hand. “The bag please,” he barked.

Dr. Clarke handed over the bag. She again settled herself into the leather chair behind the desk.

“If you truly remember what my bag looked like the night of the fire, Detective, you would have seen scuff marks on the handle.”

“Yes, I remember. It is the same one.” He closed the bag and handed it back.

“I scraped a brick wall a few years ago running to help a man who ran from a burning house. His burns were extensive. Sadly, he passed away one week later.”

“I remember that fire. The house had a great ocean view and was situated not far from here.”

“A dear friend of mine informed me the house was not insured.”

“This friend you’re referring to isn’t Phil Mason?”

“He has done nothing wrong.”

“Do you know of his where-a-bouts?”

“No.”

“Have you seen Phil Mason today?”

“Yes, I have. Phil was here at 4:30. If you had come on time, you could have met him.”

“I thought you said you are tired from a busy day?”

“Quite right, Detective Ambroso, I am having a very busy day. To put your mind at ease, Phil Mason paged me. In between patients, I slipped up here to talk to Phil. Knowing you two were late, I left a message and rushed back to another patient. You did receive the message?”

“Yes,” reported Claire.

Kendal walked across the room to the filing cabinet to study the wall.

“Nice award you have, Doctor.”

“Thank you. It is my medical degree.”

“Yes, I see. Degree awarded to Doctor Ashlee P Clarke,” read Kendal. He turned and faced the woman. “What does the P stand for?”

“I do not need to answer such a personal question, Detective.”

“It’s only a middle name. My middle name is James. Alan James Kendal.”

“I do not like my middle name.”

“Police Headquarters isn’t far,” cut in Claire.

“The mouse has squeaked again,” hissed Dr. Clarke.

Kendal was fishing, trying to provoke the woman to anger. She was good, really good. He had under-estimated her.

“I know you don’t need to answer. I’m only curious,” Kendal stated.

“You are not. You are trying to extract information.”

“I’m trying to find an arsonist.”

The woman raised her hands. “If it will help; the P stands for Patricia. Doctor Ashlee Patricia Clarke. Patricia was my mother’s name.”

“Patricia is a nice name,” admitted Kendal.

“At least someone in this world thinks so.”

Kendal refocused on the certificate and read the words again. "One last question, do you know the where-a-bouts of Patrick?"

The doctor fell silent.

Kendal turned from looking at the medical degree and cast his stare on Ashlee Clarke.

"Tell me about Patrick."

"I can't," she mumbled.

"Why?"

"Medical confidentiality," she explained.

"I can get a court order."

"Until you do, I am sorry, I cannot comply."

"Thanks for your time. We'll be in touch if we have any further questions," said Kendal.

Dr. Clarke pushed her chair back.

"Please, don't get up," said Kendal. "You look a little tired; we'll see ourselves out."

The two Detectives walked out of the office. Claire closed the door behind them.

Kendal reached for and pushed the lift call button.

"What was all that about, partner?" Claire hissed.

"I have discovered what I need to know."

"Why ask what her middle name is? To me, it's a stupid question and totally irrelevant to the case."

"I was trying to upset her."

"You only succeeded in upsetting me." She saw Kendal grinning. "What did you discover?"

"I think I know Patrick's identity." He stepped into the lift.

Claire glared at her partner and followed as the lift doors started their shutting sequence. "You want to let me know?"

"All in due time," he replied.

"Sugar, the ruckus sounds like an argument coming from Dr. Clarke's office."

Kendal swung his foot through the lift door's sensor beam. He needed to wait a few seconds for the doors to open. Both Detectives moved as one towards the office door. They heard a slap, a thud then silence. Kendal twisted the doorknob. He pushed open the door and stepped into the room. He found a red-faced Dr. Clarke sitting on the floor rubbing her cheek.

"My partner heard an argument."

Ashlee Clarke started sobbing. She pointed to the door, leading to the bathroom.

"Patrick was here."

Kendal ran to the door and swung it open. "No one's here. The manhole cover has been disturbed. Claire, check the window."

She marched to the window and began to survey the area.

"No one's out of place," she reported.

"Keep looking. Let me know if you see anyone running."

Kendal walked to Ashlee Clarke's side and helped her stand.

"I don't feel good," she whispered.

"What happened?"

"Patrick hit me."

"You should've signaled me."

"I couldn't."

“The room could have an E.L.D,” barked Claire. “An electronic listening device is usually placed on the ceiling near the central point in the room.” Without taking her gaze from the window, she pointed at the light above the desk.

“See anything yet?” asked Kendal.

“Nothing,” replied Claire. “The outside car park is almost empty.”

“Doctor, I need to borrow your chair.”

“Yes, by all means.”

Kendal placed the chair in the shower and stood on the seat. He removed the manhole, cover and looked through the square opening. He completed a full circle inspection of the dark roof space using the torch APP on his mobile phone. Stepping down he re-entered the office. “Thanks for the use of your chair.”

“There’s a man running from the building,” yelled Claire.

“Doctor, please come to the window,” urged Kendal.

She walked briskly to the window and looked down on the car park.

“Do you know that person?”

“Yes. He’s Phil Mason.”

“Claire, let’s go.”

The two Detectives sprinted for the door.

“Doctor, please stay here,” said Kendal at the office door.

Claire jammed the lift doors open. When Kendal dived through the gap, she pressed the close button.

“Claire, when the doors open on the ground floor, flank right, I’ll go left.”

They split up. Kendal quickly calculated the area he needed to search. Using the window in the doctor’s office as a reference for his line of sight, he ran fifteen degrees more to his left. Failing to see Phil Mason, he slowed to a walk. Pulling out his mobile phone he tapped Claire’s number on his phone pad.

“Any sign?” he asked.

“Not yet.”

“Go more to your right and run towards the road. Whatever you do, don’t hang up.”

Kendal spied the white van, sprinted over and climbed onto its roof to get a bird’s eye view of the car park.

“Hey Coppa,” yelled Todd, from the ticket booth. “Two minutes ago, I saw Mason running towards St Kilda Road.”

Kendal saw him point North. He lifted his mobile phone to his ear and told Claire the news.

“Mason has been sighted. He’s running towards you.”

“Sugar, I’ve spotted him. He’s making a bee-line for the park on St Kilda road. Correction, he’s boarded the number seven tram which is heading for Flinders St. Railway Station.”

“We have to catch the tram before it reaches the station.”

Lifting his hand into the air, Kendal stepped onto the road.

The driver of a yellow taxi braked late and screeched the car to a stop a few inches from Kendal’s legs. A big man wearing a light blue shirt with an insignia sewn into the material on each shoulder leaned on the passenger seat. He started yelling abuse through the open window.

Kendal grinned and slid onto the front passenger seat. “Thanks for stopping.”

“Stopping, I nearly ran you over. I have the right to throw you out and drive off.”

“Greetings and formalities will have to wait. I need to catch and get onboard tram number seven. The woman, who is running this way, we have to pick her up.”

The driver's lips quivered under a thick black moustache. He saluted, roared the car's engine and pushed the car onto the busy road. He jerked the taxi to a dead stop at the corner.

"I'm Detective Kendal," he announced introducing himself.

"Pleased to meet you. I'm Leonard," replied the driver. "Please, accept my apology for nearly hitting you." He made a sharp chuckle, staring at the woman running towards the car. "Mr. Kendal, Sir, I have never in all my years of driving seen a cop flag down a taxi and wanting to pick up a hooker. I've got to say she's the best thing I've seen in years."

Claire opened the rear passenger door and slid onto the seat. Hearing the driver of the cab chuckling she glared at him through slits.

Kendal slipped his mobile phone into his pocket and slapped the driver on the shoulder. "It's a long story and one I can't divulge. Let's go; the tram is leaving us behind."

Leonard pushed the accelerator to its stop. He cut in front of the tram to slow it down. When it had stopped, he parked on the tracks twenty feet further on.

"Yes Sir, this is an exciting day, and my mate reckons driving a taxi is dull and boring."

Kendal stepped onto the road. Pushing his head through the open taxi window, he looked directly at Leonard.

"There's an extra fifty if you stay right where you are."

"I'll be here."

"I forgot to inform you, the woman we picked up, wearing the leather pants; she's my partner, Detective Ambroso, Melbourne Homicide." Using the palm of his hand, Kendal tapped the car's roof twice before marching away from the car.

The tram driver stopped the two Detectives from boarding by stepping onto the road. The man was well rounded. The expression on his face revealed he wasn't happy at having the tram blocked.

"What the hell are you two playing at? Get back in the taxi and move it before I ram it off the road."

Claire flashed her police badge in his face. "Keep your shirt on, big fella."

Kendal pushed past the man. He boarded the tram. "Everyone listen up. I want you all to file past me in an orderly fashion. This shouldn't take long. I apologize for the inconvenience."

Nobody moved.

He flashed his police badge and pulled his Smith and Wesson from his shoulder holster. There was a surge of people scrambling for the front exit. None fitted Mason's description. Kendal nodded at Claire. Walking along the gap between the empty rows of seats, they held their guns out in front. Claire glanced at the passengers, noting most were dressed in work attire. They had craned their necks to see inside the tram. "They look like their waiting for the queen to arrive," she whispered.

Kendal and Claire slowly walked towards the last row of seats.

The third last row was empty. Both stepped onto the seat for a bird's eye view. Claire flanked left. Kendal was on the right. He signaled he'll step closer to the last row. He jumped the seat and found it empty.

'One row remained. Mason must be hiding in the last row,' Kendal decided.

Claire stepped closer. She jumped a little at hearing the screech of brakes when another tram banked up behind theirs. A car driver tooted his horn, yelling abuse out of his window at being stopped in peak hour traffic. More people joined the crowd of onlookers determined to discover the reason behind why the tram had stopped.

Claire climbed onto the second last seat. Looking over the backrest, she spied Mason. For a full two seconds, they stared at each other before he moved his gaze to Claire's gun.

From the side, Kendal glanced around the last seat. He saw the side of a leg, half a body, and black hair. The man was coiled into a squat position on the floor between the seats. Kendal remained hopeful Mason didn't carry a gun. A trapped man was always unpredictable. Seeing Claire leaning forward, he knew he was no longer in charge of the situation. His blood chilled. If any doctor argued the fact it was impossible for blood to be chilled when pumped around the body, he'd argue the point. In the end, he'd win.

Kendal aimed his gun at Mason. Nerves in his hand jumped. His trigger finger twitched.

"Freeze sucker," he yelled. "Push your hands into the air."

Mason fidgeted. He held his flick knife in a tight white-knuckled death grip. He wanted nothing more than to strike his victim. He readied himself to lash out. Mason shifted his right leg into an awkward position. He lifted the knife, so the point of the blade was almost touching Claire's foot.

"Drop the knife," ordered Kendal.

Mason didn't take his eyes off his target. As he commenced his attack, the knife's sharp metal blade glistened in the tram's overhead light. Using a sharp backhand motion, he slashed Claire's ankle. The metal edge easily cut through the leather and across her flesh. She screamed. Mason launched himself, slashing at her ankle again and again. Each slash missed its intended target. Her ankle gave way, causing her to be off balance. She started to fall and threw her revolver at Kendal. He caught it in his left hand and re-aimed his gun. He watched helplessly as Claire fell on top of Mason. She curled her fingers into a fist and punched the man's wrist. The flick knife skimmed across the floor. Mason's fists lashed out. Claire felt several firm punches to the body. Lashing out, she managed to shove a fist against Mason's nose. Kendal heard a snap. Everyone outside heard a yell. Mason instantly ceased his struggle and surrendered.

Even though Claire received a deep cut to her ankle, she managed to scramble to her feet. She glared down at the man coiled in a fetal position. Looking around for witnesses, and seeing none, she smirked.

"You asshole!" she screamed. "You've ruined my good leather pants." She kicked Mason in the ribs twice for good measure.

Kendal pushed his gun back into his shoulder holster, handed Claire her revolver and reached for his handcuffs. He dragged the man into a sitting position and tethered Mason's wrists behind his back.

"Come on, scum bag; you're under arrest." He pointed to where he sat. "Now stay." Kendal focused on Claire. "Are you okay partner?" He shook his head and realized he shouldn't have asked.

"No," she yelled, slumping prone onto the seat.

"Relax, I'll call it in."

"Sugar, I think I've got a sore ankle." She moved her foot and screamed in pain. "Change that to a definite."

Kendal called police dispatch for backup. His second call was for an ambulance.

Claire sat up and studied her ankle. She pouted. "Hey Sugar, I'm bleeding."

He flashed Claire a pacified look. "I think I'm jealous."

"Why?"

"You'll probably receive a bravery medal."

"True, I'd be jealous too if I was the one missing out."

Hearing his mobile phone beginning to ring, Kendal answered it before the second ring.

"Hello Captain Hughes, always a pleasure. Yes, we'll be here." Kendal hung up. "Claire, Cap. Hughes will be here in three minutes."

"Great," she moaned. "How can I look my best? My cap has blood on it, and look, Mason you scumbag you cut my good leathers. I have a good mind to flog you right here and now. Sugar, lend me your belt."

Through half closed eyes, Mason focused on her. "What did I do?"

"Do!" she hissed. "You low life worm."

Kendal raised a finger to his lips. "Detective, behave, we have company."

The tram driver had stepped into the tram. His murderous expression revealed he wasn't happy. He glared at the two Detectives, marching down the aisle. At a distance of seven short steps, he abruptly stopped.

"I'm Mr. Chanter. When can I get my tram rolling?" he spat.

"Five minutes," assured Kendal. Switching his stare attention to the knife-wielding man he growled. "Are you Phil Mason?"

He nodded his reply.

"Good start," barked Claire. "At least we caught the right bloke."

"Why were you at the hospital?" asked Kendal.

"I went to see Dr. Clarke."

"Mason, expand your answers."

"I came to drop off my newest CD. I'm in this band. We finished recording it the other day. I wanted the Doc's opinion."

"What's your band's name?"

"Split Theory."

"Have you started any house fires lately?"

"No."

Claire switched her attention to movement outside the window. Watching the bystanders starting to shuffle away from the tram, she whispered. "Sugar, the ambos have arrived."

"Mason. Do you want to change your answer about not starting any fires?"

"No, and I'm not answering any more questions. I have a headache." He spat at Kendal's shoes.

"Lucky you missed; my female partner's a little upset. She doesn't like either of us looking less than perfect."

Two ambulance officers boarded the tram. After introducing themselves one squatted and checked Mason while the other bandaged Claire's ankle. They placed Mason on a stretcher and were making their way towards the ambulance when Kendal stopped the ambulance driver.

"You don't need to call for a second vehicle I'll personally take my partner to the hospital."

The two officers nodded and climbed into the ambulance. In moments, the vehicle was moving along the road.

Mr. Chanter slipped his arm around Claire's waist and helped her down the tram's steps.

"You can start your tram," announced Kendal. "Claire, it's good to see Leonard hasn't moved. We need him more than before." He slipped his arm around her waist and gathered her legs in the other.

"Isn't the hero supposed to give the victim a kiss?" she moaned, puckering her lips and closing her eyes.

Kendal stumbled jolting her in his arms.

"Sugar, take it easy. Don't forget I have sore ribs." She shook her head. "You would make a lousy horse."

He chuckled. By the time he had walked the short distance to the taxi, Leonard was standing next to the open door.

"You should've gone in the ambulance," said Leonard.

"You don't expect this woman to ride in the same ambulance as Mason? By the time, they had arrived at the hospital my partner would've shot him," warned Kendal. Hearing his mobile phone making a noise, he placed Claire in the rear of the taxi and answered his phone. "Speak."

"You liked my little game?"

"No. Where are you?"

"I'm close enough to hear you breathing."

Kendal spun in slow circles studying everyone. Not one soul was using a mobile phone. His thoughts returned to what he saw in the hospital's roof. He grinned.

"Patrick, you've made your first mistake."

"Good try. I don't make mistakes."

"I'm coming for you, Patrick."

"Catch me if you can."

"I will, and soon," hissed Kendal.

"I'll let you in on a little secret. You want to hear it?"

"I'm listening."

"Soon you and yours will be dead."

"Give it your best shot. I warn you Patrick; don't sleep."

The phone went dead.

"Claire, what I'm about to say, you mustn't repeat," whispered Kendal.

She looked expectantly at her partner.

"I know where Patrick lives. My idea is dangerous. If you agree, he'll be in custody before sunrise tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

TEGAN WAVED to Sam who was standing at the entrance to the lane for the last time as she walked away. Deciding to take a shortcut through the park, she eventually saw St Kilda road in the distance. There was five stationary trams nose to tail. A mob had gathered near the first tram.

Halfway through the park, Tegan stepped onto a cracked concrete cricket pitch. A flame coloured curly haired boy rode his pushbike at speed to intercept her.

"Hi there, sweet stuff," he said, slowing to walking pace.

"Hi, yourself," replied Tegan.

"Do you live close by?"

"No."

The lad rode ahead and used his bike to cut into Tegan's path. She side stepped to go around the bike. The boy reached out and grabbed her arm.

"What's your name, sunshine?"

"Let me go," snarled Tegan.

"You have to cough up your name."

"Why should I?"

"You have to pay to walk through my park."

"Your park?" quizzed Tegan.

"Yep, ain't she a beaut? Look, we started off on the wrong foot. You come across as a nice girl. I'm Arnold. You are?"

"I'm not willing to say my name to a kid who wears a razor blade in his ear."

"I'm glad you noticed it. Makes me look cool, don't you think?"

"It makes you look stupid."

"All the other girls who walk across my park say it looks good."

"Tell me, what does it cost to get to the other side of your park?"

"A long pash will get you all the way to the other side of the oval."

"Forget it."

"I can't guarantee a safe trip if you don't pay."

"Who's going to stop me?" jeered Tegan, looking around.

Arnold threw off his jacket to reveal a snake tattooed on his left arm. "Me."

"Do you think I'd be scared of a skinny arm and a fake tattoo?"

"Come on; we're both sixteen, pucker up." Arnold placed his hands-on Tegan's hips.

"I was twelve on my last birthday."

"Liar," hissed Arnold. "You'll pay for lying. You'll be paying me double."

"Doubling zero is zero."

Tegan pushed past Arnold and started to walk off. He grabbed her arm again. She kicked out at the boy's shin. He winced at the pain, overbalanced and fell over his bike.

"I'll get you," yelled Arnold, watching Tegan beginning to run. His voice trailed off into inaudible whimpers as he cradled his shin.

By the time, Tegan got to the tram the crowd was already seated and were engrossed in chatting about the incident with the knife-wielding lad. Tegan saw an ambulance leave and spotted her father placing Claire onto the back seat of a taxi. She saw him snatching out his mobile phone from his pocket and talk to someone.

"Dad, I'm here," Tegan yelled.

Oblivious to his daughter's calls, Kendal slipped onto the front seat of the taxi. Picking up her pace, Tegan managed to open the car door and jump onto the rear seat. Kendal saw movement in the rear-view mirror and swung around.

Claire, Tegan, and her father stared gob-smacked at each other. The trio yelled at the same time. Leonard looked on, displaying a bewildered expression.

"You escaped." Kendal cheered and pulled his daughter into the front seat. They gave each other a bear hug. "Are you okay? Are you hurt in any way?"

"No. Dad, I have important information. I know Patrick's identity." She cupped a hand around her mouth and whispered her news.

"You've done well. I just need the proof. I have to catch Patrick in the act."

"I understand. We have to set a trap. I promise to have nerves of steel if I ever see Patrick unmasked again."

"Just like your old man," groaned Claire, shaking her head.

Tegan clambered over to the rear seat and gave Claire a bear hug.

"Leonard, this is my daughter," Kendal announced, blinking away his tears.

"G'day."

"Hello."

"Sugar, we have company."

Captain Hughes spied Kendal and stopped his car next to Leonard's taxi.

Kendal ushered Tegan out of the car. Both stepped onto the road, staring at Captain Hughes.

"I've great news," bellowed Kendal.

"I can see the good news. Tegan, my you've grown. How are you feeling?"

She cuddled into her father. "Good thanks."

Patting Tegan on the head, he switched his attention to Kendal. "What's been happening here?"

"We were interviewing Dr. Clarke when Claire witnessed Mason running from the hospital. We cornered him in the tram. He used a knife to slash Claire's ankle."

"Kendal, after Claire's ankle has been attended to at the hospital take Tegan up to Aura Lake for safety. This time, stay there."

"What about catching Patrick?"

"Forget the bum. You need a rest. I'll hand the case over to Philips."

"Cap, I have to protest over the idea."

Hughes looked him square in the eyes. "Take a few days off. Go fishing. You look like shit. I'm certain Patrick's not going anywhere."

"Sir, I must protest."

"Kendal, I'm surprised, that's the first time you've called me Sir." Hughes flashed a cursory grin. "I don't want to hear or see you for seven days."

"I'm close to finding Patrick."

"In one word, go and have a rest."

"You just spoke five words."

"You're a wise arse."

Hughes flashed Tegan another look. He turned on his toes and walked off in the direction of his car.

After Tegan and her father had watched him drive away, they slid into the taxi and closed the doors.

"Leonard, take us to the hospital," ordered Kendal.

He eased the car into the traffic flow. In eleven minutes, Leonard parked outside the hospital's front entrance. The party of three disembarked. Kendal looked through the driver's open window. He slipped Leonard two fifty-dollar notes.

"Thank you, Mr. Kendal. Take care; Tegan, you too. Detective Ambroso, I hope your ankle heals fast. If you ever need a friendly taxi driver give me a call. Here's my card."

Kendal nodded. He waited to see the tail lights vanish before carrying Claire into the hospital. He settled her into the wheelchair he found in a corner.

"Don't go away," he warned. "Tegan, make sure she doesn't do a runner."

"I won't go far. Bruised ribs will slow me down."

Kendal approached the reception window. The young female nurse he stared at looked un-interested as she talked on the phone.

"I need a doctor to examine the woman in the wheelchair."

The middle-aged woman seated behind the computer screen to his right looked up. "We're busy tonight; there's an hour wait."

Kendal's police badge quickly changed her mind.

A male nurse walking up the corridor beckoned Kendal to bring Claire.

"Detective, please follow me, the doctor will meet with you in examination room seven."

"Thank you."

"Tegan, tell us how you escaped," said Claire the moment the male nurse walked out of the examination room.

She relayed the facts in a watered-down summary. She just finished when Dr. Clarke walked in, followed by the head of the emergency department.

"Detective Kendal, I happened to be talking to Dr. Carmichael when a nurse interrupted. He asked could I examine a police officer. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. A knife has slashed Detective Ambroso's ankle. She's also complaining of sore ribs."

Dr. Clarke focused on Tegan. "Hello there. I'm surprised you are here and not at home watching a movie."

Instead of replying Tegan flashed a smile and scrutinized Dr. Carmichael in his examination of Claire's ankle.

"Dr. Clarke, why didn't you say earlier my daughter was at your house?" probed Kendal.

"Patrick and I had an argument. He promised me to set Tegan free. I thought the whole scene was inconsequential."

"Where does Patrick live? And I don't want to hear about the doctor to patient privacy act. I need to know, and I need to know now."

"He does not have a fixed address. He rings my doorbell, maybe once a month for a place to sleep."

"Where can I find him?"

"I have no idea. No idea at all. Did you find Phil Mason?"

"Yes. He's the one who attacked my partner."

"Good heavens. Are you positive?"

"Yes," growled Kendal. "Do you know why he came to see you?"

"Of course," replied Ashlee Clarke. "He gave me the music CD his group has recently finished recording. He wanted my opinion on its quality."

"You don't strike me as a music lover."

"I used to listen to music all the time. I must confess I used to be a real party animal in my teens. When I began my medical studies, I sacrificed music so I could put all my energy into being a surgeon."

"Head of the burns department is a big change," stated Kendal.

"I eventually found out I did not have the stomach to be a surgeon."

"The discovery would've been very disappointing."

"Extremely," she sighed. "One has to move forward and not dwell on the things one cannot change."

Dr. Carmichael stepped back from his examination, walked over to a wall, peeled his latex gloves from his hands and dropped them into the bin. He walked back to the bed to begin examining Tegan.

After the examination, he dropped the second pair of gloves in the bin and smiled at Claire.

"Your ribs feel intact. A couple of stitches in your ankle will see you right."

A female nurse stepped into the room. She quickly explained Carmichael was needed in Emergency.

"Dr. Clarke, please be a gem and stitch Detective Ambroso's ankle, I have to go. Detective Kendal, your daughter's fine. We won't need to admit her. She's fit, healthy and ready to go home." He smiled and marched out of the room.

"There's an urgent matter I was in the middle of; I won't be a moment," advised Dr. Clarke, walking towards the door. In a heartbeat, she vanished.

Kendal stepped up to his daughter. Reaching into his pocket, he extracted his mobile phone.

"Here, call grandma's house and talk to your mum to let her know you're safe."

“Slap another bandage over the cut and let’s get out of here,” growled Claire.

“You’re not going anywhere,” stated Kendal. “We have to stick to the plan. Besides, you’re bleeding everywhere.” He eyed her suspiciously. “You’re not afraid of needles?”

“I am not afraid of anything.”

Kendal chuckled at her six-word statement. Shifting his attention back on Tegan he patted her shoulder as she began to cry to her mother through the mobile phone.

“It’s okay little Tacca; you’re safe.”

Tegan whispered goodbye, snapped the phone closed and threw his hand off her shoulder.

“Dad quit calling me that childish name.” She stood and marched over to Claire.

“Partner, help me out here.”

“No way, I’m on Tegan’s side. In case you haven’t noticed, Tegan’s not a little kid anymore. I’m amazed she came through her kidnapping ordeal unscathed.”

“I am just a concerned father.”

Watching Tegan folding her arms, made Kendal concede defeat. He pushed his hand into his pocket for his handkerchief.

“Here, wipe the tears from your face. From now on I’ll never call you little Tacca again.”

Tegan brightened, unwrapped the cloth and stared wide-eyed at the small silver disc in the palm of her hand. She held it up for her father to see. Claire leaned forward to take a closer look. Hearing footsteps approaching, Kendal raised a finger to his lips, grabbed the cloth, re-wrapped the disc and quickly slipped it back inside his coat pocket.

A smiling Dr. Clarke pushed through the thick plastic emergency room doors and walked towards cubicle seven. “I apologize for taking too long. A burns victim was brought in. A surgeon wanted my immediate opinion.” She flashed a cursory grin. “How is my patient feeling?”

“I’m fine, really,” stated Claire, sitting up. “I don’t know what all the fuss is about? Slap a small bandage over the cut, and I’ll be right.”

“Certainly not, Detective Ambroso. Your ankle requires four stitches.”

“Claire’s scared,” advised Tegan.

“Detective Ambroso is a police officer she catches criminals for a living. I’m certain she won’t be scared of a small needle?”

“It’s true. Years ago, when I fell off my bike and I needed stitches in my knee, Claire told me she was scared of needles.”

“Detective, you need to be brave for Tegan’s sake. Detective Kendal, if you would like a cup of coffee, the canteen is down the corridor on your left. Tegan might like a drink too. Your partner will be in here for about an hour. If she is good, she can go home soon after.”

“Thanks, Doc. I think I’ll take you up on your offer, Tegan does look slightly thirsty.”

“I’d rather stay here to keep a close watch on Claire.”

“You might be dehydrated after your incarceration and not know it,” argued Kendal, glaring at his daughter.

“Now you mention it; a cold drink does sound nice.”

“Partner, we’ll see you in an hour,” instructed Kendal. He started to herd his daughter out of the room.

“I’ll be here,” said Claire. She sat on the bed watching Kendal marching Tegan down the corridor.

Claire winced when she felt Dr. Clarke inserting the needle into her ankle.

"The injection will take a few minutes to take effect. I'll be back soon."

Claire lay prone on the bed, watching the wall clock. Five minutes had ticked off before Clarke returned. Claire sat up to watch.

"Your foot should feel numb by now."

"It does."

"Good, four stitches coming right up. This will not take long. Why don't you lie down on the bed?"

"I do feel tired." Claire conceded and fell back against the pillow staring at the ceiling.

"All done," announced Dr. Clarke. "You rest; I'll locate Detective Kendal; when I return, you can go."

"Thanks," Claire whispered, closing her eyes.

"Hey Doc, how's your patient?"

Claire opened her eyes. Looking for the voice, she struggled to focus on the person.

"She's done," announced Dr. Clarke.

"No, she's not, the cop is still awake."

"I have finished."

"I'll take over from here."

"What are you doing?" mumbled Claire, struggling to prop herself up on one elbow. "Why do I feel so weak? Why can't I move?" She clamped a black gaze on the person beside her. He reached out and pushed her back down onto the bed.

"Doc, I don't want the cop to fall out of bed. She might arouse suspicion. Why are you so incompetent? Next time I tell you something, listen. Now give her another injection." Patrick stared at Claire. "Hey Coppa, guess what happens to the people who see my face?"

"They die."

"Please, I beg you, let the woman be."

Patrick slapped the doctor across the face, subduing her.

"Don't ever tell me what to do. Don't forget; you owe me."

"I believe I have repaid my debt." Dr. Clarke rubbed her red cheek.

"You'll never be able to repay me. Now, see if you can get something right and push this lousy excuse for a cop to the morgue."

Patrick lowered his head close to Claire's face. "You've heard correct, Coppa. You're on the way to the morgue. Your eyes are revealing you're petrified. Don't worry I'll give you some Ether. In seconds, you'll lose consciousness. I promise you won't feel a thing."

"If you want the Detective at the morgue, I suggest you do it yourself. I have had enough of helping you."

"Doc. you're not pulling rank on me, are you?"

"Yes, I am."

"Why do you always think you're smarter than me? Why?" Patrick growled and started pacing back and forth across the room.

"I am smarter than you."

Patrick stopped his pacing when he was next to Claire.

"Do you believe such crap? Just because she's a doctor doesn't mean she's smarter than me. Do you agree, Coppa?" He turned his head to focus on Dr. Clarke. "You'll do what I say."

Claire's eyes started to close. Patrick marched towards the thick plastic door. He paused to check for foot traffic in the corridor.

“Doc, the coast is clear, you go first. I’ll push the cop along the corridor. If you refuse to leave this room, I’ll shoot you.” Pulling Kendal’s gun out from a back-pocket Patrick waved the weapon under her nose.

“As usual, you win,” mumbled Doctor Clarke.

“Good to hear.”

Patrick moved a narrow trolley next to the bed and rolled Claire onto it. Positioning himself at one end he stared at Clarke, waiting for her to help.

“Come on, we have to hurry,” whispered Dr. Clarke.

“You, stupid woman, this cop is still moving. Go get a white sheet. I don’t want anyone to suspect anything is amiss.”

Dr. Clarke walked to a side cupboard and snatched a white sheet from the top shelf. She returned and partly covered Ambroso.

“Here, breathe in the sweet smell on this pink handkerchief. We don’t want you to alert anyone of your plight.”

Satisfied Claire was unconscious Patrick checked the corridor for the second time. Seeing no one, he beckoned Clarke to follow.

“Doc. start pushing, the coast is clear.”

The trolley was half in the corridor when Patrick signaled a halt.

“You must be stupid. My gut instinct is telling me you want me caught.” He raised his hand to slap the doctor’s face.

Dr. Clarke cringed. “No,” she whispered.

“Then do the right thing.”

She marched to the cupboard and snatched up another sheet to cover Claire’s face.

Patrick wheeled the long trolley into the corridor and into the lift.

“Hey Doc, I think after I’ve bumped off Kendal and his family, I’ll lay low. What you reckon?”

Staring at Patrick, she slowly nodded.

“Kendal’s kid, she turned up?”

“Yes.”

“You reckon she told anyone who I am?”

“Probably,” whispered Clarke.

The lift doors opened at the basement to voices talking and laughing.

“Doc, you look stressed. Tomorrow, wanna go with me on a holiday? I’ve been thinking about Hawaii, of late.”

“No, I have work.”

Patrick rolled his eyes. He spoke in low whispers. “Take over. If someone sees me pushing the trolley, they’ll DOB me in.”

“You hide. When the coast is clear, join me at the morgue,” instructed Clarke.

Halfway down the corridor, two female cleaners came walking around the corner carrying long-handled mops. Both were pushing cleaning buckets on tiny wheels.

“Good evening, Dr. Clarke,” said one.

“Another stiff for the morgue Eh!” the other tittered.

Dr. Clarke nodded her reply. Remaining silent, she pushed the trolley onwards. Watching the cleaners chatting in a large round mirror mounted on the wall she saw them start to climb the stairs. Dr. Clarke counted to seven, to see if they returned. When they didn’t, she whispered a beckoning call.

Patrick crept up the hall. “Forget the morgue. I said it for a cover story. Hand over your car keys. I’ll meet you at the service entrance.”

Inside three minutes he had reversed the car to the door and pushed the button to open the trunk.

“Hold it Doc; I’ll get the cop, she looks too heavy for you.”
Patrick picked Claire up and dropped her into the trunk.
“Did you have to be so rough?” jeered Dr. Clarke.
“Hey, if you don’t like it, next time, you do it. Now let’s go.” He slammed the trunk shut and marched to the driver’s door. He looked over his shoulder. “Coming?”
Ashlee Clarke folded her arms. She stood defiantly.
“What now?”
“The car door, aren’t you going to open it?”
“No, do it yourself.”
Ashlee folded her arms tighter. She pushed her chest out.
“If you don’t get in the bloody car, I’ll leave you behind.”
Glaring at Patrick, she slid onto the passenger seat.
“Where are we going?”
“Your place, I’ve a surprise waiting for you,” announced Patrick.

CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

“FORGET THE cold drink in the canteen idea, dad,” growled Tegan. “Come clean. You’re up to something?”

Kendal silenced his daughter by placing a finger to her lips. He pressed the lift call button. Pulling his handkerchief from his pocket, he unwrapped the material, exposing the small listening disc. He studied it. Grinning like a schoolboy in a lolly shop, he placed the disc on the floor and kicked it across the floor. He and Tegan watched it disappear through the splinter of darkness between the lift and the floor.

“Now Patrick won’t know what I’m up to,” Kendal boasted, looking at Tegan. “The disc explains how he has been able to listen to everything I’ve been saying.”

Tegan followed her father into the lift. He clicked his fingers at his daughter.

“I reckon Patrick had Clarke slip the E.L.D. into my pocket when I placed my coat on her shoulders the night of the fire. Patrick knew I’d want to help the doctor anyway I could. Only God knows how long he’s been tracking my every move.”

As a precaution, Kendal searched his pockets for any more hidden electronic listening devices. Satisfied there wasn’t any he placed his hand on Tegan’s shoulder.

“You’re correct in thinking I’m up to something. I want to search Clarke’s old office. I’ll explain my plan on the way.”

The lift doors opened on the second floor. Stepping up to the office door, Kendal picked the lock.

“Tegan, keep an ear out, this won’t take long.”

Except for a small box near the window, the office was an empty shell. Kendal kicked the white lid off the shoebox and stared at the contents; a picture frame and a silver key.

“How are you going over there?”

“Good dad, I don’t hear footsteps.”

Kendal swiped up the small silver key, studied it, slipped it into his coat pocket and examined the picture frame. “Tegan, come over here and have a gander at this.”

She walked across the floor. Focusing on the picture her father held, she gasped. “You’re holding a photo of Patrick.”

“The other person is Phil Mason,” reported Kendal. “They take a great family photo, don’t you think?”

Tegan nodded vigorously.

“Come on; I need to talk to Mason.”

They rode the lift to the ground floor, walked to the enquiries counter and waited for the young girl to look up.

“Karen Somers, what are you doing behind the enquiries window?” asked Tegan.

“Working,” she replied.

Tegan eyeballed her suspiciously.

Kendal leaned sideways, whispering in her ear. “It’s a long story. The girl can inform you later. Miss Somers, I’m looking for a patient by the name of Mason. Philip Mason.”

She keyed in the relevant details into the computer. She spoke the exact room number when the information came on the screen.

“He’s in room three, second door on your left.”

“Tegan, take a seat, I won’t be long.” Kendal marched down the corridor.

“Your dad is seriously weird,” whispered Karen.

“I don’t think he is. I reckon he’s the best,” said Tegan.

Kendal walked into room three. He spied Mason lying on a narrow bed next to the window.

“You again?” moaned Mason.

“I’m in a hurry. I can be your worst nightmare or a good mate. Tell me why you were running?” Kendal marched across the room and hovered over Mason.

“I suspected you and that woman were cops. And I’ve had enough,” grumbled Mason.

“Enough of what?” quizzed Kendal.

“I’ve had enough of cops asking the same question. Ever since Ashlee accidentally burnt her parent’s house to the ground, I’ve been living a nightmare.” He turned his head away. “I want to be left alone.”

“Ashlee caused the fire, you say?”

Refocusing on Kendal Mason sighed away his tension. “Yes. Everyone pointed their finger my way. The only thing I could do was to keep saying; I didn’t do it.”

“Your father said Patrick caused the fire. Which is correct, Ashlee or Patrick?”

“You don’t know?” questioned Mason. “You really don’t know?”

“Who started the fire?”

“Patrick.”

“Why did you say, Ashlee started the fire? Why would you want to protect Patrick?”

Displaying a blank expression, Mason stared at Kendal through glazed eyes.

“Where can I find Patrick?”

“I’d never say even if I knew.”

“Why not?” barked Kendal.

“Patrick will find out and I’ll be eaten by the fire.”

“What’s he to you?”

“No more questions Coppa. I’ve said too much already.”

“Why did you dump the van at the hospital?”

“Patrick asked me to.”

“Why did you go see Ashlee Clarke?”

“She’s my band’s test audience. I know she’ll give an honest opinion on our songs.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to add?”

“No.” Mason turned his head away and stared at the wall.

“Withholding information can easily be added to your string of offences.”

Mason remained tight-lipped. In fact, he used his hands to cover his face.

“I’ll give you some time alone to change your mind.”

“I’ve said all I’m going to say,” Mason mumbled.

“If that’s the way you want it?” Kendal pulled his handcuffs from his back pocket, clamped one end on Mason’s ankle and the other end around the bed rail. “Don’t go away. In case you change your mind, I’ll send someone to take your statement.”

“Hey, come back here. You can’t do this. I have rights.”

Kendal and Tegan marched back into the emergency room where they expected to find Claire. Instead, they found two teenage kids. Both were involved in a bloody fight. One male youth had a deep gash above his left eye and a sliced ear from a bottle that had been smashed over his head. The other male youth appeared to have suffered a knife wound to the stomach.

The surgeon glared at the non-sterile intruders.

“Get out, get out. Nurse, get them out.”

As Kendal backed out of the room, he spied Claire’s handcuffs underneath a small table. He squatted to retrieve them and housed the cuffs in his back pocket.

The triage nurse pushed him into the corridor.

“Who do you think you are, barging into an emergency room like you own the place?”

“I’m Detective Kendal, Melbourne Homicide.”

“I don’t care if you’re the Prime Minister. Get out.”

“I left my partner in that room not more than twenty minutes ago.”

“Well, she’s not there now?” advised the nurse.

“Where might she be?”

“I’ve no idea. Try enquiries.”

Kendal watched the nurse rush back into the emergency room as his mobile phone sounded. On the second ring, he answered.

“Have you lost someone?” asked the voice, sounding casual.

“Patrick, do you have my partner?”

“Why should I tell you?”

“She’s a police officer. Kidnapping will be added to the list. The list that will soon see you incarcerated for a very, very long time.”

“You have to catch me first.”

“I will. Now tell me, where is Detective Ambroso?”

“I sent her to the morgue.”

Kendal’s eyes bulged. He signaled for Tegan to wait. He sprinted for the stairwell, bounding down the stairs three at a time.

“Patrick, what have you done?”

Reaching the basement floor, Kendal sprinted along the corridor, bursting through the morgue door. Two workers jumped at the sudden intrusion and started abusing the intruder.

“Are you at the morgue, yet?” asked Patrick sarcastically.

“I am.”

“She’s not there.”

“Where is she?”

“You like my little game?”

Kendal felt his blood pressure rising. Fully understanding the rules of the game, and what was at stake, he kept his voice calm.

“Patrick, where is she?”

“I’m not going to tell. Do you feel angry, frustrated? Do you feel hatred mushrooming on the inside? Does it make you want to pull your gun out and shoot me?”

“I’m not angry at all. I now have the upper hand. I found your listening device in my left coat pocket.”

The phone connection was quiet for several moments before Patrick’s voice came through the phone in a whisper.

“You have to locate me by 10:00pm. If you fail, your partner dies.”

“Where do I start looking?”

“The clock’s ticking. Tick tock, tick tock.”

The phone went dead.

Kendal checked his watch. 8:00pm. He set the alarm on his mobile for 9:59pm. He signaled Tegan to follow and asked Karen Somers to page Dr. Clarke.

Two minutes of waiting and he was informed the doctor had left for the day and gone home.

‘One hour fifty minutes remaining,’ thought, Kendal. He needed to think and act fast.

By 8:30pm, he had parked his car at the home of Dr. Clarke. The letterbox was the only thing standing.

A burly fire chief marched over.

“I’m fire chief Manfred.”

“I’m Detective Kendal.”

“The firey’s are about to leave. The house was unoccupied at the time of the fire. I traced the owner to the children’s hospital. They said they’d let her know.”

The two men shook hands. The fire chief turned and left the scene to finish up.

Patrick had struck again, destroying any evidence of Tegan’s incarceration. Kendal looked sideways at his daughter’s shocked face. He saw her tears fall.

“How can you believe my story?” Tegan groaned.

Kendal placed a hand on her shoulder. He knelt to look her in the eyes.

“I believe you. I believe every word you told me and it happened to you right here. Come on, let’s search the area.”

They walked down the short drive, rounded the rubble and stood at the back fence.

“This is the exact spot where I jumped the fence,” reported Tegan.

“You described diving out of a window and landing between two rose bushes.”

“Yep.” She pointed to a narrow garden bed close to where the house used to stand.

Together they walked across the grass. Standing between two burnt twigs, Tegan pointed into the rubble. Her voice ascended to a fever pitch.

“Dad, there’s the bed I told you about.”

“Stay put; I’ll go take a look.”

Kendal climbed the smoldering rubble. Grabbing the twisted metal bed-head, he yanked. The rubble fell away leaving a blackened brass bed. His gaze fell on a long chain tethered at one end to the bed. He squatted and pulled the small silver key he pocketed in Dr. Clarke’s old office. He tried the lock. At first, it didn’t seem to fit. Three more attempts to turn the key also failed. After blowing into the lock, he tried a fourth time. The key turned. The lock clicked open. Kendal pocketed the lock then climbed down from the rubble.

“Dad, did you find the chain?” asked Tegan.

“A small souvenir,” he said, dropping the lock into her hand.

A woman’s screams split the air. Both he and Tegan ran to investigate.

A tall woman, head buried in her hands, stood sobbing close to the letterbox. She looked up when she heard footsteps.

"Evening Dr. Clarke. There's not much of the house remaining."

"I finished my shift and came home to this. Why and who would do this horrific deed? Where am I going to live?"

"I believe this is Patrick's doing," announced Kendal. "Do you agree, Doctor?"

"How the hell do I know? I was at the hospital." She started to massage her temples.

"I must go to a friend's place to freshen up and call my insurance company."

"Which friend are you talking about?" asked Kendal, eyeing Clarke suspiciously.

"Mr. Mason, Phil's father." Dr. Clarke turned her back on Tegan and Kendal.

"Before you go, I have a question."

She turned and faced Kendal. Their eyes locked.

"My partner's missing. I don't suppose you know where she went?"

"She's not here?"

"No."

"Then I do not know. I was called away to see another patient and left her resting in the emergency room. When I returned, she had vanished. I assumed you picked her up and took her home." Clarke flashed a grin. "Have a good night, Detective. I am positive Detective Ambroso will turn up."

Kendal stood watching Dr. Clarke slip behind her steering wheel. He heard the engine start. Moments later, the car pulled away from the curb and was gone.

"I'm positive Claire will too," Kendal mumbled, over the shrill of his mobile phone. Without looking, he lifted the phone to his ear.

"Kendal, Police dispatch. Do you know an attendant at the Lygon Street convenience store?"

"Yes, dispatch. Did he leave a message?"

"Yes. A man by the name of Weakom is there."

"Thanks, I'm on my way." Kendal clicked his fingers. "Tegan, let's go."

He barely gave his daughter enough time to clamp her seat belt together before he floored his car's accelerator. Using a white-knuckled grip, she held onto the overhead strap.

At 8:47pm, they arrived at the convenience store. They saw Weakom standing at the counter, counting money.

"We meet again," snarled Kendal, stepping up to the man.

Before Weakom could turn around, Kendal slapped the handcuffs on both his wrists.

"This time, you won't slip away," jeered Kendal.

Five thick piles of one hundred-dollar notes spewed onto the floor. Weakom lashed out. Kendal easily ducked the two-fisted punch. Tegan walked up to the convenience store's glass doors just as Weakom began his kickboxing routine. Someone grabbed her from behind and dragged her to the side.

Weakom kicked out time and again. Kendal easily blocked each kick. The kicking and punching slowed. Weakom's movements grew sluggish.

Kendal stepped forward. A perfectly timed right-handed fist to Weakom's jaw sent him spiraling backwards. Groping for something solid he accidentally grabbed the remaining pile of one hundred-dollar notes. He lost his balance and plummeted towards the floor.

A quick glance around the store and Kendal kicked Weakom in the ribs. Reaching out he grabbed Weakom by the shirt collar, dragging him to his feet.

"You scumbag," Kendal growled. He dumped Weakom on the bed of money littering the floor.

"Hold it," boomed a deep voice from the door.

"Captain Hughes. Have you come to join the party?"

"Let Weakom go."

Tegan wriggled free of the Captain's grip and ran to the sidewall opposite the counter.

Weakom clawed his way to a standing position. He stood staring down at the money.

"Take the cuffs off."

"No," Kendal argued.

"Do it."

Glaring at Hughes, Kendal complied. Weakom immediately picked up eighty, one hundred-dollar notes, stuffing them into a small calico bag draped over his shoulder.

"Cap, this scumbag's no good. What gives?"

"Weakom, nick off. Tegan, please wait outside."

"I've got something to say," insisted Kendal.

"What's on your mind?" asked Captain Hughes.

"You grabbed Tegan and let Weakom go. Why?"

"I didn't want the girl hurt. The reason Weakom shot at Claire was to show the criminals he's one of them." Looking around, Hughes lowered his voice. "He's working for us. I don't want him to end up like little Mike."

Kendal slapped the Captain on the shoulder. "Are you certain Weakom's on our side?" He collected his daughter and walked towards his car.

Both slipped onto the front seat. Hughes folded his arms and watched Kendal drive off. He waited for the car to turn the corner before walking towards his car.

Kendal dropped Tegan off at home. He gave her strict instructions to change her clothes and not to be too long at arriving at the burnt house where Claire had saved the baby. To uncover more evidence against Patrick, he needed to work fast.

At the crime scene, Kendal parked next to a new shiny white car.

"G'day Simon," he called.

The oversized jockey, wearing blue overalls spun around. "Look what the cat dragged in? Where have you been hiding?"

"I've been busy chasing an arsonist. Patrick's been keeping you forensic boys awake. Who gave you the black eye?"

"You'd have a hard time believing me if I told you."

"Try me."

Simon pointed to the side fence. "I was following the trail of blood. I jumped the fence. By the way, the blood is 'O negative,' and it's human."

"Captain Hughes has O negative blood," cut in Kendal, rubbing the stubble on his chin.

"As I was saying, I jumped the fence. Two snarling Dobermans came from nowhere. Believe me; I didn't stay around to have a pat. I jumped back over the fence, but my foot clipped the top edge. I lost my balance and hit myself in the eye when I crashed to the ground."

Kendal refrained from smiling. Inwardly he was in hysterics. He slapped Simon on the shoulder.

"Who said forensic science isn't dangerous. Did you find any clues amongst the rubble?"

"None yet; I'll have someone else finish. I'm out of here. I feel every muscle in my body stiffening." He picked up his metal suitcase full of forensic equipment and started to trudge towards the white car. He abruptly stopped, turned and wagged his finger.

“A word of warning, don’t jump the fence.”

Kendal watched the man limp towards his car. He then circled the debris. He stood staring at the soot covered swimming pool. Sighing heavily, Kendal shifted his focus to the backyard. He studied the entire area from corner to corner, dousing his mind at its once glamorous layout. A light breeze picked up the scent of smoldering wood from the next-door neighbor’s cooking.

“Sausages cooked on a barbeque,” Kendal whispered under his breath. He spied the blood trail leading from the pool. “It has to be a fake,” he mumbled.

Kendal carefully followed the red trail to the blood splattered fence palings. Finding no incriminating evidence, he jumped the fence and started searching the neighbor’s garden for clues.

A faint noise caused him to freeze. He squatted behind a small bush nine feet from the fence. Unable to see what made the noise, he slowly moved towards the fence. The dry leaves carpeting the garden bed crunched under his feet. He made another cautious step. A dry twig snapped. He could feel unseen eyes watching his every move. Simon’s warning, ‘don’t jump the fence,’ echoed in his ears.

Kendal pulled his gun from his holster and switched the safety off. Again, he studied the area. The unseen eyes seemed to be everywhere.

Tiny un-human feet moved closer.

Kendal glanced over his shoulder, noting the fence appeared to be less than six feet away. He tossed into the mix, should he run for the fence or stand his ground? He pondered the question for a mere second before catching sight of movement near the house.

He made his decision.

Watching eight bony black and brown legs emerge from behind the hedge he pointed his gun at the dogs.

The two black Dobermans eyeballed Kendal, lowered their heads, and opened their mouths revealing razor sharp teeth. He stepped back. The dogs stepped forward. Both dogs created a long deep growl.

“Nice dogs,” he whispered. “We’re all friends.”

The dogs took another step forward, drooling and licking their lips. Kendal regretted his decision to stay. He knew he couldn’t outrun the dogs, despite the fence being so close. He slowly raised his revolver, aiming it directly at the chest of the larger dog. Roving his stare between the dogs, he soon realized they weren’t about to back off. Their snarling intensified.

“Can’t be scared off, Eh; stupid mutts.” Kendal slightly squeezed the trigger of his Smith and Wesson. “I’ve got no qualms about shooting you.”

Hearing a sharp whistle, Kendal watched both dogs run off towards the house. Holding his gun at the ready, he walked in the direction of the whistle.

On the entertainment side of the house, he found the dogs sitting obediently close to the back door. The smell of barbequed sausages hung heavy under the pergola. A skinny man, wearing dark blue shorts and a white T-shirt stood behind the barbeque with tongs at the ready.

“Evening,” yelled Kendal, thinking the 70-year-old man might be hard of hearing.

“I’m not deaf. I heard you jump the fence,” the old man replied. “You’re the second to try his luck today. I wouldn’t jump the fence for anything, and I own this place.”

“Why?”

“The dogs, they’d rip you apart. You should be thankful I was here cooking. Speaking of which, do you know how to cook?”

"I know when meat has been burnt. I'm Detective Kendal." He slipped his gun from view and reached out his hand. "You are?"

"Ernie." The man wiped the oil off his hands. Pushing his hand out the two men pressed the flesh.

The dogs, watching from the back door, stood in unison. A deep throated growled followed.

"Finch, Freda, shut up. Now sit and stay."

Both dogs sat.

"Well trained dogs," mentioned Kendal.

"They're a bloody nuisance. Personally, I hate the dogs. My wife adores them. Sometimes I feel she loves them more than me. Do you have dogs?"

"No, I've two kids."

"They're bloody worse."

"I don't think so."

The thin man darted his head from side to side. For the first time, he showed a gummy smile. "Good, she's not here; must be inside."

"Who are you referring to?" Kendal asked.

Ernie cupped a hand to his mouth, lowering his voice. "My wife," he replied.

From inside the house, Kendal heard a woman's voice trying to drown him out.

"Ernest, I hope you're not burning the sausages again?"

The old man's eyes widened. "Detective, do you think the sausages are ready?"

Kendal looked dismayed at the charcoal meat.

"Care to stay for tea?"

"I'll pass. Thanks anyway."

Ernie shrugged and went back to watching the meat burn.

An elderly woman dressed in a pink tracksuit and wearing mahogany coloured slippers on her feet opened the back door, pushed past the dogs and came shuffling up.

"Hello there," she croaked. "Ernie, you didn't tell me we've got a visitor."

"I didn't give him a chance," explained Kendal.

The woman raised a suspicious eyebrow. "I'm Phyllis. You are?" she asked. Her English accent sounded more distinct than Ernie's.

"I'm Detective Kendal."

"Oh dear!" she exclaimed. "I hope we've done nothing wrong?"

"No, you haven't. I'd just like to ask a few questions."

"Sausages are ready," interrupted Ernie.

Phyllis viewed the charcoal remains. Looking up at her husband, she boasted a smile.

"They look splendid, dear."

"The house fire next door," started Kendal.

"I know," said Phyllis. "I woke in such a fright."

"Did you see anyone before or after the fire?"

She stood motionless for a time, thinking about the fire.

"Tea is almost on the table if anyone's interested," blurted Ernie.

"Not now dear, I'm thinking."

"First time for everything," he mumbled.

Instead of responding to her husband's sarcastic remark, Phyllis squared herself to Kendal.

"I believe I did. I woke when I heard a car door slammed shut. I got out of bed, put my slippers on and parted the curtains in the spare room. I watched someone walking into the house next-door carrying a large can. I thought it odd, visitors in the middle of

the night, especially when Claude and Candice Nabatinee had gone out for the evening. They were supposed to fly to somewhere. I can't recall where. Candice did tell me. My memory isn't what it used to be."

Kendal smiled. He patted her hand. "You're doing fine."

"That's what you think," grumbled Ernie.

"Can you remember what the person looked like?" asked Kendal.

"Tall, skinny, can't be sure, too dark."

"Sir, what about you, did you see anything?"

"Me? No way. When I close my eyes, I'm asleep. Sun up is the time my eyes open again."

"The person must have been the arsonist," added Phyllis. "Oh dear, I do hope you catch him soon. I do want to feel safe in my bed again."

"You will. My partner and I will see to your safety."

"Where's your partner? I don't see anyone else," snarled Ernie, looking around his backyard.

"It's a long story. I will say the woman who was babysitting at the time of the fire, was my partner."

Phyllis' face flushed red. "Oh dear, she came over for some milk earlier in the night. I told her to go away. I slammed the door in her face. She looked a little strange. Please, apologize for me."

"I knew one day you'd be in trouble due to your mouth," barked Ernie.

"I'll pass on your apology," stated Kendal. "Your dinner is getting cold. Please, sit and eat. I won't keep you much longer. I've only one more question. The dogs didn't like me coming over the fence."

"It's exactly what I mentioned," said Ernie, interrupting. "No one comes over our fence. If they did, the dogs would've heard. You're lucky I saw them leave the back steps to the house or they'd have attacked you for sure."

"When the house next door was on fire, could someone have slipped past the dogs?"

"No one jumped the fence. If they did, they'd be here in pieces," stated Ernie, firmly.

"Thanks for your time," said Kendal.

He shook both couple's hands and marched towards the fence where he continued his search for a few more minutes. Jumping back over the fence, he squatted and examined the ground.

"The only footprints are mine and Simon's. The old bugger was correct."

Kendal scanned the area from the pool to the fence-line. He noticed the ground under a small bush had been disturbed. He squatted and started scratching and sifting the dirt. He unearthed a small plastic tube. He brushed the dirt off and held it up. The contents looked like dried blood.

"Dad, are you okay?" asked Tegan.

He buried the semi-transparent tube deep in his pocket. "Yeah, I'm trying to think of another way to catch Patrick. All I can think of is to come face to face with him. One on one is the only way to unmask him."

"That idea sounds dangerous."

"It'll be okay." He looked at his watch. "I think I've given Patrick enough time to reach Aura Lake."

"Shouldn't we arrive first?"

"No, he'll shy away, and the game will go on." He stood. "Tegan, it's time to go."

CHAPTER TWENTY EIGHT

THE BREEZE blew at speed across the surface of Aura Lake, causing the temperature to drop three degrees. Young constable Roy Adams noted the rising full moon as he sat shivering in his police car. He still felt angry at not having his objections heard hours earlier when he was on the phone to his Sergeant. For hours, he inwardly chewed over his conversation hoping to learn how he could make certain this sort of stakeout would never happen again.

“Why should I do a stake out, especially when a two-bit city cop did the ordering?” Roy moaned.

He stepped down from the car. Seeing a clump of gravel, he kicked it into the darkness. Roy hitched up his pants and surveyed the area for the umpteenth time. Adams rolled a cigarette, extracted his lighter and lit the end. He stood, leaning against the side of the car, inhaling the smoke. He exhaled and watched the smoke rise into the charcoal coloured sky. After consuming half the cigarette, he walked to the nearest tree, unzipped his fly and watched the steaming flood travel down the tree trunk and onto a small clump of weeds.

“You, possum in the tree, it’s not fair. First, I was dragged away from my barbeque and on my day, off. Now I’ve been informed I’m stuck here all night because Jack has taken a sickie. There’s nothing up here except you, me, the trees and the lake. I’ve decided I’m going to use this stake out to net me big bucks and a possible promotion. I’ll make sure the boss thinks I’ve done a great job. The hardest thing will be to stop dying from boredom. Nothing’s getting past me or come in COOEEE of the house.”

“Excuse me, Sir.”

Adams jumped. Turning his head to face the voice, his cigarette fell to the ground.

“Sorry. I’m a little embarrassed. I haven’t had a piss for hours.” He zipped his fly closed, straightened his gun belt and ran his long thin fingers through his tight curly red hair. “Can I help you, Miss?”

“I hope so; I am lost.”

Adams raised his eyebrows at the young woman. “It’ll be my pleasure to help,” he announced. “I didn’t catch your name.”

“I am Doctor Ashlee Clarke.”

Adams raised his eyebrows for the second time. He studied her from head to feet.

“I’m real pleased to meet you, Miss or Mrs?”

“I am un-hitched. You are?”

“I’m Constable Roy Adams.”

“A police Constable; how fortunate. You must have a very exciting job.”

“It can be.”

“I am trying to find the Armanti residence.”

“Why?”

“Someone called for a doctor.”

“I can’t let you pass beyond this point alone. However, I can escort you. The house you are looking for is at the end of this driveway.”

“It sounds to me you are pushing for a promotion. You must be a top police officer. Stakeouts are dangerous. You have to be ready for the unexpected,” warned Dr. Clarke, looking sideways at the Constable.

“I didn’t realize I was that transparent? How did you know I’m on a stakeout?”

“Why else would you be standing all alone in the dark? Do you have a spare cigarette? I seem to have lost mine.”

Roy pulled his opened packet out of his shirt pocket.

“Call me Ashlee. Can I call you Roy?”

“Sure,” he replied.

“The name Roy sounds so manly. I’d love to have your phone number.”

“I’m not certain if I should.”

“We can swap numbers,” suggested Ashlee. She slowly exhaled cigarette smoke into Roy’s face. “Maybe if you ring me we could go out for dinner one night. In case you need more details for your report on your stake out.”

“Your voice is very easy to listen to. I am tempted.”

Ashlee reached out, fingering one of his shirt buttons.

“You have lovely blue eyes,” stammered Roy.

“You say the nicest things. I love this dark, isolated place.” Ashlee kissed him on the cheek. Fiddling with the buttons on his shirt, she began to undo each one starting at the top. “I feel like making love in your police car.”

“I like a woman who knows what she wants.”

“I see an opportunity and go straight for it.”

Adams threw his shirt to the breeze. Stepping over to the car, he opened the door.

Ashlee stared at the rear seat. Doubt was etched on her face.

“The space looks a little cramped for the three of us.”

“The three of us?” questioned Roy.

“You, me and your gun,” explained Ashlee. She puckered her lips and blew him a kiss.

Adams grinned. Unbuckling his gun belt, he dropped the weapon and his pants onto the front seat.

“Roy, you dive onto the rear seat, I’ll join you in a moment.”

“If you hurry you’ll get a big surprise.”

“Did you hear footsteps?” whispered Ashlee.

“No, it’s the wind blowing through the leaves.”

“Listen, there it is again. The noise doesn’t sound like leaves moving.”

Adams sat straight-backed on the seat. He grabbed hold of the woman’s hand.

“I hear nothing except my thumping heart.”

“Ashlee Clarke.”

Her pupils enlarged at hearing the deep voice. Looking over her shoulder, she stared into the darkness.

“I’m scared.”

Roy started to climb out of the car.

“Ashlee, what have I told you about men touching you?”

“What’s going on here? Show yourself.” Adams stepped down from the car.

Ashlee pushed him back onto the seat. “You should listen. I know the voice. I’ll smooth things over.”

A balaclava-clad face peered through the open door. “Stay in the car and don’t move.”

Adams heard a hand hitting Ashlee’s face. He leaned over the front seat, swiping up his pants.

“Hey punk, I told you not to move,” growled the balaclava-clad man.

“What’s going on?”

“Questions questions always questions. You’re a smart cop, work it out.”

“Who are you?”

"Name's Patrick," he jeered. "I'm Ashlee's bodyguard."

"I'm speechless," mumbled Adams.

"No, you're not. Be advise;, you soon will be."

"Explain?"

"You were going to touch Ashlee. You've been very naughty. I fix problem. Do you understand?"

Adams slowly nodded when he saw a gun pointing at him. Before Roy could make another move his body flopped sideways across the rear seat. He exhaled for the last time.

"Hey Ashlee, let's go see who lives in the house at the end of this driveway."

CHAPTER TWENTY NINE

CLAIRE WOKE to the sound of a single gunshot. She was lying face up in total darkness. She sniffed the air.

"Petrol," she whispered.

She started to feel around the space she'd been dumped into. Even though she heard muffled voices, the words were undecipherable.

Hearing another bang and the vehicle's engine roar to life, she was tumbled about her coffin for only a short time then silence returned. She heard approaching footsteps. She heard a click. The lid of her coffin opened. For a moment, she was looking up into the eyes of her kidnapper.

"Get out," ordered the mouth behind the balaclava.

"Make me."

Patrick revealed a loaded crossbow. He aimed it directly at her leg.

"Get out, or I'll shoot you."

Claire held up her hands and started to climb out of the car's trunk.

"Move real slow, Coppa."

The moment her feet touched the pea stones, she paused. For her hesitation, she received a kick to the calf muscle. She winced at the pain. Re-focusing on her smirking captor, she snarled.

"I heard a gunshot. Who'd you kill?"

"Shut up. Start walking. Thank me, you're still alive."

"Killer with a conscience!" quoted Claire.

Patrick shoved his hostage between her shoulder blades.

"I've no conscience, now move."

Claire started to walk towards the old two-storey house. The loose stone path crunched under her feet. She stumbled.

"I need to rest. I have a sore calf muscle."

"Keep moving. Take the left path. It leads to the kitchen door. No tricks."

Claire obeyed and started to exaggerate her limp. The pea stones gave way to a narrow path. She glanced at the trees framing the property.

"Don't get any ideas about running. The trees are too far. Be warned, you can't outrun an arrow fired from a crossbow," snarled Patrick, shoving her again. "Stop at the steps and knock on the door."

Claire's shoulders slumped. She restarted her walk. She climbed the three wooden steps. Reaching out, she knocked. Patrick stepped backwards allowing the darkness to swallow him. Someone came running and pulled open the door.

"Claire, hi, where's Al?"

She tried to send Kendal's wife a warning by rolling her eyes.

"Get inside the house," yelled Patrick, emerging from the shadows.

He marched up to Claire and again shoved her between her shoulder blades. Both women landed on the kitchen floor. Patrick stood in the doorway, smirking.

"Ladies, good evening," he announced.

Claire jumped to her feet, spun around and kicked out.

"Don't make another move. This crossbow and gun is pointed at you two."

Marg scrambled to her feet, grabbing Claire by the shoulder.

"You're no help to us dead," she stated.

"Sit on a chair. I'll say a warning; be good. The kid and the old dear, where are they? I've some news the old duck might find interesting."

"There's no one else here," advised Margaret.

"I don't believe you." Patrick stared hard and long at each of the ladies in turn.

"This is a good game. Be warned, I will win. Tani, Grandma, come out, come out where ever you are."

Patrick paced back and forth across the room, waiting for their arrival. Growing bored at having to wait too long he swayed his gun back and forth between the two hostages.

"This is indeed a good game. Tani, Grandma, if I haven't seen you by the time I count to three, I'm going to shoot someone."

"There's no one else here," insisted Marg.

"One, two, three," called Patrick.

"We're here," croaked Grandma, from the room adjacent to the kitchen.

Margaret's eyes filled with tears. She bowed her head.

Patrick leapt into the air, clapping and yelping.

"Yes, yes, Grandma is here and Tani too. Don't cry mummy, don't cry. By the time your husband finally uncovers the remaining clues I've left and he arrives, you'll all be dead." Patrick checked his watch. "He's going to be late. He's so dumb. I did everything, except tell him my identity. Didn't I tell you I'd win? Victory is a fantastic adrenalin rush. You should try it some time."

"Tegan told me on the phone who you are. When my dad gets here, he's going to arrest you," barked Tani.

Patrick pointed the gun at her. "Brave Tani, brave, stupid little Tani. Shut up."

Margaret moved her feet.

"Don't move. If Tani is correct, and she might be, it doesn't matter. If you want to say anything to the person upstairs, you have forty-five minutes. In fifty minutes, the fire will eat everyone in this house."

"Take off your balaclava," jeered Claire.

"No."

"Why not? We know your identity."

"I don't want to." Patrick threw a small black bag at Marg. "Open it. Inside the bag, you'll find four lengths of rope; very strong rope. Tie everyone's hands by their sides. Make sure you do it real tight, especially the cop woman."

Patrick stood watching, making sure each rope was secure. Checking his watch, he grinned.

"Forty minutes remaining."

Patrick swiped a length of rope from the bag and tied Marg.

"You don't have to do this," said Claire.

"Yes, I do. Everyone, walk towards the stairs," instructed Patrick.

The group trudged upstairs. Patrick opened the first door on their right.

"Welcome to the last thing you'll ever see in this world. Why this small square room you ask? As you can see, there's nothing in it. No carpet, no bed, no coat hangers in the cupboard, nothing. I want to personally thank you, Grandma, for cleaning out the room in the hope Kendal would start painting."

"Why are you doing this?" asked Marg.

Patrick glared at the group through murderous eyes. "You don't have a clue?"

"I thought we were playing a fire game?" questioned Claire.

"We are. Kendal changed the rules. Now it's more interesting. You should all be excited. You're the best game ever."

"You're about to be stopped. Your arson days are over."

"Calm yourself, Detective. They've put the best up against me. I have to boast, I've won every time."

"I've a question."

"Questions, questions, questions what is it about cops? All you ever do is to ask stupid questions."

"I have a right to know why you smuggled me out of the hospital; I'm not a Kendal?"

"My dear Detective, you're the door prize for winning my game."

"You've got me, let the others go."

Patrick commenced pacing the floor, chanting, 'Typical cop, so heroic,' over and over. On his umpteenth return trip, he stopped and pointed the gun at Ambroso.

"Shut up Coppia. I'll be glad to be rid of you." Patrick switched his attention to Tani. "Come here."

"No," she squealed.

"You should reconsider your decision."

"You can't take her," cried Marg.

"Don't ever tell me what to do. I told Kendal, my last fire was going to be the grand finale. This is it. Tani, if you come now, I promise you won't be hurt."

"Liar," she yelled.

"Kid, you're too smart for your own good." He raised both arms in surrender. "Okay, okay, you win. You can stay."

Marg's shoulders slumped. Claire looked sideways at their captor. Patrick walked out of the room and locked the door.

Grandma leaned her back against the wall, trembling in fear. "We're all about to die."

"We'll be fine. Al will be here soon," explained Claire.

"He's not lurking around outside?" whispered Marg.

"No. However, I'm certain he's not far behind."

"How can he be?" quizzed the old woman. "You heard Patrick, Kendal doesn't know about all this."

"He knows. Don't worry; Al's on his way."

Hearing the door unlocking, the group watched it being pushed open. Patrick stood at the threshold holding a hammer in one hand. In the other, he held a thin one-metre squared wooden board.

"What are you up to?" demanded Claire.

Patrick ignored the question, flanked wide of the group and walked to the window. He placed the board over the glass and nailed it to the window frame. When he finished, he stepped back to admire his handy work.

"Tani, I've a present. Catch. I thought you might like it. The pink cloth smells great."

Tani raised the cloth to her nose and breathed in. Claire yelled. The girl fell to the floor unconscious.

Patrick snickered. He casually walked over. Picking her up, he carried Tani towards the door. "Say goodbye to the kid."

"Please, don't take my baby," wept Marg. "Please."

"If your husband arrives on time, she'll be fine."

"What if he doesn't?"

"It'll be too gruesome a scene to describe. Before I go, I nearly forgot to mention the news. Grandma, your hubby's dead."

Patrick walked out of the room and locked the door.

"You murderer," yelled Grandma. "If I could get free, I'd belt him in the jaw."

"You and me both," whimpered Marg. She burst into uncontrollable sobs. She thrashed about the floor, trying to break her bonds.

"It's okay," soothed Claire. "Al won't let anything happen to Tani. She's part of his stupid game. Wait and see, tonight will work out fine."

Marg looked up. Slowly she managed to stop sobbing. The constant worry painted deep wrinkles on her brow.

"Thank goodness the nursing home informed us this morning about dad's passing."

"They didn't say someone murdered him," choked Grandma.

"It's time to escape," announced Claire. She flashed Marg a confident look. "In case Al is delayed."

She strained against the ropes wrapped around her torso. She exhaled a long sigh, depleting her lungs of all oxygen. She seemed to shrink. When she felt, the rope loosened she got to work. She managed to free a finger. Her thumb came next. Her hand slipped out. Her fingers pulled at the rope's knot. She repeated her breathing technique, winked at Marg and again attacked the knot. It loosened then the rope unraveled.

Grandma and Marg displayed a disbelieving look at the escape.

Claire fell to the floor to heave in oxygen.

"Are you okay?" asked Marg.

"Yes. I'll sit here in the corner for a moment." She took a few more breaths. "Just before you tied the rope around me I puffed my body out to make the rope look as though it was tight."

"Dangerous thing to do," said Marg.

"Yes, however, it was worth it. All we have to do is break through the boarded-up window. If Al's not here by then, I'll rescue Tani."

Claire untied Marg and Grandma. She walked to the door and pushed her ear against the solid wooden panel. Hearing nobody walking about she marched across the room to the boarded-up window.

"What does this window look out on?"

"The pool," reported Marg.

"How deep is the water?"

"Six feet," advised Grandma. "You're not suggesting we jump."

"It's a good solid plan," said Marg. "Just like when we first started high school. Only thing is; I don't think I'd be up to jumping into the pool either."

"I'd never place you or Grandma in such a dangerous position. I'll jump, find Patrick and bring him down."

"Wouldn't it be easier for you to break the door?" asked Grandma.

"This house is old. The doors are made of solid wood. Too much noise might also alert Patrick. Our best bet is the window." Looking slightly nervous, she hesitated. "I wonder where Kendal is. He should have been here ages ago?"

"Al knows what's happening and is meeting you here?"

"This is all part of his plan. Don't worry. Like I said earlier, everything will be okay." Claire turned her back on the others, scrunched her nose and mumbled. "I hope his plan works."

Claire grabbed the bottom left-hand corner of the three-ply board covering the window. She yanked. Hearing the board creak, she tried again.

The wood strained against the nails. She stepped back to study each of the four edges of the window. Two edges were flush; the other two weren't.

"This is the best spot to break the board," she announced.

Reaching out, she again pulled on the thin board. She heard another crack. On her fifth attempt, the edge of the board broke away, revealing the glass. Claire dug her fingers further behind the wood. One massive pull and two nails loosened. On her next attempt, the wood broke. She looked at Marg.

"This brings back memories of us breaking into our primary school when we were students. Remember, you'd play the principle I'd sit at my desk pretending to be naughty. You'd scribble on the blackboard then we'd play chasey down the empty corridors."

"I remember the cleaner chasing us. The old bloke threatened to have us kicked out of school if he ever caught us," said Marg.

"Our friendship goes back a long way, eh?" said Claire.

"Sorry Mum," said Marg, walking to the door. "I never did tell you what we got up to as kids."

The old woman scrunched her wrinkled face. In a proud voice, she spoke confidently.

"I knew. The cleaner told the Mother Superior. She phoned me. I needed to smooth things over if once was a dozen times. I told that woman, you two would eventually grow up and stop your shenanigans. What a Nun knows about children is beyond me."

Claire chuckled. Staring at the wooden board, she started attacking it again. Half of the board was on the floor when she yelled in pain. "I got a bloody splinter."

Marg stopped listening at the door, walked over and studied her hand.

"The splinter isn't too deep. Make a fist and I will push on both sides of the splinter. Mum, you've got long fingernails grab the splinter when it comes up."

Seconds later, all three stared wide-eyed at the size of the bloody splinter sitting in the palm of the old woman's hand.

"My turn," said Marg. "Besides, I have to escape, now. I want to find Tani. We've been in this room for too long."

Several struggling minutes later, Claire waved her hand to call a halt to their escape attempt. She broke the glass and stared through the window.

"Marg turn off the light."

"This way's no good, the pool's too far. The next room would've been perfect," grumbled Claire.

While the ladies were breaking through the window, Patrick carried Tani towards the lake. They exited the tree-line at the bike path. He changed direction and walked the short distance to the boat hire shed. He made a quick survey of the area. Seeing no one,

he placed the girl into a sitting position by leaning her back against the shed wall. Patrick removed his balaclava and produced two brass keys from his coat pocket and thrust them at her face.

“You want to know what they’re for, don’t you? Watch this.” Patrick slipped the first key into the bottom door lock.

The key refused to turn.

“Kid, stop laughing. Do you hear me? Stop it.”

Patrick tried the top lock. It snapped open. Sighing heavily, he attacked the bottom lock.

“Who is laughing now, Tani? I was here two months ago disguised as an old man. I copied the keys and stole the code to the shed’s alarm.”

Tani groaned. She half opened her eyes.

“Go back to sleep little one. The game’s not over yet.” Patrick sprinted inside the boat shed and tapped the numbers 7743 on the alarm pad. “Tani, this is all too easy.”

Patrick dragged a small one-man yacht to the water-line. He then grabbed two oars, an anchor and dragged another yacht to the water-line. After resetting the alarm pad, he relocked the door.

Patrick placed Tani into the first yacht. He walked behind the boat shed towards a dead tree where the scrub had been mounded up. He kicked away the debris and found a small blue bag. He carried the bag to the yachts and placed the bag at the feet of the sleeping girl.

“Kid, look after the bag while I tow your boat out there on the lake. What did you say? You’ll come for a ride, only if I tell you what’s in the bag and how long ago I buried it?” Patrick snickered. “You’re just like your father, always asking questions. I’ll tell you only if you promise to keep it a secret. Do you agree to my terms?” He reached out his hand and forced the sleeping girl to nod. “I buried the bag after I watched your father leave you and your mother here to look after Grandma. I insist the contents of the bag must stay a surprise. What I will tell you, is, it goes bang at exactly 10:00pm.”

Quickly tethering Tani’s boat to the rear of his boat, Patrick rowed out on the lake. One hundred feet from land, Patrick swiped up the anchor out of Tani’s yacht and lowered the weight into the dark water. He watched the rope tighten. A cold breeze blew across the lake, forcing Tani’s yacht to strain against its tether. Patrick studied the sky. The stars were blinking out one at a time. He re-focused on the sleeping girl.

“I hope your father is in Grandma’s house before the storm arrives. I don’t want the rain to extinguish the fire before the house has a chance to implode and bury him and everyone else. Whatever you do, don’t move.”

Dipping his oars into the water, Patrick waved Tani goodbye and struck out for the boat hire shed.

Back on shore, Patrick hid the second yacht under a clump of tree branches. With a last look at the boat on the lake, he sprinted back to the house. In preparing for the fire, he collected an armful of dry kindling and stacked the wood pyramid style in the center of the lounge room.

“Another step in my plan completed,” he whispered.

Patrick walked outside to Dr. Clarke’s car to collect two, four-litre metal containers full of petrol. Returning to the house, he noticed the bedroom where he put the hostages was in darkness. He entered the kitchen and deliberately left the door open a tad.

“Please reconsider what you are doing,” said a voice.

Patrick turned to face the kitchen door. “Hey Doc, I thought I left you asleep in the car?”

“You did. I woke when you came for the fuel cans.”

“You’re not going to give me another lecture, are you?”

“No. Where’s Tani?” asked Dr. Ashlee Clarke.

“She’s sleeping in a small yacht in the middle of the lake. Provided she stays asleep; she’ll be fine.”

“I hope you’re correct.”

“Me too, she’s my plan B. Must always have a plan B.” Patrick started to chant and pace the floor.

“Will you please stop,” hissed Dr. Clarke. “Stop your pacing. Your chanting upsets me. You sound crazy when you chant.”

Patrick wagged a finger at her. “Don’t ever say I’m crazy.”

Dr. Clarke covered her face with her hands. She started sobbing.

“Come on. We’ll finish setting the petrol trails together. It’ll be fun to watch the fire fingers stretch over the house. I love hearing the fire roar, devouring everything.”

Ashlee Clarke lifted her head.

“I have to admit, it is exciting,” whispered Dr. Clarke. “Patrick, what’s next?”

“You stand here in the kitchen. I have to go and check on the prisoners. I think they are loose.” Patrick turned to leave. He took two steps before facing Ashlee. “Hey, while I’m gone, ring Kendal on the mobile phone.”

“Why?”

“To find out where he is.”

Patrick walked down the hall, marched up the stairs, pulled the Smith and Wesson from his back pocket and produced a key to the small room. He inserted the key into the lock. The door lock clicked. Reaching out he swung the door open.

He stood at the threshold to the room, staring at the pieces of board scattered across the floor. Two women, fear etched on their faces, were cowering in the corner near the window.

“Where’s the other one?” growled Patrick.

“She climbed out of the window,” whimpered Marg.

“I don’t believe you. She’s still here. Where is she?”

“Come and see for yourself,” suggested Marg. “Claire shimmied down the storm water pipe. She’s looking up at the window, laughing at you.”

“There’s no downpipe next to the window. She must have jumped. Tell me the truth or Tani dies.”

Marg remained quiet.

“I’ve placed your daughter and a bomb in a small yacht one hundred feet off shore. She has no way of escaping.”

Marg stared at Patrick and kept up her silence.

Patrick sighed and pulled a small black box from a pocket. “This is a remote detonator.”

Marg remained tight-lipped. Patrick stared at her, watching him.

“This is a good game. You play your hand and try to bluff. I don’t bluff; I play to win.”

He placed the black box on the floor. Using his shoe, he pushed a button on the box. A green light lit.

“The timer is now set. Tani has one minute. At exactly 10:00pm, she will be dead.”

Patrick pushed hard on the door, slamming it against something soft. He stepped into the room and banged the door closed. Grabbing Claire by the arm, he threw her towards the window. She hit the wall and crumpled to the floor.

“Your little surprise wasn’t good enough, Coppia.” He pointed to Marg. “You; tie her, and the old woman up. This time, make the rope nice and tight.”

“What about my daughter?” Marg sobbed.

“Tuff; you shouldn’t have kept silent. Kendal should have arrived on time. Tani’s life will end in ten seconds. Watch the window; the explosion will be a blast.”

Claire, Marg, and Grandma crowded around the window watching the lake. They could barely make out the small yacht on the surface.

“Please, Tani is just a child,” wept Marg.

“She’s a Kendal,” growled Patrick. “Five seconds.”

Claire squared herself to Patrick. “How could you murder a child?”

“Easy, I don’t care.”

“I’ll do anything you want, just allow Tani to live.”

“One second,” barked Patrick.

Out on the lake, the three women witnessed an explosion. The fireball mushroomed into the dark sky. Embers fell like rain.

“Marg, I’m telling you, Tani jumped into the water,” whispered Claire. She watched her best friend crumple to the floor.

“You’re a rat,” yelled Marg, staring up at Patrick. “How could you kill a child?” She sobbed as she strained against her ropes.

Patrick started pacing the floor. Using tight fists, he began hitting his balaclava.

“I hate kids, especially Kendal’s.”

“Why do you hate us? We’ve done nothing to you.”

He sprinted towards the sobbing woman. Scraping her nose against the woolen balaclava, he glared at his hostage through cold blue eyes.

“You’ve hurt me. Blame your dear husband over Tani’s death. It’s his fault.”

“Whatever he did, I’m certain it was an accident,” spat Grandma.

In the distraction, Claire saw her chance to escape. Patrick pounced on the old woman. Grabbing her by the cardigan, he reeled her in close.

“The Doc told me the same stupid line. Be warned; I don’t care. Kendal broke the rules. Now he must pay.”

“What rules?” probed Marg.

“The club’s rules,” hissed Patrick. “Don’t touch a dancer.”

“What dancers, when?” Marg’s voice sounded desperate.

“Take off your mask,” dared the old woman.

Patrick dropped her on the floor. He laughed a deep throated gargle.

“Not today. I’ve messed around long enough. It’s time.”

“Time for what?” barked Claire.

Patrick casually walked towards the open door. Reaching outside into the hall he snatched up a metal container, unscrewed the lid and sniffed the contents.

“I love the smell of petrol.”

Grinning wildly, he proceeded to splash the liquid on the walls and the floor.

“Ladies, it’s been a pleasure. I’d love to stay and chat. However, Detective Kendal should be here soon. He’s typically late. Maybe my little explosion on the lake killed two Kendal’s.” He sighed. “I do love to win my games.”

“If we’re about to die you should have the decency of giving us a last meal,” yelled Claire, still straining against her ropes.

Patrick glared at each of the three women in turn.

“Ladies it’s been a real pleasure, goodbye.”

CHAPTER THIRTY

KENDAL DROVE across the wooden bridge on the outskirts of Aura Lake at 9:25pm. He followed the road around the first bend, catching only a glimpse of his in-law's house on the hilltop.

"The Lake is quiet tonight," he whispered.

Tegan pointed at an old house directly opposite the first shop. "Mr. K. looks peaceful."

Kendal stared at the sleeping man sitting deep in his rocking chair. The local kids nicknamed Mr. Saunders, Mr. K. He was named Kurt Saunders, in the year of his birth in 1921. He was a gentle man who loved nothing more than to watch the kids and everyone walk past his house. He'd sit in his rocking chair all day so that he could wave at the kids on the school bus in the morning and again in the afternoon. His only downfall, he refused to have people fuss over him and flatly rejected any form of help. At the ripe old age of 85, he was the oldest person in the area.

Kendal jumped on the brake pedal, bringing the car to an abrupt stop in the middle of the road.

"Something's wrong," he stated. He opened the car door and stepped onto the road.

"Dad, you're acting weird."

"Sorry, something's wrong, I can smell it."

Tegan sniffed the air. "I can only smell trees and wildflowers. What do you smell?"

"Trouble, it leaves an odor."

"It's probably your coat. It's a little on the nose," Tegan giggled.

"I'm checking out the old fella. I'll only be a moment."

Kendal made a beeline for the small white weatherboard cottage with the uninteresting front yard. He stood at the rusting front gate, staring at Saunders.

"Excuse me, Sir."

Saunders didn't move.

Kendal swung open the old creaking gate and called again. Seeing no movement, he walked the short path to the verandah steps. He waited a moment to view the scene a little more closely before climbing the last three steps to the chair. Kendal hovered over the old man.

"Patrick stopped for a visit. A coroner's autopsy report will confirm my suspicions." He reached out and touched the old man's bony hand.

The old fella opened his eyes.

Kendal jumped.

"I thought you were dead."

"Do I look like a ghost? I heard you calling from the gate." Saunders coughed. He ran his arthritic fingers over the last remaining three strands of silver hair on his head. Satisfied they were still in place he reached for a half-finished bottle of beer. He polished off the remaining amber liquid in a single gulp.

"Sir, do you need help to get inside?"

"Young fella, I'll have you know I was asleep. Ya' stopped that noisy car of yours and woke me. Ya interrupted a perfectly good dream to ask me a stupid question."

Kendal flashed his police badge at the man's nose.

"Why didn't ya say?"

Seeing the old man awake, Tegan wandered over. She stood at the gate, displaying a friendly smile. Saunders mellowed. He lifted his hand and waved. She waved back.

"She's a good kid," said Saunders, pointing.

"Sir, could you answer a question?"

"Sure, can young fella."

"Did you see a car come past a short time ago?"

"Yep, I did. It stopped outside me gate on the other side'r road. Weighed down at the arse end it was. Maybe it had somethin' to do with all them blankets covering the back seat. I don't know why ya young folk won't ride a horse." Saunders leaned sideways, swiping up another bottle of beer out of his small Esky. "In my day, we rode a horse to school." He paused and looked at the lake. "Them's were the days."

Kendal cut in, stopping Saunders in mid-sentence. "Did you happen to see the driver?"

"Yep. She got out and came up the stairs, just like you. She was a good lookin' Sheila. I told her, too."

"Did she say her name?"

Saunders drank another half a bottle of beer before coughing. Kendal patted the old man on the back.

"Thanks, young fella. Now where was I?"

"You were talking about the woman driver."

"Yeah, said she was a doctor. Came to talk and gave me ticker a quick listen to. I'm stronger than an Ox she said. Yeah, that's what she said. Me ticker's stronger than an Ox." Saunders leaned forward. "If only I was fifty years younger."

Tegan giggled from the gate.

"Did you see anyone else in the car?" asked Kendal.

"No."

"How long ago did she stop?"

"Now how the hell do I know? Time, it goes slow up here. The sun had gone, and the bats were flyin'."

"Thank you," said Kendal. "You've been a great help."

Saunders displayed a toothless smile. "Stop here again. It's great talkin to ya young fella, missy."

"Tegan, time to move on, it is 9:45pm. Patrick's waiting."

Kendal drove a little faster than usual towards his mother-in-law's house. Passing a small gap in the trees, he glanced at the lake. He loved the serenity, the lake's calm and yet at times turbulent water. When the gap disappeared, a frown creased his forehead. Something seemed different. The road forked. He immediately drove away from the house, towards the lake.

Tegan stared sideways at her father. Instead of asking the obvious, she decided to remain silent.

Kendal parked the car outside the boat hire shed and stared out over the water. Although everything seemed quiet, he couldn't shake off the feeling something was wrong.

His gaze skimmed over the lake's surface, homing in on the shadow of the small boat anchored one hundred feet from the shore.

"Strange," he mumbled.

"Dad, it's just a boat," whispered Tegan, looking at what he was most likely staring at. Curiosity had worn her down. She needed to discover what he was thinking.

"The boat looks to be sitting low in the water."

"Dad, all yacht's sit low in the water."

"Yes, except a one-person yacht doesn't have an anchor rope tied to the side."

Turning his back on the lake and in the car's headlight beam Kendal studied the ground near the boat shed. Two, one metre wide tracks led down to the water's edge.

"Boat tracks," blurted Tegan.

"Yes, two boats were dragged towards the water, yet there is only one set of footprints."

"The tracks can't belong to the boat hire bloke he'd have gone and rescued his boat from the lake."

Kendal pulled a small torch from his pocket. He'd only walked four large paces before he pointed at the soft mud.

"Here's another set of footprints leading away from the water. In my opinion, the person rowed out, tied the anchor rope to the side of the boat, dropped the weight into the water and rowed back. He came ashore where we are standing. There must be another boat around here somewhere."

Tegan pointed to flattened tree branches on the other side of the boat shed.

Kendal marched over to investigate. He removed the scrub.

"Here's the boat." He pulled the small yacht from its hiding place and dragged it to the water. "I'm going for a row. I won't be long."

He climbed into the yacht. Snatching up the oars, he dipped the paddles into the water and pulled. Except for the headlights to his car, the darkness quickly swallowed the shoreline.

In a short space of time, Kendal twisted his body to see where the small yacht might be. He found it to be in easy reach. Stopping his rowing technique, his yacht quickly lost speed. Sitting heavy on the ice still water, both yachts bumped. He reached for the anchor rope and lashed both vessels together. Staring into the other yacht, he saw a small figure coiled in a fetal position. He placed his oversized hand on her shoulder. She groaned and rolled over.

"Tani," he called.

The girl's eyes blinked open. She croaked. "Dad, where am I? Where's Mum, Grandma, Patrick?"

"Quiet now, don't worry about anything, let's get you to shore."

Kendal reached out, scooping up his daughter. The sides of both yachts tilted to the water-line. He gently laid her back.

"Stay still Sweetie; I'll tow you in."

Kendal hoisted the anchor into Tani's boat. He leaned forward so he could tie the rope to his foot. Kendal froze when he noticed a blue bag tucked under the seat. Using an oar, he carefully hoisted it into his yacht. He sensed Tani, watching his every move.

"Except for the padlock, the bag looks harmless," he casually mentioned. "Tani, I'm glad little Mike was on our side. He taught me how to pick locks."

"Who's on our side," Tani stammered.

"It's a long story. Before we start our return trip to shore, I want to check out this bag."

Tani sat bolt upright. Wide-eyed she stared into the darkness. "I want to go right now." Her body trembled. Tears welled in her eyes. Her sudden movement rocked the small yacht.

"Tani, keep still, and the boat won't move."

She clung to the side of the boat with white knuckles, staring down at the dark water. A long ear-piercing scream followed. Tears rolled down her puffed cheeks. She looked ready to scream again.

"Tani, stop screaming," ordered Kendal. He finished picking the lock and was about to unzip the small blue bag.

“Dad, the water, it’s so black. I’m scared.” Tani leaned towards her father, tilting her boat once again to the waterline.

“Tani, stop moving, my boat’s not big enough for two people. Look at the shore and not at the water.”

She nodded slowly, turned her head and fixed her eyes on the shoreline.

“Dad, a light has just gone out, and there are two lights close together near the boat shed. I’m scared.”

“It’s okay. Patrick turned the lights out in Grandma’s house and is waiting for me. Those other lights are coming from my car.” Kendal craned his neck so he could see the contents of the bag. “Nothing unusual yet, it’s probably someone’s lunch.” He scooped aside a hessian cloth. The small square object was beeping. The digital readout on the face of the object read, 63-62-61-60. Kendal’s eyes widened. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead. An alarm sounded. He jumped, bumping the bag.

Reacting to her father’s surprise, Tani violently rocked her boat. Her crying intensified. Both yachts dipped dangerously close to the water-line. Tani’s fingers submerged under the water. Feeling the cold water, she screamed again.

Kendal glared at his daughter. She was clutching the side of the yacht in a death grip.

“Tani, you have to stop screaming. The noise was only my mobile alarm going off to remind me it’s 9:59pm.” He gently slipped his hand through the bag’s strap and placed the bag packed full of explosives back into Tani’s yacht. He whispered. “I want you to let go of your boat and come into mine.”

“You said the boat’s not big enough for two people.”

“I know I did, but this is an emergency. You must be brave.” He released the anchor rope from around his foot and let it slip silently back into the black water. “Come now.”

“I’m scared.”

“Tani, come please.” Kendal outstretched his hands.

“I can’t.”

“Yes, you can.”

Tani had fixed her stare on the water. “It’s deep and cold and scary.”

Kendal clamped his teeth together. He barked the word ‘now’ in a deep stern voice. The girl sat frozen.

He shook his head. Reaching out, he grabbed his daughter by the waist. Water licked the top edge of both yachts.

“Tani, let go of the boat. You have to let go.”

She screamed again.

Tegan stood at the shoreline waiting for her father. She heard the oars dipping into the water and watched until the darkness had swallowed him. Over the next few minutes, she heard nothing. Hunching her shoulders, she walked to the boat shed. The front doors had been padlocked.

“This is strange,” she whispered. “Two boats must have been left out. Patrick must have another accomplice.”

After completing a full lap of the boat shed and finding the only window, she looked inside.

“I can’t see much in there,” she mumbled.

Tegan walked off towards the bush where the second yacht had been.

“Nothing again,” she moaned. There are no clues, nothing.”

Tegan jumped when a rabbit darted past her feet. Watching it hop away she chuckled at seeing its tail bobbing up and down. Returning to the car, she checked her watch. The hands had moved to 9:59pm. She heard a high-pitched scream. Staring out

over the water, her eyes welled. She unexpectedly heard her father's stern voice. A high-pitched scream quickly followed.

Then silence.

Exactly one minute after hearing the second scream, she heard a loud bang. Witnessing a large fireball mushrooming into the air, she ran to the water's edge, screaming.

"Dad, where are you?"

Twenty times in the space of a minute she yelled.

Except for the lapping of the water against the mud at her ankles, she heard no reply. She buried her head in her hands. Trembling from head to foot, she sobbed uncontrollably.

Finally, she heard her father's voice.

"Tegan, I'm here, where are you?"

Tegan looked up, wiped her eyes and saw the outline of her father walking towards her, holding Tani's hand. Tegan sprinted along the water's edge, holding her arms wide.

"Dad, I thought you were dead." The remainder of her sentence sounded worse than jumbled inaudible words.

The trio group hugged. The two girls cried. Kendal held both his daughters tight.

"Tani's yacht had a bomb in it," explained Kendal. "We managed to evacuate the area in time."

"Tani, you were so brave," chirped Tegan, giving her sister an extra special hug.

Counting down the seconds inwardly Kendal barely had twelve strokes of the oars completed before the bomb blew. He smiled down at his youngest and decided to bury the secret of having to pry her fingers from the yacht's side. There was no point in telling the full story.

"Come on you two; I have to rescue your Mother and Grandma."

Tani spoke for the first time since the explosion. "Dad, Claire, Grandma, and Mum are in the house."

Kendal dropped to one knee to look his daughter square in the face. "Claire is in the house you say. Is she, Mum and Grandma okay?"

"Yes. They are in the spare bedroom."

"Other than Patrick, is there anyone else in the house?"

Tani vigorously shook her head.

"Is there anything else you can tell me?"

"Patrick's a liar. He told me to smell a pink handkerchief. He said it smelt nice. It didn't."

"I know all about that hanky," said Tegan. She took hold of Tani's hand. "It's a horrible lie."

"I've just had a thought," mentioned Kendal. "Patrick might assume Tani and I were caught up in the explosion. The scene would push him into a win, win scenario. I reckon he will want to kill everyone in Grandma's house. I'm positive it'll be his next move."

"I'd be the last Kendal," sobbed Tegan.

Kendal nodded.

"Stay in the car and look after Tani. I'm off to the house to put an end to this game. I'll pick up Constable Adams on the way. Here, take, my phone. Call police dispatch and request backup, a fire truck and an ambulance. Under no circumstances are you to leave the safety of the car."

Tegan nodded, pushed Tani onto the front passenger seat and slid behind the steering wheel.

Kendal turned the headlight switch to parkers. "There's no point in having a flat battery. No matter what happens, don't come to the house. Wait here. When the local police arrive, inform them what's going on."

He waited for Tegan to lock each door before marching away.

Both girls watched their father pull his gun from his shoulder holster, checked the gun for a full round of bullets, click the safety off and repeat the same check of his snub nose revolver strapped to his ankle.

Kendal glanced back at the car and disappeared into the scrub.

Tegan sat in the car, one arm cuddling Tani, her free hand tapping the numbers of police headquarters on her father's mobile phone. She hummed quietly waiting for dispatch to answer.

"Good evening, Police Headquarters, I'm Constable Jillian Forsythe. May I help you?"

"I need an ambulance, fire truck, and police back up at number seven Sweet-Gum Circuit Aura Lake."

"What is your name?"

"Tegan Kendal."

"I see," said Constable Forsythe.

"I need back up, now," she yelled.

"You can't request backup unless you're a police officer."

"I'm Detective Alan Kendal's daughter."

"Hold the line I'm transferring you to Captain Hughes."

"No," Tegan yelled, a full second too late. She looked at Tani. "I don't believe this. I'm positive it would have been easier to call triple zero."

"It'll be okay. Dad will arrest Patrick and receive a bravery medal. He doesn't need backup."

Captain Hughes' voice interrupted the music erupting from the phone's small speaker.

"Tegan, why are you ringing me? Is there a problem?"

"The woman who was working dispatch put me through to you. Dad needs back up. We're all at my Grandma's house at Aura Lake."

"Don't panic, I'm already here."

Looking at Tani, Tegan heard a click.

"We have to warn Dad. Buckle up, I've an idea," whispered Tegan. She turned the ignition key. The car's engine roared to life.

"Dad said not to go to the house under any circumstances."

"I know he did. This is an emergency. I have to let him know Captain Hughes is here."

"Do you know how to drive?" quizzed Tani. Her voice sounded doubtful.

"Not exactly," Tegan replied. "I've been watching Dad for ages. How hard can it be? Just as well Claire's car is automatic."

"What's an automatic car mean?" asked Tani.

"The car changes gears all by itself," replied Tegan, displaying an all-knowing look. "Quiet now, let me concentrate."

In the dark, she selected the correct gear, managed to complete a U-turn and slowly drove back to Sweet-Gum Circuit. At the main road, she checked for traffic then turned left towards her Grandma's house. She squeezed her toes on the accelerator when the car slowed. The girls spotted a police car shrouded in darkness. Tegan braked and pushed the gear stick into park causing the car to come to a jerking halt. She chuckled at her sister's worried expression and white-knuckle grip.

“Stay in the car. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“To get back up,” she explained.

Tegan ran to the police car yelling for help. She pulled open the front passenger door. For several moments, she stared at the gruesome scene on the rear seat. Claspings her mouth shut to stop from vomiting, Tegan ran back to Tani.

“Did you get help?” asked Tani, watching Tegan slide behind the steering wheel.

“No, I didn’t and don’t ask why.” She shuddered as she threw the car’s gear stick into drive.

“You must have seen something. Tell me why you didn’t get help?”

“You’re too little. You’ll have nightmares.”

“I’ll tell Dad you didn’t tell me what you saw.”

“I wish I didn’t see.”

Tani folded her arms. Glaring at her sister she pouted.

“Okay,” groaned Tegan. “Don’t come wake me when you have nightmares.”

Tani brightened, unfolded her arms and looked directly at her sister.

“The cop was dead.”

“How gross,” blurted Tani, scrunching her nose.

Tegan navigated the car slowly along her Grandma’s drive, guiding it carefully so as not to hit a tree or one of her precious Rose bushes.

“There’s Dad,” said Tani, pointing. “I saw him crouching at the kitchen door. He’s just crawled backwards into the shadow of the house.”

The car rolled to a stop thirty-feet from the kitchen door.

“Stay in the car,” ordered Tegan. “It’s too dangerous for you now.”

Tani watched her sister run on her toes towards the house and squat behind a thick bush.

“Dad, where are you?” called Tegan.

Kendal made his way over to where Tegan was hiding. When he stepped next to her, he didn’t look happy.

“Didn’t I order you to stay at the lake?” His voice sounded one decibel above a whisper.

“Yes, you did. I’ve important information.”

“I hope so. It’s extremely dangerous. Patrick’s inside, and there’s a heavy petrol smell coming through the gap between the wall and the kitchen door.”

“Can I help?”

“Yes, tell me the information and get back in the car.”

“Captain Hughes is here, somewhere.”

Kendal nodded. “I understand.”

Tegan set herself to run back to the car.

“Hold it. I’ve just had a thought. Seeing how you drove from the lake, I want you to drive the car into Grandma’s rose garden and mow over all her precious rose bushes.”

“She’ll never forgive you. She loves her rose garden.”

“She’ll get over it. Besides, by morning there probably won’t be a house.” He flashed his daughter a wintry smile. “Tegan, I love you. Tell Tani I love her too. Now go.”

“Love you too, Dad.” She looked over her shoulder at her father. “Be careful. I want to talk to you tomorrow.”

“Make sure you run over Grandma’s most favourite rose bush,” jeered Kendal.

“I promise.” She turned and sprinted back to the car.

“We’ll talk about your illegal driving in the daylight if I’m still alive,” he mumbled.

Kendal watched Tegan drive the car over the rose garden. Every one of the old dear's rose bushes was snapped cleanly at ground level.

"The old woman will be pissed off alright," he chuckled. "At least now I have plan 'B' if things take a turn for the worst."

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

INSIDE THE house, Patrick finished spraying petrol on the downstairs walls and ceiling. Over the next half an hour he had locked every door and checked that all the windows were shut. In the darkness, he walked from window to window waiting for his prey to arrive.

Outside, the trees resembled tall, dark statues. Due to the approaching storm, the two-metre-tall wooden framed windmill next to the rose garden started to spin faster.

Patrick checked his crossbow for readiness. Snatching the gun from his back pocket, he rechecked the number of bullets.

"Three bullets and two arrows, more than enough fire power to bring Kendal down. I can smell victory."

Walking in the dark, Patrick began to re-check that every door was shut and locked; all except the kitchen. I'm ready for you Coppa. Come and get it. Remember, you broke the rules."

Standing in the dark, waiting for the first sign his victim had arrived, he started to chant quietly.

'Don't break the rules. Don't break the rules. You broke the rules.
You broke the rules. You're gonna cop it. You're gonna cop it.'

A sudden noise forced Patrick to stop. The noise came from the front of the house. Staring through the dark, his pupils enlarged. Moonlight shone through the glass on top of the door making the entrance brighter than the surrounding rooms. He held his breath as he watched the door start to open. Squaring himself to the door, he lifted the crossbow to eye level.

"Kendal, you're late."

Patrick heard no reply. When the door was fully open, he saw a figure enter the house.

"Patrick," whispered the shadow.

He fired. The arrow struck the front door at waist height.

The figure emerged from the darkness.

"Hey Doc, you, stupid woman, I nearly killed you."

"You should look before you shoot. Lucky for me you are not the perfect shot."

"Never sneak into the house."

"You should have a light on."

"No. I want to surprise Kendal."

"He is probably dead."

"I don't think so. I thought I caught a whiff of Kendal's cheap deodorant."

"If he was alive, he should have been here by now," suggested Dr. Clarke, pushing her hands onto her hips. "He was probably blown up playing hero, out on the lake."

“You’re wrong. Kendal’s too dumb to think one of his kid’s might be in the boat.”

“What did we see when we stood next to each other in the dark?”

Patrick shrugged.

“Remember when we were staring through the trees, we both saw a car’s headlights shining bright, across the surface of the lake? Furthermore, we heard the explosion. I was in the kitchen, and you were upstairs checking the hostages. Shouldn’t the explosion have been your plan B?”

“It was.”

“You should have used plan ‘A’ first?”

“I did it to get even. Kendal’s wife lied to me. She shouldn’t have lied. You know how angry I get when people lie to me.”

“She does not understand you, like I do.”

Patrick stared at Clarke then resumed his walk back and forth across the room. He eventually stopped.

“Maybe Kendal did die in the explosion,” said Dr. Clarke. “It could be the reason behind why he is late.”

“Either he’s dead, or the clues I left weren’t good enough.” Patrick paused to look Ashlee in the eyes. “Or you didn’t ring him.”

She bowed her head. “I didn’t ring. You have to understand; I was scared.”

Patrick pulled an arrow from the quiver hanging from under his arm and thrust it under her chin.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to let you down.”

“You’ve let me down for the last time.”

Wriggling violently, Ashlee managed to break free of the vice-like grip. She glanced at her watch. “It’s 10:30pm. Have you thought of a new plan B?”

“No, I haven’t. The explosion on the lake was the diversion I needed to get away.”

“After the house fire, you’ll be caught. You have no way of escaping. For all, you know Kendal could already be in the house?”

“He’s not here yet,” growled Patrick.

“How do you know?”

“The smell of his cheap aftershave would be strong in the air.”

“We need a plan if you’re going to escape this house.”

“Shut up and let me think.” Patrick started to walk in tight circles. Every few seconds he stared at Ashlee.

A full minute ticked off before she clicked her fingers three times in rapid succession.

“Time is running out. If you don’t tell me the plan, I’m leaving.”

“I’m a genius,” barked Patrick. “I’ve the perfect solution. I want you to lock yourself in the trunk of your car. When the house implodes, start calling for help. A burly firefighter will play hero and save you.”

“Where will you be?”

“I’ll start walking towards Melbourne via the lake. After you’ve told the cops I threw you in the trunk; you can pick me up on the way home. After Kendal and his family are dead, the cops will never connect you to the fire. The cops will assign someone else to hunt me down. They won’t find me due to the fact there’ll be no more house fires. They’ll draw a blank. Case closed.”

“It sounds good to me,” said Ashlee.

“Come on; I’ll escort you to the kitchen door. You can leave after I know the coast is clear. All you have to do is get to your car unseen,” whispered Patrick.

Kendal had successfully wormed his way through the gap between the wall and the kitchen door undetected. He stood in the dark, next to the antique stove. Its short cast iron legs were sitting heavily on the broken tiles. He knew he was walking into a trap. This moment must come. It was he and Patrick, one on one. He knew if he won the game, Patrick would be stopped. Losing wasn't an option. If everything went pear shaped, he must stay alive long enough to rescue his wife, the old woman and if he could, Claire.

Aiming his revolver at the closed kitchen door, Kendal slid along the wall. The hallway was long and narrow. At the other end, he could just see the staircase. Kendal walked slowly. He had reached the halfway point when he heard a chuckle.

"You're late."

Kendal stopped and pushed his shoulders hard against the wall.

"Put the gun down, nice and easy."

"Why should I listen to you?"

"Because you're in checkmate," growled Patrick. "You're halfway between each end of the hall, and I've a crossbow pointing at your heart. There's nothing to hide behind. You have nowhere to run."

"Checkmate is a strange word. Are we playing chess?"

Laughter echoed down the hall.

"Patrick, you're under arrest."

"Nice stall tactics. I like the desperate game you're playing. Be advised; the game's over. Drop your gun, now."

Kendal knew he had no option except to obey. Staying alive was off to a bad start. He threw his revolver behind him. It made a clunking noise when it hit the floor, barrel first. He heard it slide along the polished floorboards.

"Good, now the other one."

"I don't have another."

"Don't mock me, Kendal. You forget I know you. Don't make me spell it out."

"I'm at a loss." He raised his hands to prove it.

"The gun is strapped to your inside right ankle."

Light from a torch shone through the darkness. Kendal bent his leg and reached for the snub nose. It ended at the same place as the revolver.

"Excellent."

The torch went out. The overhead light flickered on. Kendal squinted in its sudden brilliance.

"Coppa, it's good to see you again."

"Why don't you stop hiding behind the mask?"

"Not before time."

"Give up the game. It's over."

"For you, the game is over. I won."

"You should never be over confident."

"And why not?" barked Patrick. "You're here. I have hostages. Admit it; you're in checkmate."

"Never," jeered Kendal. "I know your identity."

Patrick stared at the ceiling and created a hideous laugh. The noise brought a grin to Kendal's face. He clenched his fists and moved at speed. There was no time to debate the pros and cons, or if the psychotic arsonist had a concealed gun behind his back. The scathing attack would have to be more silent than a game of charades. There'd be no turning back, no let up. No surrender.

One fist found its home on Patrick's protruding jaw, sending his head and body sideways. Kendal's second fist grazed a rib. Patrick lashed out with a hurried slap to Kendal's chin. Patrick stepped back, aimed the crossbow's arrow and pulled the trigger. The arrow found its mark pinning Kendal to the wall.

"That wasn't nice," puffed Patrick, rubbing his swelling jaw. "Not nice at all. I'll allow you to scream in pain. I've heard it all."

"I'd never give you the satisfaction," snarled Kendal.

Patrick stepped closer. His eyes gave away he was full of murderous anger. "You need sleep. Your eyes are bloodshot. Tracking me down has worn you out."

One step closer was all Kendal needed for a second chance to win against his aggressor.

Instead of stepping forward, Patrick back stepped.

"Clever, but I'm up to your tricks. You want me to take a step forward to kick me in the ribs."

Patrick walked into the lounge room and threw the crossbow away. Extracting a match from a pocket, he struck it on the side of a matchbox he held in his gloved hand. For a long moment, he stared at the dancing flame.

"You have been a mighty opponent, but it's time to say goodbye."

He flicked the match high in the air, walking towards the door. For only a moment he hesitated to stare Kendal in the eyes.

Upstairs in the bedroom, Claire heard muffled talking. Continuing her struggles against the ropes, she met Marg's stare.

"I have to hurry, Al's here, and I think he's in trouble."

Marg started to sob.

"There's no time for crying. I'm almost free." Claire exhaled. She groaned and pushed her right hand from underneath the ropes. "Marg, I need you to stand." She rolled towards the window and picked up a large fragment of glass lying on the floor from the shattered window. Using the wall for a brace, she struggled to a standing position. "Marg hold still." Claire held tight the glass fragment and started sawing the rope that held Marg, a prisoner.

Seconds seemed like hours.

"Claire, take a break, you've been attacking the rope for ages," whispered Grandma.

"I'm tired, but, I'm not stopping. I'm convinced Al's in trouble and I have to help him."

Marg's face tensed. "How far have you got?"

"I'm about half way through the rope. Why?"

"I thought I heard the striking of a match."

Everything happened as if in slow motion. Kendal watched the match rise and fall. He looked Patrick in the eyes. He saw something he'd never seen in a criminal. Could it be compassion, doubt, or was it fear?

Behind the balaclava, Patrick blinked. The match hit the floor. Kendal's eyes widened as he tensed, waiting for the petrol to ignite.

The match went out.

Patrick doubled over in laughter.

"Before the fire roars to life I want you to beg."

"Never," he barked.

The psychotic arsonist straddled the kindling. His grin looked barbaric, his stare absolute.

"It's been a real pleasur. However, the time has come."

"Ending the game so easily? Where's Ashlee? Isn't it her turn to roll the dice?"

"I'm not answering your questions; the games are over. I've won."

"I wouldn't count on a win just yet."

Patrick lit another match. Again, he watched the flame dance on the match head.

"See Kendal; if you listen to the flame, it's telling you it's alive and very hungry. It can smell food."

"You should listen to Dr. Clarke. She wants you to blow the flame out."

"I could listen to her, but if I snuff the flame out, I'd be a murderer. I can't do it."

"Yes, you can. Blow out the flame."

"You didn't say the magic word."

"Patrick, please put out the flame."

"No," he growled. "I've one final thing to say before you take your last breath."

Kendal's eyebrows shot up.

"Checkmate."

Patrick flicked the match high above the pile of wood. The flame flickered in the sudden rush of air. It hovered for a mere second then gravity took control.

"Calling checkmate is a trifle premature. You aren't the perfect archer as you might think."

Unscathed, Kendal slipped out of his long black coat. Leaving it hanging on the wall, he dived towards the match.

Patrick saw him move. He jumped off the kindling, reaching for the gun in his back pocket. A blue and orange fireball erupted the moment the match hit the kindling. The fire roared to life, quickly spreading throughout the house.

Kendal hit Patrick hard using a tight fist, spilling the gun out of his gloved hand. Kendal and Patrick rolled towards the wall away from the fire, their limbs flying in all directions. The fire grew rapidly. Four flaming fire trails went in separate directions. The walls erupted in flames as the fire traveled upwards to the ceiling.

Patrick got to his feet first. He kicked out using his left foot. Kendal reached into his back pocket for Claire's handcuffs. With precision timing, he snapped the handcuffs over Patrick's ankle. Patrick, aware he was cuffed, ran for the kitchen door, Kendal in hot pursuit. He wasn't about to have this offender slip through his fingers. He dived over the kitchen table, knocking Patrick to the ground, grabbed his handcuffs and pulled the arsonist towards the antique cast iron stove, quickly clamping the handcuffs around one of the stove's stubby legs.

Patrick started growling. He lashed out at the handcuffs and the heavy stove that held him a prisoner. He sent a right-handed power punch to Kendal's stomach, tumbling him backwards over the kitchen table. For a few seconds, his lungs refused to work. Using the kitchen doorway for a crutch, he managed to slowly stand. Kendal glared at his victim, still cursing the stove.

"Patrick, don't go away."

Kendal took a deep breath and stepped into the plume of smoke billowing into the kitchen.

The storm was bearing down on the house. The wind started howling through the treetops. Branches were scraping hard against the windows, waiting to fan the fire. Lightning forked across the sky. A blue flash and sparks erupted from the home's electrical switchboard. If it weren't for fire, the house would have been blanketed in darkness.

Visibility quickly dropped to practically zero. Breathing felt impossible. Kendal squinted to protect his eyes from the lurid smoke. Feeling the walls along the hallway, the stairs erupted in flames. He hesitated and thought he heard the fire laughing at its newest victim. The glass in the lounge-room windows cracked. A moment later they

shattered. The walls creaked. The temperature soared. The smoke in the hall cleared. Kendal spied his guns. Snatching them up, he pushed them home in his shoulder holster, and ankle strap before the next wave of smoke began to smother him. He inhaled. The putrid smell of burnt carpet lingered in his nostrils. Ignoring the flames eating the balustrade he sprinted up the burning stairs. He could feel the heat under his feet.

The ceiling in the lounge fell, pulling an upstairs room down to the ground. The pale green walls in the hall started to blister from the heat. Kendal felt his way along the upstairs hall, past the first doorway and stood square to the second door. He half opened one eye, found the doorknob and twisted.

It refused to turn.

Embers fell from the ceiling, dancing around his feet. He took a half step back, raised his foot to waist height and kicked. The solid wooden door's lock broke. The door swung open. The three ladies inside the room jumped. Kendal emerged from the smoke, displaying a smug look. The sudden draft of oxygen caused by the broken window fed the fire. Flames burst into the room. The walls caught fire. The flames headed for the ceiling.

Claire stopped her cutting action. "You're late."

"I'm always late to a party."

"Patrick?"

"He's busy examining the stove."

Tears poured from Marg's eyes. "Al, I thought you and the kids were dead."

"Not even close," he lied. "Tegan and Tani are safe in the car." He opened the flick knife he confiscated from Crusher, marched across the room and using a sharp downward sweep of the blade the ropes holding each of the women a prisoner, fell to the floor.

Marg hugged and kissed her husband.

"Romance will have to wait; this floor's about to drop."

Claire sprinted into the hall only to return displaying a dismal expression. She looked at the group and shielded her eyes from the falling embers.

"The window's a no go and so is the stairs."

Kendal walked to the door. Smoke still poured into the room. The stairs crashed to the floor below, causing a fireball to mushroom and splatter flames across the ceiling. The floor of the upstairs hall and the room they were standing in burst into flames.

"Follow me," he yelled.

Grabbing Marg's hand, he looked her in the eyes. She stared back.

Kendal led the way to the next room, turned the doorknob and opened the door. Claire was the last one through and shut out the smoke. She caught her partner up at the window.

"What happened downstairs?"

"It's like what I told you at the archery club, Patrick isn't the perfect shot."

"Are you telling me he missed?"

Kendal nodded and kicked out at the glass window. "He did ruin a perfectly good coat."

When the closed door burst into flames, Kendal leaned out of the window and looked at the pool.

"No time to play 'the spinning game,' to see who goes first. Claire, you're up. You'll be fine, the pool's six feet deep."

She took seven steps backwards, turned and ran for the window. After diving through and completing a mid-air somersault like an experienced diver, she landed feet first into the water, creating a giant splash.

Kendal poked his head out of the smashed window and waved at his partner. He looked at his wife. "You're up next."

Marg copied Claire and dived through the window. Tegan and Tani came running to the pool's edge.

Kendal faced the old dear.

"I'm not jumping."

"Take a look at your favorite rose bushes," he suggested.

The old woman stared through the window. Lifting a tight fist, she waved it in the face of her son-in-law.

"You murderer," she spat. "For years, you've been trying to find a way to get at me, and now you've done it. You deliberately ran over my rose bushes, didn't you?"

"I did no such thing. I needed ammunition to get you to jump. It's a small matter of your life or death. Tegan said you'd be pissed. If you jump, you can yell at me all you want, after you move into my home."

Still shaking her fist, the old woman climbed onto the window ledge. Her screams drowned out the sirens of the emergency vehicles. She made the water by mere centimeters.

The house creaked and groaned. The temperature inside the house felt unbearable. Kendal walked back to the door and sprinted towards the window. He thought of the days and months to come. Shaking his head at the thought of the old dear living at his house, he still felt certain Marg and the kids would love it, though he couldn't be sure the old woman would ever get over the loss of her roses. One thing he felt certain of, she'd love every minute of being close to her grand-kids. As for him, he hoped there'd be another case to keep him busy and out of her way.

Flames erupted from the floor at the window. Kendal dived through the window, landing sideways in the water.

"He's not much of a sportsman," giggled Claire, in Marg's ear.

Both women sprinted to fetch him from under the water.

Kendal took a moment to spit the water out of his lungs. He smiled at knowing they all survived the fire.

"I have to save Patrick."

"Why?" snarled Marg. "He has been nothing except trouble."

"I need him alive so we can unmask him in front of Hughes."

Kendal sprinted around the other side of the house. Seeing the flames erupting out of all the downstairs windows, he knew time was of the essence. He picked up his pace, pushed open the back gate and sprinted towards the kitchen.

Patrick grew tired of thrashing about trying to yank on the handcuffs and kicking out at the heavy stove. Smoke looked thick. The ceiling appeared to be sagging. Visibility was practically zero. He started coughing out smoke.

"Fire, I demand that you stop laughing at me this instant. Kendal, I curse the day you were born. I hate you. I hate you."

Patrick yanked on the handcuffs again and spat at the tiled floor under the stove. Staring through wide eyes, he reached out and pulled up half a tile.

"I've still got time to escape. I'll be gone from here before Kendal finishes playing hero upstairs. I'll escape via the kitchen door and disappear into the night. He won't find a body. He'll think I was incinerated in the fire."

Patrick squatted. He shouldered the stove. The cast iron leg lifted. Reaching out, he pulled away the other half of the tile. He leaned harder against the stove, managing to slip the handcuff chain half way under the leg.

"Doc, I need your help. I can smell freedom. Doc where are you?"

"This time, the doctor isn't going to help you."

Patrick looked for the voice. He saw Kendal's ghostly shape enter the kitchen.

"You got here too quick. How did you escape the fire?"

"The same way you did. I jumped."

Patrick groaned, curled his fingers into a fist and swiped at the air.

The ceiling directly above their heads creaked then sagged lower. Flaming paint fell to the floor. The doorway leading into the hall caught fire. The upstairs hall and rooms collapsed.

"All this is your fault," spat Patrick, trying to kick Kendal.

He extracted his handcuffs from his back pocket. Seizing the perfect opportunity, he clamped one end of the cuffs over Patrick's wrist, the other end, he clamped his other wrist.

"You wait. When I'm free, you'll regret you were born," snarled Patrick.

Kendal bent down, shouldered the stove, grabbed Patrick's un-cuffed ankle and handcuffed them together.

Patrick lashed out using a double fisted punch. Kendal easily blocked the punch, grabbed hold of the handcuffs and dragged his prisoner by the wrists out of the kitchen and towards the pool. When he heard timbers crashing, he turned his head and saw the ceiling in the kitchen collapse. At poolside and with everyone mingling around, Kendal stared directly into Patrick's eyes.

"For now, your balaclava stays on. I want a few more witnesses to arrive before your real identity was revealed.

"Why, so you can gloat?"

"Yes. You have exactly two minutes to confess why you have a vendetta against me. After the two minutes, I'll hand you over to the arson boys. Believe me; they're not friendly as me."

What remained of the house quickly imploded, turning the old home into a pile of smoldering rubble.

"Start talking," barked Kendal.

"Will I receive a lighter sentence if I tell all?"

"Anything is possible. How the jury sees things is out of my hands."

Patrick spat the taste of smoke out of his mouth. Staring directly at Kendal, he started his incredible confession.

"I hate you. When I walk out of prison, I'll have my revenge. It is entirely your fault for what happened to Dr. Clarke in that strip club."

Kendal stared past the mask and into Patrick's defeated blue eyes, casting his mind back in time, back to the night when he was seventeen and had entered the strip club.

"I remember finding my father sitting in the front row, left of center drooling over a tall female exotic pole dancer. I walked up to, and king hit him from behind. My father staggered to his feet, turned, and faced me. I hit him again. He fell backwards onto the stage. I followed. He clawed his way to his feet. I could tell he was full of booze and I hit him one more time. He overbalanced, knocking the woman towards the edge of the stage. I went to grab her by the arm to prevent her from falling. My father kicked me in the thigh. I fell off the stage, dragging the woman behind me. I fell through a chair. The bouncers grabbed me and threw me out of the building and into the dirty back lane. They told me I broke the rules by touching a dancer."

"Yes, you broke the rules," hissed Patrick. "Ashlee Clarke was that woman. Because of you, she broke the fingers on her right hand. She was in the club to earn money to finance herself through medical school. She was studying to be a fine surgeon. She had the talent. No thanks to you, her dream ended."

"Why involve my family?"

"Their last name is Kendal. They will one day breed."

"Tell me about the first fire. The one Mason was accused of starting."

"Ashlee Clarke was twelve-years-old. Mason, her, and I were playing hide and seek at Ashlee's house. Her mother needed to go pick her father up from the train station. Fifteen minutes she'd be gone. She warned Ashlee not to go anywhere near the open fire. She would light the fire when she got home. The temperature began to drop. Mason and Ashlee ended their game. I couldn't convince her to start the fire even when I explained she'd hear praise from her mother for helping. In her entire life, she never heard a pleasing word. In fact, her parents always called her a loser. To help, I poured petrol on the kindling and threw a lit match into the fireplace. I accidentally tipped the large can of petrol over when I jumped back from the fireball. The petrol in the can ignited. Mason dragged Ashlee out of the house. I ordered her to tell her parents I started the fire and not her. They didn't believe her. They blamed Mason."

"So, Patrick, it was you who started the fire?"

"Yes."

Kendal watched a police car stop next to the pool. A familiar man stepped down and marched over.

"Captain Hughes, welcome. You have arrived just in time," said Kendal.

"I take it this is the scumbag you've been chasing for three months?"

"It certainly is Cap, Captain Hughes, Sir."

Claire stood next to her partner, giggling.

"Good work you two."

Kendal reached for Patrick's balaclava.

"Before you bring us out of suspense, I've a couple of important announcements," said Hughes. "Firstly, there's a manila folder on my desk. It has your name on it. That's your next case. Second is, congratulations."

"Exactly what do you mean?" questioned Kendal.

"The promotion you have been asking about has been approved for you and Claire. I have to call you both, Detective Sergeants. The two words have a flow about them don't you think, Detective Sergeant Claire Ambroso and Detective Sergeant Alan Kendal?" asked Hughes.

Claire couldn't hide her oversized grin.

Kendal grinned too, reached for Patrick's balaclava and pulled it from his head.

"Everyone say hello to Dr. Ashlee Clarke and Patrick, the psychotic arsonist. Both are one and the same." He knelt and stared at the unmasked Ashlee Clarke in the face. "You lost the game when Dr. Clarke and I were having our conversation in her office. When you were playing the Doctor, you used full words such as, 'I am here.' Patrick's words were rough and slightly on the slang side. For example, 'I'm here.' As for Ashlee, she was the smoker and the flirt. She was the third person and the exotic pole dancer. To top it all, when I looked into the roof cavity at the hospital and found only cobwebs, I knew beyond any doubt of your identity, and where you've been hiding. The fact was cemented into place when Tegan saw your face. I've one more thing to say, Patrick."

The pyromaniac looked up and stared at Kendal through defeated eyes.

"Patrick, you've been dethroned. I won."

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my novel 'Fire Games' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted, so please take a moment to leave a review. Spreading the word about my novels to a close friend or on face book would be a blessing. 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

You can also find me on www.booksbythedozen.com.au

Mark Stewart is an inspirational author.
The transformation from when I started to edit his work until
now has been amazing. His hard work and dedication have
helped him to write more professionally.
Mark is undeniably the one to watch.

Rosemary Cantala

Mark Stewart is an acclaimed author.

He loves to write fiction right across the board from romance adventure to crime and onwards to science fiction and children's books. His fast-paced novels will keep you on the edge of your seat from the first word to the last.

Mark lives in Melbourne Australia and tries to keep to the Aussie lingo and customs.

Mathew Lang

By Mark Stewart

Crime novels: The Kendal Chronicles.

Fire Games

Heart of a spider

I know your secret

Copycat Murders

Kiss on the bridge

Kiss on the bridge two

Kiss on the bridge three

The perfect gift

Legendary blue diamond
Legendary blue diamond two
Legendary blue diamond three

Don't tell my secret
201 May Street
The girl from Emerald Hill

Blood Red Rose
Blood Red Rose Two
Blood Red Rose three

Planet X91 series

Children: A Troglan knows
Luke's cubby house
Malcolm's cubby house

Smashwords has various short stories.

Below is the opening page of my some of the novels.

Synopsis: Kiss on the bridge. Adventure romance. **Free on Obooko.**

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.

Kiss on the bridge two: Set in Australia in 1977. Meredith wakes in a coffin. She has no idea her hero is on the way. They meet and fall in love, but will the emotion be strong enough to keep them together?

The Perfect Gift. Adventure romance. **Free on Obooko.**

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, but neither wants to be first. Through a series of adventures stretching 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 the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers 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 whereabouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating 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. **Free on Obooko.**

"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?

Don't tell my secret. **Free on Obooko.**

How far are you willing to go to keep a secret?

James Buxton is summoned to his publicist office. He's not brave enough to tell her he's suffering from writer's block. She tells him to write a romance. At first he refuses, explaining he writes crime. She walks over, gives him a seductive kiss then says go write me a romance novel. When he arrives at a bed and breakfast hotel he meets an attractive woman, Mia Garnett. Did fate bring them together or something else? James meets an elderly woman, Eloise, who wants to dictate a romance novel to him. He is told to take the credit for the book. The story is about a woman living in 1940's and her struggles to survive when her husband goes to war. Lilly and her friend Suzie do a horrific act. They vow to take the unspeakable deed to their graves. As James types the novel, he falls in love with Mia. After a romantic dinner at a restaurant they dance to the juke box with the song queue full. At the end of the night they are informed the jukebox queue hasn't worked for years. When Mia hears the truth behind Eloise will the discovery put a rift between her and James forever?

Synopsis: Heart of a spider. Crime. Second book in the series.. **Free on Obooko.**

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 which astounds even Kendal.

Synopsis: I know your secret. Crime. Third book in the series. **Free on Obooko.**

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 with a note inside which read, 'I was paid to miss.'



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