



Caroline Bready is being watched. Someone has posted a photograph of her on a mysterious website.

Still struggling to rebuild her life after the unsolved death of her husband, Caroline tells herself that the photo is unimportant. She drifts into an affair with a colleague; the relationship begins casually, but quickly becomes intense and disturbing.

After Caroline discovers the first victim of a serial rapist who has begun to attack women in Sydney, another photograph appears. Are the online images a threat, or simply coincidence? Against a backdrop of deception and lies, Caroline finds herself drawn to an enigmatic stranger. Is he protecting her, or does he mean her harm?

If Caroline cannot distinguish friend from foe, it could cost her life.

(In Your Sights is Book 1 in the Sydney Triptych series of suspense novels.)

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Chapter 1

HE LURKED ON THE FRINGES of her life. He watched her from the shadows, gathering information without making his presence known.

She would give him nothing by choice, so he took what he could by stealth.

She would give him nothing by choice, but she was careless, in the way that many people are careless online. Her blog was open to the world. Her full name and her photograph appeared on every post she made.

Someone should tell her about the dangers of being so free with her personal information. Someone, but not him.

He lifted his head at the low rumble of thunder through the open window. His eyes were used to the bright light of the computer screen, and he could see nothing through the window but blackness. The direction of the thunder told him that the storm was passing, sweeping away over Sydney’s Northern Suburbs.

No longer absorbed in his work, he became aware of the sweat that clung to him. He wiped his hand across his forehead as he rose, and regretted, again, not being able to afford to rent an apartment with air conditioning. The flare of light as he flicked on a lamp turned the window into a mirror, reflecting the small room back to him: desk, chair, sofa, television. As the blinds swished shut, he caught sight of a star above the dark bulk of a building.

Which direction do her windows face? he wondered. He knew where she lived. It had been a simple matter to follow her home one day, to watch from the shadow of a tree as she unlocked one of the mailboxes in front of an apartment building. He’d had no success yet in penetrating the double security doors to determine the layout. So much closer to the ocean than he was, though, her apartment must catch the cooling breezes.

He looked at the computer screen again. He was satisfied with the photograph. It was one of his best. The processing into black and white took time to perfect, and the selective heightening of focus here, the subtle touch of blurring there, was exacting work.

The question was – should he post it?

He hovered the cursor over the Publish button, and clicked.

* *

“No! No, don’t!”

Caroline struggled against the man’s body that pinned her to the bed. She tried to push him away but her hands slid off his chest. She couldn’t breathe, his weight was suffocating her, this was wrong, so wrong!

“No!” She raised her head in an abrupt motion, and her forehead smashed into the bridge of his nose.

Reece jerked upright.

Caroline squirmed away and huddled against the wall. She clenched the sheet under her chin, with her heart hammering in her chest and tears welling in her eyes.

“What the hell’s got into you?” He cupped his hands over his nose.

“I can’t! I’m sorry, Reece, I just can’t. I thought I could, but...it’s wrong!” She groped for a way to make him understand. “It’s like cheating.”

His sigh was sharp with anger. “He’s dead. He’s not going to care who you take to your bed.”

Caroline sat up, the rumpled sheet tight across her breasts. “I care! Niall was my husband!”

In one smooth movement, Reece swung his feet to the floor and rose. The light that stole into the bedroom from the hallway limned one side of his body, pale skin glowing against shadow. “Spare me a homily on the sanctity of marriage, please.”

“Those vows were important to us!”

In a mocking tone, Reece said, “Saint Niall and Sweet Caroline.”

“I told you never to call me that!”

He leaned forward and braced his hands on the bed. His body blocked the light until it was no more than a shining halo around his blond hair. “Ah, yes. That was your dear husband’s nickname for you, and no one must dirty the memory.”

The memory. She remembered the first time Niall had sung the song to her, driving home from a movie after a date. He was a terrible singer, but she had been too delighted to care.

“I think you should leave now,” Caroline said, with as much authority as her trembling voice would allow. She would not give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry.

“On that, we are entirely in agreement.” His movements were stiff as he pulled his pants over his legs. The tiny sound of the zipper was as loud in the taut silence as the thunder had been earlier. “I will see myself out.”

Caroline tracked the slight sounds of him walking to the apartment door, and flinched at the crash when he slammed it behind him. She flung herself backward onto the mattress and clutched a pillow, prepared for the flood of tears.

The tears did not come. She lay on her bed, angry and ashamed, but she could not cry. With an exclamation of impatience, she flung back the sheet and sat up.

Caroline pulled on her bathrobe and walked onto the terrace that wrapped around two sides of the apartment. She leaned against the wet railing and gazed down at the black expanse of the ocean. A cool breeze chased the lingering clouds from the sky and the turmoil from her mind. She felt trapped at the prospect of going back into the apartment, where she knew she would relive this disastrous evening. She had to get out, had to escape – she had to do something to take her mind off Reece, but what?

An idea came to her, and she scanned the horizon. The moon, a few days past full, would rise soon. It would be an ideal subject for the low-light assignment from her photography class, and struggling with the camera would take her mind off what had happened tonight.

But was it too late to be outside taking photographs? She rubbed thumb and forefinger over the silver penguin pendant that hung from a chain around her neck. It wasn't as useful as rubbing a magic lamp and having three wishes granted, but touching it had become a habit whenever she had to make a decision.

Fifteen minutes later, Caroline slung Niall's camera bag over her shoulder, tucked Niall's tripod under her arm, and escaped into the summer night.

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“I'll never figure this out,” muttered Caroline. She tweaked a dial on the camera, not entirely sure what effect it would have.

The interplay of exposure, aperture and light sensitivity was as incomprehensible to her as nuclear physics. Niall had made this look easy.

Caroline straightened up, and reminded herself that Niall had held a camera in his hands from the age of eight until he died at 38, and made his living from it. She had done nothing more than point and shoot until a few months ago.

There was a glimmer of movement at the edge of her vision. She looked to the left and saw a bobbing light. It followed the path that hugged the edge of the next cliff, behind the Clovelly lawn bowls club. The light swung and dipped in an erratic manner, and Caroline hoped that whoever held the light was taking care: that path was dangerous in the daytime, let alone at night.

Acknowledging defeat, she began to pack up the camera. When the bag was closed and the tripod folded, she sat cross-legged on the rough sandstone. She thought she might as well admire with her eyes the scene that she'd had no luck capturing with her camera. The lopsided moon – upside down, to her American way of thinking – hung above an ocean that shimmered like molten metal. To a woman who had lived the first 33 years of her life in landlocked Denver, such sights were still a revelation.

To her right and left winked the lights of Sydney's beach suburbs. The soothing sounds of the water and the soft touch of the breeze relaxed her. She had resolutely pushed Reece from her mind, but now, less emotional than when she had fled from the apartment, Caroline could think about him.

From the first days in her new job three years ago, Reece's friendliness had set him apart from the hundreds of strangers who also worked in the corporate headquarters of the bank that had hired Caroline. She had been flattered by the warmth in his eyes or the smile he flashed as he passed her desk; flattered, but not interested. Why would she be interested in Reece when she was so in love with Niall?

Then Niall had died, and her own life, too, had ended, or at least the life she had known.

Eighteen months after his death, 18 tumultuous, empty, lonely months, she had thought she could begin to move on. She had wanted Reece tonight, but somewhere in their lovemaking the excitement had turned to guilt and fear. Fear? That was ridiculous. There was no reason to be afraid of Reece! He had been nothing but kind and attentive to her since Niall's death.

So how could he have been so horrible to her tonight, and so cruel about Niall?

The only explanation she could think of was that he must not have known how he sounded; after all, no man could react gracefully to being rejected in the middle of sex! He probably thought that she had led him on, that she was a tease. With a sense of shame, Caroline realized that what had happened tonight was her fault. She should have been calmer and talked to him, but she had panicked and tried to push him away.

What must Reece think of her? Could she ever make it up to him?

Caroline pushed herself to her feet: sitting here would solve nothing and it was time to go home. She hoisted bag and tripod, and turned her back to the ocean. She took one step, and stopped. Even with her flashlight, it was dark on the cliff. Very dark. Shrub-covered dunes blocked the light from the houses in the distance. Beside her, the bulk of an old stone pillar glowed pale white. The rhythmic crash of surf breaking against the eroded cliffs filled the night.

Caroline directed the flashlight's beam at her feet and picked her way over the uneven slabs of worn stone. The moonlight flattened shadows, robbing her eyes of their ability to see depth. As she neared the path that skirted the shrubs, her prickle of unease faded. There were only a few dozen feet of narrow path to negotiate and then she would be on the broad track that ran beside the bowls club. Already there was a glow of light, spilling from the street and the car park. Staying as close to the shrubs as she could, she picked her way along the path.

Safe! She was off the path and on the gravel track, wide enough for a car and heading straight to—

What's that noise?

Caroline whirled to her right.

Nothing.

She heard only her own gasping breaths and the muted surf. Her flashlight revealed nothing but bushes and the white-painted fence that ended at the cliff edge. Behind the fence was the beginning of the trail that weaved behind the bowls club.

The noise, if there was one, must have come from the people whose light she had seen earlier. She let out her breath and turned toward the street.

There! It was that same sound, like a whimper.

She backed away, her eyes on the bushes and on the weak circle of her light darting from right to left. It could be an animal, she thought, maybe a dog. She glanced at the ground, hoping to find something to throw if it attacked.

Sudden movement pulled her attention back to the bushes.

A woman stood behind the fence. She was naked apart from a T-shirt that hung in shreds from her shoulders. Blood oozed from cuts and scratches running from her breasts to her feet. She seemed around Caroline's age, but taller and plumper, with a long mass of straggling black curls. Her frantic, imploring eyes stared at Caroline. The high-pitched whimpering came again: she could not speak because her lower face was wrapped in silver duct tape.

Caroline stumbled backward.

The woman shook her head. She thrust herself between the rails of the fence and moved toward Caroline with fitful steps. One bare foot slid into a depression in the rock, and she tripped.

Jolted from her frozen shock, Caroline leaped forward, but she was too slow. The woman staggered, could not find her balance and fell heavily on the dirt, unable to catch herself because her hands were bound behind her back. Caroline skidded to her knees and ripped at the tape covering the woman's face.

The woman opened her mouth.

"Oh, God!" said Caroline in horror. How could anyone do that to her?

She held the woman's chin in one hand, and with the other she teased a ball of sodden fabric from her mouth. The woman retched, and then threw back her head and gulped deep, shuddering breaths, her mouth stretched wide. Her eyes were squeezed shut.

"Are you alright?" asked Caroline. She wanted to shake the woman, to make her open her eyes and look up, but was afraid. The woman could not possibly be alright. What a stupid question!

The woman did open her eyes. "My hands," she said in a cracked voice. "Please."

On her knees, Caroline shuffled around the bowed body. She rubbed her thumb over the ridged length of plastic that encircled the woman's crossed wrists.

"I don't think...I don't have a knife!" Caroline had nothing with her but a few coins, her driver's license and her keys.

Keys! She yanked them from her pocket.

With the flashlight gripped between her teeth, she worked the tip of a key into the lock on the cable tie. The key did not fit the small plastic hood, and if she exerted too much force it tended to skid free. She was afraid to press too hard in case the key's metal edge gouged into the woman's skin.

"I'm sorry! I've never tried to do anything like this before!" Sweat trickled into Caroline's eyes and she wiped the back of her wrist over her forehead.

"It's okay. Keep trying."

After what seemed like an eternity of desperate twisting and pushing with the key, she was able to force the strip of plastic back through the lock.

The woman moaned when her hands were released. She folded her arms across her waist in an awkward manner, and huddled forward.

"Don't cry," said Caroline. "It will be alright now." She felt useless and inadequate, but dared to rest one hand on the woman's shoulder.

"No, I will not cry," the woman said. "That bastard is not worthy of my tears!"

Caroline sat back on her haunches and began to unbutton her shirt. It was one of Niall's, so big it went down past her hips, with long sleeves. The air was cool on her arms when she removed it, but the T-shirt she wore under the shirt would keep her warm enough. "Put this on," she said.

The woman took the shirt, but dropped it in her lap. She bent her head and her shoulders shook.

The sound of her sobs tore at Caroline, and she threw both arms around the woman.

"Ohhh, no. No. Shhh. He's not worthy, remember? You're safe now. Put this on, and come with me, and we'll get you looked after. Shhh, now." She murmured more words of comfort, soft and low, and rocked the woman in her arms. "What's your name?"

"Jayna."

"I'm Caroline." She helped the other woman get to her feet.

Jayna looked down at her hands. They had swollen below the tight plastic tie, and her fingers were grotesquely inflated. "I don't think I can manage the shirt."

Caroline helped Jayna dress, doing up the buttons for her as if the woman were her young niece back in Denver.

She pointed to the right, past the thin line of shrubs beside the grass of the bowling lawns. "My car is there. And my phone, so I can call for help. Can you walk that far?"

Jayna straightened up. She winced with pain, but said, "I can walk to hell if it helps catch that fucker."

With Caroline's arm around Jayna's waist, the women trudged up the track to the street, to light and to the safety of other people.

* *

The bright fluorescent lights in the hospital corridor beat against Caroline's closed eyelids. She rested her head against the wall, one forearm over her eyes, and tried to ignore the way the hard back of the plastic chair dug into her neck. Above her, a clock ticked in time with the throb of her headache. The acrid scent of disinfectant mingled with the greasy smell of someone's food.

She had been unable to refuse Jayna's plea that she come to the hospital, although hospitals meant one thing to Caroline: Niall in intensive care, the white bandages stark against his dark hair, the whoosh of the ventilator lifting his chest. She had clasped his hand for an hour, willing him to live and watching as his life drained away.

"Excuse me."

The voice tugged her thoughts back to the present. She lowered her arm and turned in her chair.

The man who sat beside her, with thinning hair and pouched eyes, had the strained look of someone who had already worked a long day. He might have been a doctor, but she knew he was police.

"Do I know you?" he said.

Caroline had spent the last 30 minutes reliving the morning that Niall died – and now she was faced with this man. "You were in charge of the investigation into my husband's death, Detective Inspector McGraw."

He frowned, eyes unfocused. She could almost see his brain ticking through cases.

“Hit and run. July, 18 months ago.” His brown eyes met hers, no longer impersonal. “I regret that we never found the driver who killed your husband, Mrs Bready.”

Regret. What a paltry, insignificant word. It came nowhere near to describing Caroline’s need to face the killer of her husband, to extract revenge. “So do I,” she said.

His frown returned. “And...you found the victim tonight? Is that right?”

“I didn’t find Jayna. I happened to be there when she came out of the bushes,” Caroline said.

“You happened to be there. Why? Why were you on the cliffs by the ocean at midnight? Alone, apparently?”

“Yes, Inspector, I was alone!” What was he implying? “I was taking photos of the moon.”

Two dark eyebrows flew up in what seemed to be genuine surprise. “Why?”

“My photography class. We had an assignment to take low-light photos. I thought that would be a good spot.” Even to Caroline, it sounded ridiculous when spoken aloud.

“There is low light on those cliffs, I’ll give you that,” he said. “I don’t suppose you have the photos with you?”

She pointed to the camera case and tripod at her feet. “Do you want to see them?”

“Yes.”

“They’re not very good, I’m afraid. I’m a beginner.”

He let out a low whistle of appreciation at the sight of the camera and lenses nestled inside the bag. “You have excellent equipment for a beginner.”

“They were Niall’s. That’s why I went to the cliffs tonight. Niall and I went once, during a full moon. He took marvelous photos then. I didn’t know it would be so hard.” She stroked one fingertip along the barrel of a lens. “A...friend suggested I should learn how to use them, rather than sell them.” Was Reece still her friend? Would he ever speak to her again, after tonight? She wished he was here now.

Played back on the camera’s screen, the photos were not as bad as she expected.

“That one is very good,” Inspector McGraw said, pointing.

“Maybe. They usually look okay on the camera, but not on the computer. And I have no artistic vision.”

“You shouldn’t be so hard on yourself. It takes years to learn how to use cameras like this, let alone to acquire, ah, artistic vision.” Light amusement lifted his face and for a moment he seemed less remote.

“That’s what my blogger friends say. I have a photo blog,” she said.

“So have I. Black-and-white shots only. I have no artistic vision, either.”

Caroline started to laugh at his admission, and then felt ashamed for laughing with Jayna so near. Even so, she could not suppress a yawn. “Sorry,” she said.

The inspector slipped his notebook into his jacket pocket. “We don’t need to do this right now. I have your statement from the sergeant. Tomorrow morning I’ll go to the scene, to see it in daylight, and I can stop by your apartment.” He gave her a small smile of sympathy. “I’m sure you’ve had enough of police stations.”

She hated police stations as much as she hated hospitals, and for the same reason. “Every time I see one, I’m reminded of that day.”

He nodded his understanding. “There’s another thing – I’m not with the Eastern Suburbs LAC any more. I transferred to Eastern Beaches a month ago. You would have to go to Randwick to attend at the station.”

She had no idea what he meant by LAC, and told him so.

“The state of New South Wales is divided into a number of police local area commands,” explained McGraw. “Bronte – where your husband was killed – comes under Eastern Suburbs. Clovelly is Eastern Beaches.”

“But Bronte and Clovelly are both Sydney suburbs. They’re right beside each other!” She thought the division was crazy.

He shrugged. “The boundaries must be drawn somewhere. Good night, Mrs Bready.”

By the time a constable had driven Caroline back to where her car was parked, and she had driven home, she was stupefied with tiredness. She managed to avoid scraping a van as she maneuvered into a gap between parked cars on the street, but she knew it was due more to luck than to skill.

She was forced to walk half a block along the sidewalk, hemmed in on one side by parked cars and on the other by fences or hedges. Old gum trees lining both sides of the street formed an arch overhead; it was enchanting in the morning as dappled light played around her feet, but now it was threatening.

Her nerves jangled with each twitch of a leaf. She imagined assailants behind every tree and car. A dark shape ghosted overhead and a moment later branches began to thrash.

Calm down, it's a flying fox, she told herself.

Then, behind her, came the sound of a car door opening and closing. Footsteps grew louder. Without looking back, Caroline sprinted up the stairs to her building's front door, fumbling for her keys.

A hand fell on her shoulder. She shrieked, and then swung the heavy tripod at the figure looming behind her.

* * * *

Chapter 2

“CHRIST, CAROLINE! First you headbutt me, and now you try to take my head off with a tripod!”

She was dizzy with relief. “Reece! Oh, Reece, I’m so glad to see you!” She hurled herself at him.

Reece caught her in his arms. “Where have you been all this time? I’ve been waiting for hours to apologize for being such an inconsiderate brute. It’s not easy for a man to be rejected *in flagrante delicto*, but I should not have been so harsh or said such things about your husband. I know how much you loved him. Please forgive me.”

“No, I’m the one who has to apologize! I’m sorry, so sorry! I should never have acted like that.” She nestled closer, thankful for his solid, warm presence. “It was so awful, Reece.”

“What was?” His lips trailed along her temple.

“I went down by the ocean to take photos of the moon. By the lawn bowls club. Do you remember, a couple of months ago, we walked over the cliff tops before we had lunch in Bronte, and I showed you that path behind the club? Oh Reece, a woman was raped there tonight! Right there! I saw the light and didn’t know what it meant!”

She felt him stiffen, and then he stepped back and stared at her with an expression of shocked horror.

“You were there?” His voice sounded strangled.

“I found her and called the police, and then I went to the hospital with her. Poor Jayna. He tied her up and gagged her. He hurt her. He had a knife.” She remembered seeing Jayna in bright light for the first time, those bloodied tracers on her chest and belly and thighs. That psychopath had drawn the point of his knife over her skin, in deliberate lines.

“Jayna?”

“That’s her name.”

Reece slid his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “But you’re alright?”

She nodded against his shoulder.

“Good. Open these doors, and I’ll walk you to your apartment and then go. You need sleep.”

She shook her head. “No.”

“No?”

“I mean, yes, I need sleep. But I don’t want you to go.” She tipped her head to look into his eyes. “I want you to stay, and make love to me.”

He regarded her with a searching gaze. “Are you very sure, Caroline? I would rather not be headbutted again!” His laugh lightened his accusation. “But more importantly, you’re upset right now, and it would be wrong of me to take advantage of that. You must be sure.”

His bare forearms beneath her fingers were cool in the night air. “Yes! I’m sure. I don’t want to be alone!”

Reece’s smile was slow and wide. “Then I will stay.”

* *

McGraw looked down at the water to his right. It was only 8am, but swimmers plowed their way from one end of Clovelly inlet to the other, beach to breakwater and back again. By noon, the concrete slabs and boulders that surrounded the inlet would be littered with sun worshippers, and the water would be so full of snorkelers that they would bump into each other. But it looked inviting now, the ocean sparking in the clear sunshine of a hot summer morning. He could imagine the cold brush of water on his skin, the sharp taste of salt on his lips.

One swimmer caught his eye, a man, slicing with powerful and economical strokes through the untamed waves of the ocean beyond the breakwater. McGraw watched the flash of his arms and the timed turn of his head as he breathed, until

the swimmer surged over the breakwater and angled toward the steps set into the side of the inlet. McGraw nodded his admiration for such prowess.

He turned his back on temptation and surveyed the sports field. Blue-and-white tape blocked off the north end of the field and the cliffs, giving the crime scene an incongruously festive air as it fluttered in the ocean breeze. He could see little of the bowls club, screened from the sports field by trees and shrubs. McGraw began to walk across the grass, aiming for the far corner where the white fence marked the cliff edge. He skirted the crowd that had gathered to watch.

When he reached the corner, he ducked under the tape. He recognized the uniformed constable on guard duty and nodded a greeting to him.

“Morning, boss,” said the constable.

“Hello, Harry,” said McGraw. He pointed at the crowd. “Are they behaving themselves?”

“Oh yes, sir. The usual bunch of thrill-seekers and rubbernecks. A couple with cameras,” Harry said with disgust. He pointed to the left, and added, “There’s a few on that cliff too. By the white pyramid thing.”

McGraw looked toward the “white pyramid thing,” which he thought was an old trig point used years ago for surveying. As Harry had said, a small group of people jostled for a view. He saw the glint of sun on a camera lens.

“Send someone over there to keep them away from the edge, Harry. A fall is the last thing we need.”

The constable nodded. “Will do, sir.”

McGraw planted one foot on the lower rail and swung over the fence. It must have posed an obstacle for the attacker; but a knife, he knew, was a very effective means of persuasion. A path squeezed between high shrubs and the jagged cliff edge. He peered down at the slabs of fallen cliff that had piled up over millennia, and hoped that the slab on which he stood would not choose today to fall.

He spotted DS Chen further along the path. He had known Chen only by reputation before he transferred to Randwick: the sergeant was said to be thorough, if humorless.

McGraw caught his foot on a loose rock, and as it skidded across the sandstone Chen turned toward the sound.

“Hell of a spot to rape someone, sir,” he said with a grimace. “It’s a miracle neither of them ended up in the ocean.”

Is there a good spot to rape someone? McGraw wondered. Aloud, he said, “What do we have, Dennis?”

The sergeant shrugged. “Her clothes and shoes, that’s it. You can see they’re looking everywhere.” He waved at the forensic science team examining the bushes and plants.

“Leaving no stone unturned,” said McGraw.

Chen nodded. “There too.” If he realized McGraw was making a joke, he ignored it.

McGraw sighed, and tugged his hat lower over his forehead. The sunlight did nothing to ease the ache behind his eyes.

“No sign of the knife.” The sergeant paused, and added, “Or of the other things. Though there never is.”

Thorough, indeed, thought McGraw. It seemed they had read the same reports.

He glanced at the younger man, but saw only a distorted image of himself reflected in Chen’s sunglasses. “Let’s not make assumptions, Dennis.”

“No, sir.”

“Oh!” exclaimed a woman.

McGraw and Chen turned at the sound of her voice. A few feet away, a member of the forensic science team crouched beside a thorny bush. They walked to her side, their shoes rasping over the bare stone.

“What is it?” asked McGraw.

“Maybe nothing, sir. I hope it’s nothing.” There was apprehension in her voice. “Just a playing card. But it looks brand new, not like it’s been here for any length of time.”

This was what McGraw had expected, and had dreaded, since last night. His words to the sergeant had been false hope, nothing more. He pushed a branch aside and leaned closer. The sun seared his shoulders through his shirt, like scores of tiny knives ripping his skin. The card was the queen of diamonds. It was caught in a tangle of thin vines, perhaps blown by the wind. With the side of his finger, he nudged the card over so he could see the back.

“Redback spider, sir?” asked Chen. He sounded like a man who wanted very much to be wrong.

McGraw straightened. The ache behind his eyes throbbed with his heartbeat. He nodded, once.

“That beast has come to Sydney, then,” said Chen.

* *

Niall was moving around the bedroom. From the muted sounds, she could tell that he was trying not to wake her. Caroline rolled over and felt the warm spot where his body had lain beside hers.

“What are you doing?” she murmured. “Come back to bed.”

“I can’t. Diane will be back in a few hours and I must get home.”

Diane. Reece’s wife was named Diane.

Reality and memory crashed in on Caroline, and she pitched once more into the black void of Niall’s loss.

There were a few moments every day when Caroline felt happy, precious seconds in that gray nether world before she woke fully, before she remembered that Niall was dead. And then it would come back to her, and happiness would swirl away like rain down a storm drain.

But, oh, the particular cruelty of this morning, to hear Reece and to think it was Niall!

At least she hadn’t called him “Niall.”

Steeling her face to hide her feelings, she opened her eyes to look at Reece. His back was to her as he bent down to tie his shoe laces.

“You snore,” he said over his shoulder, with faint accusation.

Niall had teased her about that for years; Reece seemed to find it less endearing. But it was an easier criticism to deal with than mistaking your lover for your husband. “Sorry,” said Caroline. “I don’t do it on purpose.”

Reece straightened up. Hands resting lightly on his hips, he looked at her, his gaze travelling over her sheet-covered body from her toes to her head. Caroline patted her hair in an attempt to smooth the spikes.

“Oh no you don’t!” Reece laughed and leaned over to muss her hair with a vigorous scrubbing of his hands.

“Just like an echidna,” he said, and kissed her forehead.

She had seen an echidna at Sydney’s zoo, and did not consider the comparison with one of Australia’s odder animals to be flattering. “No one’s ever compared me to a spiny bug-eater before,” she said. “And I’m not sure I like it now.”

“Then you shouldn’t have cut your hair. I liked it long.” The accusatory tone was back in his voice.

Niall had liked it long too. He would run his fingers through the golden waves that fell down her back, would roll her on top of him and tent their joined bodies in the gossamer strands of her hair.

A year ago, when she could no longer bear yet one more reminder of what had been taken from her, Caroline had marched into a hair salon and demanded a cut that hugged her head and curved around her ears.

“Sorry,” she said, again.

Reece’s blue eyes, so pale they were a cool gray, rested on her. There was no expression she could read on his face, and she wondered what he was thinking. Then, like a light coming on, his mouth widened into a broad smile and lines sprang up around his eyes as he laughed.

“Goose!” said Reece. “It’s your hair, you can cut it as you please. You look wonderful either way.”

“First I’m an echidna, now I’m a goose! And I know perfectly well that ‘wonderful’ does not describe how I look in the morning.” There was tartness in her voice, but how could she stay annoyed with him when he looked at her with the same teasing warmth that had made her like him in the first place?

“You are a veritable zoo of womanhood. I mean that in the best possible way,” Reece said. “But I do have to leave.”

“Good, or you’ll be finding even less flattering animals to describe me!”

His kiss was brief, but firm. “See you in the office tomorrow.”

“See you,” she replied with a smile.

He left.

She lay back against the pillows. So, she had done it. Taken one more step on the road to a life on her own; one more step away from Niall.

Caroline had no illusions that she was the first woman with whom Reece had been involved outside of his marriage, and she doubted that she would be the last: he was too smooth in his pursuit of her, too charming when it suited. When she had learned that Reece’s wife was a flight attendant and therefore away frequently, her first thought had been that it was a very convenient arrangement for him.

Convenient for Caroline also, it turned out, because she had missed a man’s company and the feel of a strong hand holding hers. She had missed sex, too, even if last night had not been quite what she had expected. The first time had been

quick, and more for his pleasure than for hers. The second time, Reece had been gentler and more considerate. Her body had responded and she still felt the glow of repletion.

She hugged a pillow in her arms and stared through the sliding glass door to the terrace. Caroline wasn't sure what she felt for Reece, but she knew she wasn't ready for another intense relationship. Certainly not one with a married man.

It was the fact that Reece did have a wife that had finally persuaded her to give in to his urging. At some point, it had become easier to agree to a drink after work than to refuse him, again. From drinks it was a short step to dinner, once or twice a week when his wife was out of town. His wife was Caroline's safety net, for Reece could demand no commitment from Caroline, could not pressure her to give more than she was willing to give.

The shrilling of her cell phone jolted Caroline from her thoughts. She stretched out an arm for her phone on the bedside table, expecting to see Reece's name on the screen, but it was an unknown caller.

"Hello?"

"Mrs Bready, this is Detective Inspector Horace McGraw. I'm calling to arrange a time to drop by." There was a pause, during which he probably expected her to speak, but she couldn't think of what she should say. "Last night, at the hospital? I said I would come over this morning?"

"Oh yes! I'm sorry, detective, uh, inspector, I just woke up." She was afraid that admission would make her seem like a sluggard who spent all Sunday lounging in bed, but to her relief the alarm clock showed a respectable 9:15am.

"Would 10 o'clock suit you, Mrs Bready?"

"That's fine. See you then."

Fifteen minutes later, showered and dressed, Caroline settled down in front of her computer to wait for McGraw. She held the camera's memory card in her fingers. Those moon shots needed editing, even though her impulse was to erase them. They would always remind her of Jayna and last night.

With a sense of reprieve, she decided to check her blog instead. Exchanging comments with her blogging buddies would offer a few minutes of distraction before the interview with McGraw. She had done no more than scan the list of new posts and 'like' two photos, however, before the intercom sounded. As she pushed back the chair, she saw the notification icon flash up a new comment.

She hurried over to the intercom and buzzed McGraw in. If she were quick, she could read the comment while he climbed the four flights of stairs.

However, she needed nowhere near that long to read it. The comment was two words: "Centennial Park."

She typed an exasperated reply. "Oh thanks, that narrows it down. Not!"

The sound of knocking pulled her to the door. "Come in, Inspector. I'm sorry there's no elevator."

"Quite alright, Mrs Bready." McGraw's attempts to hide his shortness of breath gave his voice a wheezing quality.

She pointed down the hall. "The living room is at the end. Oh, but you know that."

The inspector smiled at her in a polite, professional way and walked to the living room. He sat on the sofa, and she took the small armchair in the corner.

"I apologize for not recognizing you at the hospital, Mrs Bready. It has been some time since I last saw you. Last night, my mind was on other matters," said McGraw. His gaze drifted to the photographs on the opposite wall, and then back to her. "And I remember you with much longer hair."

She laughed. "I sometimes don't recognize myself when I look in a mirror! I feel like a sheep after shearing. But it sure is easier to manage."

McGraw glanced again at the wall, and then rose to his feet to cross to the row of large photographs that had caught his attention. They stretched the full length of the room. "These photos weren't here before, were they? I'm sure I would have noticed them."

Caroline stood beside him. "No. They were with the printer when...then. It was months before I could bring myself to put them up."

"Your husband took them." It was not a question.

She didn't trust herself to speak, and nodded.

The photographs, some in color and some in black and white, some muted and some vibrant, were all of her.

"Do you think it's showing off? Like I'm saying, 'Look at me!'" Before he could answer, she rushed on with, "That's not why I displayed them. But it was such a beautiful day, and we had so much fun. Seeing them on the wall reminds me of that."

“No, I don’t think you’re showing off. You are an attractive woman; that’s a fact. Why pretend you’re not? And in these photographs, your love for your husband is clear. I don’t think you would look at just any photographer with that expression.” He pointed to the photo that was her favorite, taken at Gordon’s Bay: she stood by the line of upturned boats along the rocky shore, her long hair and pale sweater gleaming against the blue of the ocean. Niall had done something in the processing so that the colors were faded and flat, except for the green of her eyes which glowed with such intensity that they looked like illuminated jade.

As if he had read her thoughts, McGraw pointed. “How do you think he did that? So much color in your eyes, so little elsewhere?”

She shrugged, and laughed. “You’re asking the wrong person! I can’t even take a photo of the moon, remember?”

“Were none of them any good?”

“I couldn’t bring myself to look. All I can see is Jayna.”

She had almost forgotten why he was here and that he was a policeman, but at her words his expression changed and he nodded.

“Yes. Let’s talk about that.” McGraw moved back to his seat on the sofa and took out his notebook.

Caroline trailed after him, wishing they could return to the subject of photography, or the weather; anything but last night. She sat down and then to her embarrassment she yawned. “I’m so sorry! I’m tired.” She rubbed at her eyes. “I must look awful.”

McGraw regarded her for a moment, and then he shook his head. “No, you don’t look tired. You look like…” His voice trailed away and his head turned to the closed bedroom door. “Excuse me. I didn’t realize you were not alone. I’ll make this as quick as I can.”

She felt the sudden blush in her cheeks as mortification ran through her, hot and fast, followed by disbelief. He couldn’t possibly tell by looking at her that she’d had sex last night! Could he?

“There’s no one here, Inspector,” she said.

His eyes betrayed the doubt he did not voice. “Your private life does not interest me,” he said, “unless it has a bearing on the case, Mrs Bready.”

“Call me Caroline,” she said, with unintended abruptness.

Her surname had been Bready for almost ten years. Using Niall’s name was as comforting as being wrapped in his arms had been, but guilt made her feel uneasy to be called “Mrs Bready” in the same sentence as a reference to her private life. “When you say ‘Mrs Bready,’ I think you mean my mother-in-law,” she said, trying to make light of it.

She lost her bravado in the face of his ongoing silence, and dropped her gaze to her hands. “You must think I’m terrible. So soon, I mean.”

“I think you deserve love as much as anyone else, Caroline.”

She wondered if it would make things better or worse to say that love might have little to do with her and Reece.

McGraw shifted on the sofa, and glanced at his notebook. He cleared his throat. “I walked over those cliff tops this morning. By the old trig point, if that’s what it is. That’s only a few feet from the edge! What possessed you to go out there at night?”

“I told you, to photograph the moon.”

“There are safer places to take photos,” he said.

“I know. But I love sitting up there watching the ocean, and that’s the spot that came to mind. I told you I went there with Niall during a full moon. Last night, I was… I had a disagreement with my, um—” she had no idea how to describe Reece, and waved toward the bedroom, feeling her cheeks flame again, “and I wanted to get out of here. It seemed like a good idea at the time.”

McGraw’s pen hovered over the notebook, but he did not pursue that comment. “What time did you arrive?”

“Around 10pm, I guess,” she said. “I took photos for an hour, and then I sat on the rocks and watched the moon on the water for a while.”

“Did you hear anything?”

Caroline shook her head. “Only the surf. And Jayna had that tape over her mouth. She couldn’t have screamed.” She remembered the spot of light that dipped and nodded along the cliff edge. “I saw a flashlight! I think it was a flashlight. A light, anyway, moving along the path.”

He looked at her sharply. “That’s not in your statement.”

“I forgot about it. It was such a small thing. A moving light. I thought it was teenagers or tourists.”

“What time? Going which way?”

She fingered the pendant at her neck. “Maybe...30 minutes before I left? Just before I started packing up. The light was heading away from me. Do you think it was them?”

“Probably. Jayna did say he had a headlamp.”

“How is she? Last night, she wanted me to visit her today. Do you think I should?” A cowardly part of Caroline hoped his answer would be “no.” What on earth would she say to Jayna?

“If she still wants you to, yes. I suggest you check with the hospital. Jayna may not feel up to it.”

“When I saw her last night, in the ambulance, in the light...” Caroline’s voice trailed away and she looked down at her entwined fingers. “I wanted to cry. She was braver than I was. Stronger.”

There was an unexpected softness in McGraw’s voice when he said, “Even strong people have their limits. I don’t mean only physically strong.”

She nodded, still seeing Jayna, bleeding and bruised but her eyes flashing fury. Caroline’s head came up, and she stared at McGraw. “Find him, Inspector.”

He made a sound of sharp impatience. “We are trying to do just that. Police forces around the country have been trying, for years, to find him.”

“What do you mean?”

“Everything about this assault indicates that this is the same man who has been attacking women along the east coast for four years. We won’t know for certain until the DNA tests are done.”

The brush of fear was like a cold draft on the back of her neck. “You mean a serial rapist? In Sydney?”

“This is his first attack in Sydney. The first that we know of,” McGraw said, correcting himself. “He has attacked six women in four states in the past four years. Seven women, now.”

“Four years? And you still haven’t caught him?”

He flinched, perhaps at the disbelief and outrage in her voice, and then leaned forward with his elbows on his knees, his eyes holding hers.

“He strikes at night. In a deserted area. He covers his head with a black balaclava – the women have never even been able to see the color of his eyes. He wears gloves. He never speaks. He gags them with a handkerchief and tapes their mouths. He binds their hands behind their backs with a cable tie. He is of average height, and average build. He uses a knife. He’s a psychopath who hurts women, and makes fools of us. He leaves us a marker, every time: a playing card with a redback spider on the back. And no, we have not caught him!” McGraw’s voice had been rising throughout this speech, and he almost shouted the last words at her.

He slumped back against the sofa. “I’m sorry. That was out of line. I’m frustrated and angry, and the idea of him here, in Sydney...”

But his apology barely registered with Caroline. “I read about him! A few months ago. The Redback Rapist, the newspaper called him. I remember thinking what a sicko he was, and being glad he never came to Sydney. That’s selfish, I know.”

“I’m just as selfish,” said McGraw. “My daughter is 24. The thought of her coming home at night, alone, after a few drinks...”

On impulse, Caroline leaned forward and touched his hand. “She will be fine. What’s her name?”

“Olivia.” He hesitated, then said, “Our relationship is...strained. But improving, I hope.”

She gave him a smile of sympathy. “What does Olivia do?”

“Television, of all things!” He shook his head in wonder. “Ever since she was small, she wanted to be a TV reporter. Absolutely determined. After university, the only job she could find was in New Zealand. That led to an offer a few months ago from a station here in Sydney.”

“You must be glad she’s back,” Caroline said.

“Yes.” He flashed her a look of apology. “Listen to me, going on about my daughter. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t mind. I’ll watch for her on the news!”

McGraw smiled, and then rubbed his hands over his head and leaned back, stretching.

“Would you like a coffee?” asked Caroline, noting how tired he looked. “I don’t suppose you got much sleep last night.”

His short laugh was lacking in humor. “No, not much. And unlike you, I do look awful, but I’m no beauty queen at the best of times. I would like a coffee very much. Thank you.”

She hesitated, remembering her colleagues’ obsession with coffee that came from complicated machines with Italian-sounding names. “I’m sorry, all I have is instant coffee. Is that okay?”

“If it has caffeine, it’s more than okay.”

As she walked down the hall, his voice wafted after her. “Two spoonfuls!”

While she waited for the water to boil, Caroline gazed out the window at the heat shimmering from the roof of a neighboring building, and thought about Horace McGraw. He had not registered on her as a person when they’d met 18 months ago. He had been no more than the police officer looking into Niall’s death, and she had been too consumed by grief, too focused on herself, to notice him. As the months wore on and the case remained unsolved, she’d had less and less to do with McGraw. She guessed he was in his early 50s, a few pounds overweight and with the soft look of someone who rarely got enough exercise, but she doubted that he always looked so drawn and tense.

Caroline wondered why his relationship with his daughter was strained. Then she thought of her own father, and remembered how she had blamed him for her parents’ divorce when she was 15. It would be safe to describe those years as “strained” too. Maybe it was similar with McGraw and Olivia.

She stirred the coffees, and then paused. All that caffeine on an empty stomach would do him no good. She reached for the loaf of banana bread.

In the hall again, she balanced the tray against one hip and pushed open the bedroom door. Maybe it wasn’t important, and maybe he did believe her, but she wanted McGraw to see the open curtains and the neatly made – and very empty – bed.

When she entered the living room, she found him bending over the desk to see the computer screen.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve been looking at your blog posts,” McGraw said. “I noticed that close-up of a frangipani flower with rain drops, and wanted to see more.”

She did mind, momentarily, but told herself not to be silly; it wasn’t as though he were searching her apartment. And hadn’t she opened the bedroom door precisely to reveal more about herself? “No, that’s fine. It’s a public blog, anyone can see it.” She wanted to ask what he thought of her photographs, but was afraid he would say they were terrible, or, worse, would pretend they were not. “How long have you had a blog, Inspector?”

“A couple of years. It takes my mind off work.” He sipped his coffee. “And it reminds me that I should stick with what I’m good at. Policing, not photographing.”

His words so mirrored her thoughts that she smiled. “I’m sure you’re better than you think.”

“Compared with a number of other bloggers, I’m rubbish. I discovered one a few weeks ago who does black-and-white shots in Sydney. There’s no information about the photographer, not even a name. It could be anyone, man or woman. Here, look.” He bent down to type in the browser’s address window, and a photo blog took shape. Lettered across the top were the words *nero su bianco*.

“What does *nero su bianco* mean?” she asked.

“In black and white. It’s Italian.”

The photographs were striking compositions of darkest blacks and blown-out whites, deliberately over-exposed. “That’s a good name,” she said.

“Most of the photos are black and white, like this one, but some also have splashes of a single color. It’s a very strong look.” McGraw sounded like he admired the technique.

The first photograph had been taken at a busy city intersection, where impatient pedestrians waited to cross the street. Her attention was drawn to a young woman smiling down at the baby in her arms; they were in sharp focus, but the other people and the buildings were blurred to varying degrees. Blurred, but recognizable. “That’s the corner by my office building!”

There was no reply.

“Inspector?” She twisted to look at him over her shoulder.

He was staring with still intensity at the screen. “That corner isn’t the only identifiable thing in the photograph, Caroline.”

She scanned the photo, but didn't understand what he meant. "What else?"
Caroline felt the brush of warmth from his body as he leaned closer to point.
"You. That's you."

* * * *

Chapter 3

THE SHIVER THAT RAN through Caroline when she heard Inspector McGraw's words had nothing to do with the air conditioning.

"It is me!" Her fingers tightened on the edge of the desk. "But...it's coincidence. It must be. Like I said, that's beside my building. I go out for lunch almost every day. It could have been anyone in that photo. It was no more than luck that I there."

His unblinking gaze crumbled the wall of reassurance she had erected.

"Go back through the posts," he instructed. "Are you in any others?"

The shiver turned into goosebumps, but obediently she clicked from one post to the next, going back in time. The photographer did not post often, and always a single image. One black-and-white scene of people in Sydney gave way to another, some with a splash of color as McGraw had said.

"No sign of me. It has to be coincidence."

"Do you remember seeing someone taking photos that day?"

Her breath escaped in a rush of exasperation. "What day? I cross that street every day! But no, I've never noticed."

"What software do you use to edit your photographs?"

The abrupt switch of topic took her by surprise. "What...uh, Photoshop. But I'm not very good with it. This is Niall's computer. My laptop doesn't have image-editing software."

"Go back to that photo with you, right-click it – no, stop. There's no point."

Her small sigh reflected her confusion.

He said, "I had thought of using Photoshop to check the file information, but the blogger could have altered it. You may be right. It's probably a coincidence."

For her own peace of mind, Caroline wished she could believe that he believed it was coincidence. She knew she would check that blog every day now, and scan the crowds around her office building for a person with a camera. Was it a man, or a woman?

She looked again at the photo. She wasn't in focus, not like the mother and baby; they were the ones the photographer was interested in, not her. Other people around her were just as visible, and just as blurred, as she was. It was nothing but a coincidence.

McGraw's finger hove into view again as he pointed to the top right corner of the screen. "You have a new comment."

Her concern about the chance photograph vanished. "Oh! Can I read it now? I'll be quick! I'm waiting to hear about something."

McGraw laughed, and lifted his mug of coffee. "Go ahead. I think the investigation can spare a few more seconds. We're off topic as it is."

A few seconds were all Caroline needed to realize this comment was no more help than the first one. "Do you know Centennial Park very well, Inspector?"

"Reasonably well. Why?"

"One of the bloggers I follow is another Sydneysider. Most of his photos are detailed close-ups of birds and insects, but he sometimes posts scenes around Sydney." She was reminded of that other photographer, and faltered. But no, McGraw's blogger's images were black and white, picking out individuals in crowds. Her blogger's photos were full of light and color, and rarely had people in them.

She clicked on a link and beckoned McGraw closer. "He posted this one of a cute statue of a boy and a dog. I asked him where it is, and he wouldn't tell me! He said he'd give me clues and I would have to find it myself. All I know is that it's in Centennial Park. Do you recognize it?"

McGraw nodded. "Do you want me to tell you where the statue is? Or give you more clues?"

She considered. “Neither, I guess. If you say it’s there, I believe you. I can track it down.”

“It’s a big park,” said McGraw.

“I’ll pack a lunch. Take a GPS. Maybe leave a trail of breadcrumbs.”

His next words punctured her playfulness. “Be sure you’re out of there long before dark. Stay in sight of other people at all times.”

Caroline swallowed, and nodded.

“Do you know this man? The blogger?”

She shook her head. “Not in person. You know how it is, Inspector. You become friends with all sorts of other bloggers but never actually meet them. He doesn’t have a photo of himself on his blog. All I know is that he lives in Sydney and his name is Janus. What nationality do you think that is? Eastern European?”

McGraw pointed to the logo on the blog: a man’s head with two faces, each looking in opposite directions. “Possibly. Although Janus was the Roman god of beginnings and the future. He was usually depicted like this.”

“You mean the blogger’s name isn’t Janus?” A thought came to her. “He may not even be a he!”

“Janus might not be what you imagine,” McGraw said.

“I don’t imagine anything!”

The small smile on McGraw’s face told her he knew that wasn’t quite the truth, but he let it rest. Instead, he gestured with a slice of banana bread and said, “This is excellent, thank you. It’s the first food I’ve had since yesterday. Did you make it?”

She laughed. “No way! Nola made it. All the Bready family are baking fanatics, whereas the best I can manage is not to burn toast. Niall used to make Danish pastries for the heck of it, can you believe that? Nola specializes in loafy things like this.”

“Nola?”

“My sister-in-law. Niall’s sister. They were fraternal twins, actually. She’s the older one.”

He was doodling in his notebook, or maybe actually taking notes, although she couldn’t imagine how this could be important.

“Do you see his family often?” he asked.

“Once a month, I guess. Is that often? Niall’s parents live in Normanhurst, up near Hornsby, although Nola’s family is in St Leonards, which is closer. Slightly closer.” She scowled at the thought of the long drives required to visit her in-laws. “Nola is the one I see most. She goes to my photography class too, though I think it’s to give me moral support. She prefers to use her phone camera.”

He smiled. “So does my daughter.” He stared at his notebook for a moment, and then in a different tone he said, “Your husband’s case is not closed. I haven’t forgotten.”

“No. Neither have I.” Niall’s face came to her, so white that she could see the veins threading across his temples, and the sooty slashes of his dark eyebrows; Niall, in the hospital, dying. “But after so long, Inspector, what could happen? You traced the car, found out it had been stolen, but nothing about the driver. It’s like the car drove itself.”

His mouth tightened and he shook his head – in frustration, she thought, rather than in denial.

“I can’t promise you anything, Caroline. I wanted you to know that we haven’t given up.” He glanced at his watch. “I should be going. If you remember anything new about last night, no matter how insignificant it seems, get in touch.”

She took the card he held out, and put it beside her computer. “I will. I wish I could help! I wish I knew something that would lead you to that man!”

“Perhaps you do, but don’t know it yet,” he replied, as they walked to the door. “May I ask you something?”

She gave him a sidelong glance. “Isn’t that what you’ve been doing?”

“Something personal.”

“Oh. Alright.”

The entranceway was narrow, and he turned to face her. “After your husband’s death, why didn’t you return to America? Go back to your family – go home?”

She looked down at the floor, at her bare feet, and wondered how to explain. “For me, home was wherever Niall was. I didn’t want to move to Australia in the first place, but Sydney was his hometown and he wanted to come back. So I did. Then he died. I have no reason to leave Sydney, and no reason to stay. Inertia keeps me here.”

“But you have friends here now, and his family? You have a job, and interests, like your photography. You have a life,” said McGraw.

How could she explain it to him? “Most of the time, it feels more like I’m going through the motions of having a life. Like I’m watching someone else, behind a curtain, rather than taking part myself.”

“Sometimes you do take part, though, don’t you? Something gets through, and you’re you again. But then you remember. So you close the curtain. Then you feel guilty for having taken part, as if it were a betrayal.”

She marveled that he could describe it so well, and then she understood. “Your wife?”

“Twelve years ago. Cancer. I spent many years after her death not taking part. It was very hard on Olivia.” The brush of his hand against hers was so fleeting that she might have imagined it. “I hope you tear down that curtain and find a life again.”

“Even if it means leaving Niall behind?”

“He is dead. There’s no need for you to die too.”

She leaned one shoulder against the wall. “I tell myself that. I don’t always believe it. But I do think I’m taking part, really taking part, more often than I did. The blog helps. All those people from all around the world, strangers, who don’t even know about Niall so don’t think they have to tiptoe around his death.”

He nodded, and with a smile he glanced at the open bedroom door. “That will likely help, too.”

To her annoyance, she felt a blush warm her cheeks again.

McGraw opened the door and stepped into the corridor. He looked back at her. “Never feel guilty about being alive, Caroline.”

* *

It was stuffy inside the car. He cracked open the window, enough to allow air to enter but not enough to attract the attention of passersby. The hot air that oozed in was heavy with that peculiarly Australian scent of gum trees in the sun. Even after two years in the country, he did not expect to smell that in the city.

He knew he should go. He had been parked outside her building for almost an hour. Eventually, someone walking past – singleton or couple or family – would notice the man inside the car. He might as well be standing in the middle of the street for all the camouflage the tinted windows offered.

Perhaps he was wasting his time. He could see her car, but that didn’t mean she was here. She could have walked anywhere local – the parks, the stores, the beach.

Hand on the ignition, he took one last look at her building. The instinct honed from long years of hunting other men, and being hunted by them, had him ducking down before conscious thought could form.

It can’t be him.

He inched his head up again until his eyes cleared the window sill.

It was the man from the cliff tops: the police officer to whom the others had deferred. What was he doing in her building?

It might be coincidence. The man might live here. Or know someone who lived here, someone else.

Yes, and a squadron of pigs might do a flypast over the harbor one day, too.

He hadn’t survived 20 years as a commando in the Royal Marines by believing in coincidences.

He took a quick photo of the man with his phone, and then slid down onto the seat. There was no need to draw attention to himself with that policeman around. He retrieved his camera from the footwell of the passenger seat and brought up the photos he had taken earlier, after his swim. The image on the phone was badly focused, but held beside the camera’s screen, there was no doubt: it was the same man.

Now what? he wondered, and glanced at her building. He immediately looked down again.

She was standing just feet from his car.

He allowed 10 seconds to tick past on his watch before he looked up. She had passed his car and was walking toward her own. A gust of wind flattened her short dress, red with white polka dots, molding it to her body. He could see the curves of her bottom, and the way her hand reached behind to smooth the dress.

He imagined it was his hand, both hands, cupping her round bottom and pulling her body against his. He could feel her, so small and slim, pressed against him. She was so much shorter than he was that her nose would touch his breastbone.

And then he imagined her face, the fear and the horror on it, the push of her hands against him as she tried to twist away.

Would she scream?

He didn't think she was the screaming sort, but who knew?

He remembered a hot, humid jungle three years ago, and what he had done. He still woke in the night, sometimes, with the women's screams echoing in his mind.

He shook his head and straightened up. He should go home. He knew it. What he was doing was mad. He felt a vague disgust at himself for doing this, and a vague resentment of her for bringing him to this.

He turned on the ignition. At the corner, he had a choice: left to go home, or right to follow her. Who was he fooling? He had no choice.

She was a careful, rules-abiding driver, and tailing her required little effort. It was nothing like shadowing someone who suspected they were being followed, nothing like driving through the streets of a war-torn city.

He followed her car through the weekend traffic that weaved through the shopping area of Bondi Junction. From her general direction, plus that public exchange of comments on her blog earlier today, he had a good idea of her destination.

Foolish woman, to be so trusting. She would go to the park on the word of a stranger, and risk who knew what. The park was too exposed for him to follow on foot, and when she turned through its ornate gates he continued straight.

His mind circled back to one question.

How does she know the policeman?

* *

Caroline's attempt at parallel parking was better this afternoon than it had been last night, and she breathed a small sigh of relief. She scooped the bottle of wine off the passenger seat and turned toward Nola's house.

"Auntie Caroline!"

Only one person in Australia would call her that. She looked around for Deirdre and spotted her climbing out of a van that had stopped in the street.

"Nice outfit, Deirdre," Caroline said with a smile. "I like it. Simple, yet elegant. That splash of green around your waist sets off the white very nicely."

Deirdre rolled her eyes in response to this witticism, but she hugged Caroline anyway, quick and casual. She tugged the hem of her jacket back into place. "The belt will be blue in a few weeks, just wait."

"Another competition? Haven't you already beaten every other 16-year-old in Sydney?"

"This one's in Newcastle. I'm going to kick some serious ass up there." Deirdre nodded with satisfaction.

Caroline said, "Didn't you tell me that judo was throws and falls, not kicks and chops?"

Deirdre paused, one hand on the gate. "It's, like, an expression, you know? Kick ass?"

"I see."

"Though I could, if I wanted to. Nobody better mess with me!" Deirdre proclaimed, jabbing one thumb toward her chest. "You should learn, Auntie Caroline. Every woman should know how to defend herself. I can teach you an easy throw, if you want."

Caroline laughed. "Deirdre! You're 16, but you're four inches taller than I am!" She looked up into the girl's face, exaggerating the angle – but there was little need to exaggerate. At 5 feet 2 inches, she had not been able to look Deirdre in the eye for two years. "How could I possibly throw you, or anyone else for that matter?"

"It's not what you have, it's what you do with it," replied Deirdre, with the air of reciting a mantra. "Little kids in my group can throw adults, if they get the leverage."

"And they get lucky!" said Caroline.

Deirdre shrugged. "Yeah, that helps. Seriously, did you hear about what happened to that woman last night? That was right near your place!"

The sight of Jayna staggering toward her flashed into Caroline's mind, followed by the sight of Jayna an hour ago, her face a palette of bruises against the white pillows of the hospital bed. "Yes. I heard."

Deirdre closed the front door behind them, and then flung her arms around Caroline again. The girl dispensed hugs as casually as most people shook hands or patted backs, but this hug had uncharacteristic fervor. "You be careful. Okay?"

Deirdre tugged at the jacket again. “After all, you’re my one American relation. You promised to go there with me in my gap year, remember?”

“I will. Be careful, I mean. And go to America with you,” Caroline added. She wondered with amusement what concerned Deirdre the most: her aunt’s safety, or her own holiday.

She snatched for Deirdre’s sleeve as the girl started up the stairs to her bedroom. “You be careful too, Deirdre. Even if you can kick ass. This guy is mean.”

The girl tossed her head so that the long braid of dark hair flopped over one shoulder. “So am I. See you in a few minutes.”

Caroline was continually amazed at Deirdre’s toughness. Niall’s niece had more confidence in herself at 16 than Caroline had at 36. Deirdre had not yet started school when Niall had brought Caroline to Australia to meet his family, when things between them had become serious, but even then Deirdre had known her own mind.

Caroline wondered, again, what their child, her and Niall’s child, might have been like if she hadn’t miscarried four years ago. For all their enthusiastic attempts, she had not become pregnant again. Her hand brushed the polka-dotted dress over her abdomen. She had never even felt the baby move, poor thing.

“Why are you daydreaming at the foot of the stairs?”

She turned at the sound of her brother-in-law’s voice. “Hello, Dan. Sorry. I was miles away.”

Dan shared her own fair coloring, and at family gatherings the two of them stood out like ivory against ebony. Niall had once described the Bready family to her as “Black Irish.” It was clear that Deirdre’s black hair and brown eyes had not come from her father.

She held out the wine to him. “Here. It’s that red you like so much.”

He grinned. “You always think of others. That’s why you’re my favorite sister-in-law.”

“I’m your only sister-in-law,” she pointed out.

“Yes, there is that too! Come out to the backyard.” He slung a friendly arm around her shoulders and they walked toward the kitchen, where large glass doors led to a shaded deck and a sun-splashed yard. “Did Nola tell you Frank and Theresa were coming?”

She nodded. “Yeah. Thanks for the warning, though.”

It wasn’t that she didn’t like Niall’s parents. She did. They were considerate, generous people, thrilled when their son had brought his wife home to Australia. Since Niall’s death, however, she had felt smothered whenever she was with his mother. If Theresa could, she would keep Caroline in mourning for the rest of her life.

She squared her shoulders and forced a wide smile.

“Bad move,” Dan said in a quiet voice, as he slid back the door. “Grieving widows don’t smile. Ever.” Then he winked at her.

In the outpouring of greetings and hugs from Niall’s family, she felt ashamed of her reluctance. They were not of her blood, but they loved her for her own sake and not simply because Niall had married her. Having them almost made up for the distance from her own family in Denver.

Dan poured her a glass of wine, and she sat on the wicker sofa beside her mother-in-law. Theresa was in her mid-60s, but her son’s death had robbed her of vitality and she looked a decade older. Caroline was about to ask Theresa how she was, but Nola spoke first.

“So, did you find it?”

“Find what?” asked Theresa. She looked from daughter to daughter-in-law with puzzlement.

“A statue.” Caroline explained about Janus’s blog, and the statue. She put her glass down in order to unzip her bag. “I found it, but look what else I found! He left me a note. It was tucked under a rock by the boy’s foot.”

Theresa’s scowl carved furrows in the wrinkles between her eyes. “A note! You don’t even know this man, Caroline.”

“Don’t worry, it’s all very innocent,” Caroline said. “Read it yourself.”

The paper shook slightly with the shaking of the older woman’s hand. “Congratulations, fellow photo blogger! You found my statue. I hope to see your own photos of it on your blog soon. Regards, Janus.”

“Janus?” asked Nola with a snigger. “What kind of a name is that?”

“Polish,” stated Frank from his lawn chair. “They pronounce it Ya-noosh.”

Caroline thought of the two-faced Roman god on the blogger’s site, but said nothing.

Theresa thrust the note away. “Polish, English, I don’t care! You shouldn’t be receiving notes from strange men. Not with poor Niall...” Her voice trailed away into a sob.

Caroline fumbled for something that would excuse her for the crime she hadn’t even committed. “Oh, I didn’t, I mean, I—”

“Rubbish!” interrupted Nola. “Come on, Ma! It’s not like Caroline is moving in with this bloke!”

“You’re moving in with a man?” asked Deirdre, who had joined them in time to hear her mother’s last words. Her face held outrage of such comical proportions that Caroline was hard pushed not to laugh.

“No, I’m not!” she said. “I don’t know this guy, I’ve never met him in person, we’re not shacking up. Okay? Are you all satisfied?”

“I know you’re not, dear.” Theresa patted her hand. “How could you? No man could match our Niall. Did you know how much he loved you? You meant the world to him. He would never have forgotten you.”

Caroline picked up her glass and took a swallow of wine, a long, slow, deliberate swallow, to give herself time to bite back her initial reaction to that faint but unmistakable emphasis on “he” and its implication that she had forgotten Niall.

Nola averted the impending awkwardness by standing up. “Give me a hand in the kitchen, will you, Caroline? Dan, you can fire up the barbie now.”

When they were safely inside the house, Nola said, “Don’t let her get to you. This isn’t easy for Ma – for any of us.”

“And you think it’s easy for me? He was my husband!” She raised her hands in frustration, and then plopped onto a kitchen chair. “Sorry. I know I’m being selfish. You all lost Niall too. So, what do you need help with?”

“Nothing. The salads are in the fridge, and you know the men – Dan and Dad will be arguing over the barbie for ages. I thought you might want to escape, that’s all.” Nola smiled, and added with studied casualness, “Oh, and there’s dessert too. Ma brought a pavlova.”

Caroline could feel her teeth cringing at the thought of that sugar-laden meringue confection.

Nola reached into the fridge for a bottle of white wine. “She’s convinced that if you have pavlova enough times, you’ll eventually like it. Ma wants to turn you into a good Aussie, so you’ll stay here. We were all afraid you’d go back to America when Niall died.”

Startled, Caroline looked up from the table. “You’re the second person today to say that to me.”

“Yeah? Who was the first?”

“Pour us a glass of that,” she said, nodding at the wine, “and I’ll tell you.”

Nola listened in silence as Caroline recounted what had happened on the cliffs last night. Her fingers closed around Caroline’s on the table, her grip so tight it was painful – painful, but comforting. The wine in their glasses was untouched.

When the tale was told, Nola said, “The TV news said the woman had been rescued by a passerby. That was you!”

Caroline shook her head. “I didn’t rescue her. I was just there. Luck. I went to the hospital before I came here. She asked me to visit, last night.”

“And?” prompted Nola.

“Last night, she was defiant. Angry. Enraged that a man would do that to her. She said she’d do anything to catch him. She reminded me of Deirdre, actually. So tough.” She clenched her sister-in-law’s arm. “Make her be careful, Nola! Don’t let Deirdre go out alone until they catch this maniac. Jayna was tough, but look what happened to her. She wasn’t as tough today. It was like the anger had seeped out of her. Her partner Ellie was there too. Jayna tried to make a joke about it, she said the rapist hadn’t put her off sex with men because she preferred women anyway, but she didn’t laugh. She closed her eyes and turned her face away, toward the wall.”

“The poor woman,” said Nola in a soft voice.

“Inspector McGraw said that even strong people have their limits. I hope Jayna hasn’t reached hers.” The dull despair in those blue eyes, so full of fire last night, had frightened Caroline.

Nola brought her glass to her lips, swallowed, and grimaced. “Gah, it’s gone warm.” She went to the freezer and returned with an ice cube in each hand. “No point in wasting it.”

Caroline swirled the glass, watching the glittering cube shrink.

“Are you going to meet him?” asked Nola.

“Who? Inspector McGraw?”

“No! Ya-noosh.”

She smiled at the sound of the name. “No. I’m not ready for that kind of thing yet. Not that this is any kind of thing. It’s not a thing at all.” A light relationship with someone she had known for three years, yes, she was ready for that, despite the rocky beginning last night. But starting from nothing with a complete stranger, feeling her way – dating? No, she could not do that. Caroline was tempted to tell Nola about Reece, but she was unsure how Niall’s sister would react to such news.

“It’s sort of creepy,” mused Nola. “That note.”

“Creepy? How? I think it’s sort of sweet.”

Nola tapped one fingernail on the table. “How did he know you would go there? Today? I hope he’s not stalking you.”

“Stalking me?” Caroline laughed at the sheer craziness of the idea. “He is not stalking me! I told you, we exchanged comments about the statue this morning. And before you start,” she held up a warning finger, “he has comment conversations with dozens of people. He’s got many more followers than I do, and they all have something to say. He answers every one. Good manners. I like that about him.” She saw the amusement rising on Nola’s face, and hurried on. “Anyway, Inspector McGraw confirmed the statue was in Centennial Park. It’s a beautiful day, it’s the weekend, and I have to pass the park anyway to drive halfway across the state to get here. Why wouldn’t I go today?”

Stalking. Abruptly, she remembered that black-and-white photo, and McGraw’s reluctance to believe in coincidence. She fished inside her bag for her smartphone.

“Look at this photo, Nola. I don’t think this person is stalking me, either, but this is definitely creepy.” It took her a minute to find the *nero su bianco* blog. The blogger had posted a new photo since this morning. “Oh my God.”

“What?” Nola looked at the small screen, and then at Caroline. “You’re scaring me! What?”

Caroline pulled up McGraw’s number. “Answer the phone!” she urged.

“This is Detective Inspector Horace McGraw.”

“Inspector!” Relief loosened her grip on the phone, and it fell to the floor. With an exclamation of dismay, she bent over to retrieve it. “Hello? Are you there? It’s Caroline Bready. Have you looked at that blog lately?”

There was a silence, and then he said, “*Nero su bianco*?”

“Yes.”

“No. Is there another photo of you?”

“No, Inspector. This time the photo is of you.”

* * * *

Chapter 4

MCGRAW PUT HIS PHONE on the desk and leaned back in his chair. He had told Caroline the truth: he did not know the significance of their photos appearing one after the other on the same blog. He smiled at the memory of her surprised “oh,” as if she had thought she had only to ask him and all answers would be forthcoming.

His smile fell away. If he had all the answers, he would have found her husband’s killer.

There was a core of resilience in her that he admired. She was a small woman, small and blonde with big green eyes and an air of fragility that suggested she might break easily. He did not believe that. She had handled herself well in a difficult situation last night.

He extended a finger and nudged the mouse, waking up his computer screen. He looked at the photograph. It was not a flattering image of him – squinting in the sun, and rubbing the back of his neck – but it was undoubtedly him. The photograph itself had the same saturated blacks and bright whites, the same mix of sharp focus and blur, that he had admired in the blogger’s other images. He would never be able to look at those photographs in the same way again. McGraw felt a spasm of resentment at the destruction of his own simple enjoyment of the blog.

“Dennis.” He beckoned to the sergeant at a nearby desk. “What do you make of this?”

The man’s lips formed an O of surprise. “Holy dooley! That’s you, sir. This morning, on the cliffs.”

“I know it’s me. Anything else?”

Chen looked again, and this time he thought before he spoke. “He must have been in the group on the next cliff. No one was allowed any closer. That’s a hell of a zoom.” There was envy and admiration in his voice.

McGraw scrolled down the page, to other photos. “It’s what he does. His style. He hangs back and zooms in on particular people in a crowd.”

“How did you find this, sir?”

“I didn’t. I knew about the blog, but not this photo.” He scrolled back up and pointed to the street scene near Caroline’s office. “She saw it, and called me. That’s Caroline Bready.”

“The woman who found the victim last night?” Chen squinted. “Is she that good-looking in real life? I can’t tell with that blurring going on.”

“Yes.”

Chen’s lips pursed. “The photographer has her, and you? That stretches coincidence.”

“Find me that blogger, Dennis.”

“Yes, sir.” Chen hesitated, and then asked, “Any idea where I should start?”

McGraw shook his head. “None. Sydney-based, judging from the photos, but that’s it. Most blogs have a page about the blogger – some information, something personal. This one has nothing. There is no way to like a post or share it, no way to leave a comment. This is not a man who wants to interact.”

“How do you know it’s a man?”

“I don’t,” McGraw admitted. “But my gut tells me it’s a man. And you’re going to prove it.”

The gleam in Chen’s eyes was what McGraw imagined an impala might see before the lion leaped for its throat. “Too right, sir!”

“A heads-up for you, Dennis. The strike force commander is on his way from Newcastle. He wants this rapist’s balls, or his blood. Or both. He’ll be demanding answers from us before he’s through the door.”

The sergeant sketched a salute and turned toward his desk. “Then I’d better get started.”

“Do you know any of the boys in cyber crimes squad?” asked McGraw.

Chen looked back over his shoulder with a smile. “Yes. A civilian contractor, actually. But she’s more of a girl than a boy.”

McGraw nodded, and returned to the file he had been reading when Caroline phoned. The Redback Rapist’s file.

Six unsolved rapes in four years – seven, if he included last night. They stretched from Melbourne in the south to Gold Coast in the north, with Sydney roughly in the middle. It was inevitable that the rapist would turn his attention to Australia’s most populous city. The surprise was that he had not struck here before.

The rapes occurred roughly every eight months. Was that significant? No one knew. No one knew anything about this man. Everything McGraw had told Caroline about the rapist was consistent since the first attack. Strike forces in the three affected states had compiled fact after fact after fact, none of which was the slightest damned good in finding the sadistic pervert.

McGraw tossed the folder of papers onto his desk.

And now, he thought, no woman in Sydney is safe.

* *

When Caroline walked into the narrow kitchen at work on Monday morning, Reece was there, talking with a colleague. A little thrill went through her at this unexpected sight of him. He flashed her a smile but continued to dunk his tea bag in his cup, head cocked as he listened to the other woman. Caroline squeezed past them, not wanting to disturb their conversation but intent on making a coffee. She flicked on the kettle and reached for a cup.

“You smell nice this morning,” Reece murmured, so close behind her that she felt the warmth of his breath on her neck. “Where have you dabbed your perfume? Behind your ear, oh yes, but where else? I want to sniff it out.”

She was shocked that he would say such a thing in front of others, but a quick look revealed they were alone. “I always smell like this.”

His slow smile sent pleasure lurching through her, pleasure of a type that she was not used to feeling at 8:45am on a Monday.

“I’ve never been close enough to notice before,” he said. “What shall we do tonight?”

“Tonight? I have my photography class on Mondays, you know that,” she said. “Sorry, Reece.”

His smile never wavered, but a shadow flitted across his eyes. “Now you have me. Diane won’t be back until midnight. Let’s not waste this free night. I want to find that perfume.”

“It’s not a free night!” She tried to ignore the images his words evoked. “I have a class.”

“Is that more important than I am?”

“No! I, well, it’s just…” Caroline stirred her coffee, at a loss. “Of course not.”

He edged past her to open the refrigerator, and as he did so his hand stroked her bottom. “I hope that’s the truth,” Reece said. Then he raised his voice to say, “Good morning, Arnold! How was your weekend?”

Caroline nodded a greeting to Arnold and marched out of the kitchen. Morning sunlight glared through the window behind her desk, reflecting off its smooth white surface, and she snatched at the chain to lower the blind. When she banged her coffee onto her desk, the hot liquid splashed onto a pile of papers. She sopped up the mess with tissues, all the while scolding herself.

Why couldn’t I say no? she thought. Why did I let him walk all over me like that?

She dropped onto her chair and jabbed at the power button on her computer.

A pale face appeared around the monitor on the desk that faced her own. The woman looked at her with surprise. “Someone got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning.”

“I was fine until I got here!” Caroline pressed her fingers to her mouth. “Oh Lily, I’m sorry!”

A shake of her head sent the woman’s straight black hair flapping around her ears. With a cheerful grin, she said, “No worries, luv. We all have bad days.” Her eyes slid past Caroline and her grin grew wider. “This will cheer you up. Good morning, Reece.”

Caroline crossed her arms and refused to look up when he stopped beside their desks. “Good weekend, Lily?” Without waiting for an answer, he held out a small plate to Caroline. “You left so quickly you didn’t get one of Arnold’s homemade chocolate muffins. I know how much you like them.” He waggled the plate. “Go on, take it.”

Against her will, she looked up. His blue eyes held such light teasing, coaxing her with their own words, that remorse stirred inside her. He wanted to be with her tonight; what was so wrong with that? Shouldn’t she be flattered? It was only one class, after all.

Caroline extended her hand and took the plate. “Thank you, Reece.”

He smiled, and turned to the other woman. “Sorry, Lily. I was lucky to get the last one for Caroline.” Then he glanced at his watch. “I’m late.”

She watched him hurry off, his blond head bobbing through a crowd of people clustered around a desk. He was not a particularly tall man, not especially large, but he projected an unthinking expectation that people would move aside, and they did. His walk was the strut of the leader of the pack, confident and touched with arrogance.

What was it, she wondered, that gave certain people such unshakable self-belief? She herself would have skirted the edge of the crowd and apologized for intruding.

“He likes you,” said Lily.

Caroline hastened to deflect any speculation about their relationship. “Oh no! We’re just friends.”

“I know that! It’s common knowledge that Reece is devoted to his wife. That photo of her on his desk is enormous! You could walk into his office and take off all your clothes, and he would politely ask you to leave so he could get back to work.” Lily laughed, glanced around and then leaned closer. “That’s what he did when Alison tried it.”

“He did? Who’s Alison?” She was amused at the thought that Reece had fooled so many of his colleagues. He was far from being a devoted husband!

“Alison used to work in human resources. That was before you joined. She was infatuated with Reece. She resigned right after her failed seduction. It’s not like she could have stayed after that!” Lily said with a grin. Then she looked thoughtful. “I don’t get it, though.”

“Don’t get what?”

“What Alison ever saw in him. I feel sorry for his wife!” She held up one slim hand to forestall Caroline’s objection. “Reece can be very sarcastic and cruel. He doesn’t care if he hurts other people’s feelings. I once overheard him giving one of his team a proper telling-off. The poor man he was talking to was completely shattered. Oh, Reece can be nice enough when he wants to be, I admit that. Lord knows the man is sexy as hell! And rich, he must be rich. He doesn’t get those suits in a department store, and he drives a Jaguar. Maybe that’s the key with his wife. A certain type of woman is willing to overlook personality flaws when the personality comes in an attractive, expensive wrapper.”

Caroline was surprised to hear Reece described in such a way. He had been, well, yes, cruel to her on Saturday night, but then he had apologized so nicely. He had waited for her to come home just so he could apologize.

Lily resumed speaking. "Reece has his flaws, but he does have his good points, too. Look how much help he was to you when, uh, Niall, uh, passed."

There it was, that shifting of the eyes and shuffling of the feet. It happened whenever someone at work referred to Niall's death. No one could simply say it straight out. Did they think she had forgotten, and would be shocked into remembrance by a word? No one ever said he had died, it was "passed" or even "moved on," as if he had found a new job.

Caroline nodded, and crumbled a corner of the muffin. "Yes, he was. I would never have known how to handle all that stuff, like Niall's will and the money. Niall looked after those things."

"That's what lawyers are for. Handling stuff. And it didn't cost you a cent!" Lily winked. "No, you keep right on smiling at Reece. You never know when a top financial lawyer may come in handy again."

"Lily!" Caroline exclaimed. "You make me sound very devious."

"You? Devious? That's a laugh! You're too nice to be devious." Lily stretched across her desk and broke a chunk off the muffin. She winked. "But share the spoils, eh?"

The ringing of her phone interrupted Caroline's laugh. She moved the microphone on her headpiece closer, and punched a button on her phone. "IT Support, this is Caroline," she said. "How can I help?"

* *

When her telephone rang at 2pm, the caller was Reece. He got straight to the point. "I have to cancel tonight."

She couldn't believe it. "Excuse me?"

"Tonight. Something's come up and I can't make it."

Caroline swiveled her chair so that she faced the window and Lily would not hear. "But I...I've already told Nola I can't go!"

There was a sound of impatience. "Tell her you can go, after all. I can't get out of this."

"Out of what?"

In the silence, she imagined the way his eyebrow would lift at her presumptuousness in asking.

"Does it matter what it is?" Reece asked. He sighed. "I am meeting an old client, if you must know. From before I worked for the bank. He said it's important."

She gave in to the spurt of anger. "Your old client is important, but my class isn't?"

"You must admit they are hardly comparable." There was a silence, then he said, "I have an idea. Your class is at 7pm, and I'm meeting my client at 7:30pm. Why don't we have a quick bite after work and I'll drop you off? I do want to see you, Caroline." He lowered his voice. "I had wanted to see more of you than is possible in a restaurant, however. Much more."

The tone in his voice when he said "much more" sent a vibration through her, and she sat up quickly. She looked around, but Lily had left her desk and no one else was paying any attention to her. "Okay."

"Am I forgiven?" he teased.

She smiled, although he couldn't see. "Yes."

* *

"There's a nice pub around the corner from the college," Caroline said, as Reece drove down a busy street in a suburb a few miles south of their office. "We could go there. It's only a few blocks from here."

"I've already booked a restaurant," Reece said. "And, since we have so little time, I pre-ordered for us. I'm sure you understand." He threw a brief smile at her, but returned his attention to the traffic.

She understood, but she was not pleased.

The restaurant was one of those hot, trendy eateries to which all the hot, trendy Sydneysiders flocked as soon as they opened, and abandoned later for the next one. It was small and noisy, and as Caroline followed Reece and the waiter through the crowd of people in fashionable black, she felt dowdy. Their table was a prime spot in the center of the room, where they could see everyone and everyone could see them; Reece was not a man who would choose to sit in a corner.

The waiter glanced at his tablet. "I see you've both ordered seared scallops to start, followed by cassoulet. Excellent choices."

Caroline hated scallops, and knew that the beans in the cassoulet would give her gas all evening.

Sweeping dark hair from his face in a languid motion, the waiter asked, "What can I get you to drink?"

“Water. I’m driving,” said Reece.

The waiter turned to leave, but Caroline said, “I would like a glass of wine.”

A tap on the tablet, a swipe, and the screen held in front of her now showed the wine list. She waved a hand. “Oh, I don’t mind what it is. Anything white.” It was a small statement of independence, but it felt good. “Actually, I’d like to change my food order, too.”

Reece frowned at his watch, and then at her.

The tablet hovered before her, this time with the food menu. “A salad will be fine,” Caroline said, without looking. “Something quick. Maybe with cold chicken in it?”

“We have just the thing,” said the waiter. “For your entrée or your main?”

This was more complicated than she expected. “Just bring me one big salad, and I’ll have it for both courses.”

The waiter flipped the cover onto his tablet and smiled at her. “Perfect.”

Caroline looked across the table. “I’m sorry, Reece. I know you wanted to save time, but you chose two things I dislike.”

Reece’s frown disappeared like chalk scrubbed off a blackboard, and he lifted her hand to his mouth to kiss it. “You’re quite right. It was presumptuous of me. But you should have let me choose the wine for you.”

They had shared enough restaurant meals for her to know that “anything white” were words he would never utter. Reece would have scrutinized the wine list and interrogated the waiter, before deciding on something obscure and expensive.

“You’ll probably end up with the house chardonnay,” he said.

“I like chardonnay.”

He shuddered in an exaggerated show of horror, and darted his tongue between her fingers.

“Reece!” she protested in a low voice, and extracted her hand. “Don’t do that.”

His smile had a knowing air to it. “You liked it. I saw how your pupils dilated.”

“I did like it,” she admitted. “But this isn’t the place for such behavior.”

He crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. A shaft of light from the ceiling spotlights brought his hair to blazing brightness. “How disappointingly prim of you.”

Was she wrong to think that couples should show self-control in public? She didn’t think she was prim, but Reece didn’t seem to be teasing.

Caroline was spared the need to defend herself by the arrival of the waiter. He placed a small plate in front of Reece with as much reverence as if it held two nuggets of gold rather than two scallops, brown on the outside and a pallid white inside. Her salad was enormous, a bowl of varied leaves and vegetables, scattered with shredded chicken breast and topped with an upright fan of something spiky and possibly deep-fried.

The waiter looked at her expectantly.

“Perfect,” Caroline said.

Reece popped a scallop into his mouth and chewed. “You haven’t told me how it went with that policeman from the hospital. Did he come around yesterday?”

She poked the mystery object atop her salad. “Yes, not long after you left. Oh Reece, you’ll never guess what we found!”

He helped himself to her wine, and grimaced in distaste. “I wouldn’t know where to begin to guess. You had better tell me.”

She told him about the blogger with the black-and-white photographs, and how he had posted images of both her and Inspector McGraw. “I could hardly sleep last night. I kept wondering why he would take photos of the person who found the victim and the person who was investigating the crime. What do you suppose it means?”

“I suppose it means that your blogger is now a ‘person of interest’ to the police,” said Reece. “Although given that the officer in charge of this case is the same one who was in charge of investigating your husband’s death, and he was unable to solve that, I should think your blogger is safe.”

Caroline put down her fork. “Stop calling him ‘my’ blogger! And it wasn’t Inspector McGraw’s fault they never found the driver. Besides, he’s not in charge of the serial rapist investigation. He told me a strike force was set up years ago.”

“Years ago? And still nothing? Criminals of Australia, rejoice.” Reece raised his water glass in a mock salute.

“Will you stop making fun of the police? They are trying their best!” She noticed the flash of annoyance in his eyes, and changed the subject. “But what about those photos? Of me and the inspector?”

He thought a moment. “The photographer couldn’t possibly have known that you would be the one to find...what was her name?”

“Jayna.”

“Yes. If both shots had been taken after the crime, it might mean something. But taking yours before? And you no more than an out-of-focus person in the background?” One shoulder rose and fell under the tailored white shirt. “I don’t think it means anything.”

“You don’t?” She leaned forward, willing to be convinced. “That’s what Inspector McGraw said. But I wanted your opinion too.”

He smiled at her, and reached out one hand to stroke her cheek. “You’re quite safe. The Redback Rapist has no interest in you.”

The worrying unease that had hung over her all day slipped away.

“Now eat your leaves, you don’t want to be late.”

* *

After dinner, Reece drove Caroline to her class. He pulled over near the community college, a modern building that clashed with the older houses on either side.

“Goodbye. Thank you for dinner.” She reached for the door handle, but he caught her arm.

“Not so fast,” he admonished. His tone was stern, but his eyes were alight. “We’re alone right now. You will say goodbye properly!”

She smiled at him. “Will I?”

Reece slid his hand along her arm, to cup the back of her neck. He pulled her to him, but she was already leaning in, anticipating his kiss and his caress. She gave herself up to the sensations of his touch on her skin, his lips against hers.

“Now you may go.” Reece put both hands on her shoulders and turned her toward the door.

“Yes, sir,” Caroline said with a smile. She tidied her hair and straightened her blouse.

She was a few steps from the car when she spotted Nola. She waved, and after a few moments Nola waved back.

From behind her, Reece called, “Caroline!”

She looked over her shoulder. He leaned against the low-slung car, holding her camera bag in one hand.

“Oh!” She hurried back.

“I’m glad you forgot the bag,” Reece said, as he slipped his arm around her waist. He nuzzled her neck. “I can say goodbye again.”

“Reece!” She squirmed out of his grasp. “Not here.”

“Ah, yes. Too public.” His gaze moved beyond her. “You must introduce us, my dear.”

Caroline turned, and there was Nola, arms crossed. Nola’s eyes moved from Caroline to Reece, and then back to Caroline.

“Uh, Nola, this is Reece. He’s a friend. Reece, this is Nola, my sister-in-law.”

Nola regarded Reece with the same wariness she would a snake that crossed her path. “How do you do,” she said in a flat tone.

Reece’s arm returned to Caroline’s waist. “Darling, you must learn to be more precise. She cannot be your sister-in-law because you have no husband.”

Disbelief flooded through Caroline, and she wrenched away from him. How could he be so loving one moment, and so cruel the next?

He nodded. “I am loath to resurrect such unpleasant facts, but it is the truth.”

In a voice as frosty as a winter morning, Nola said, “Caroline will always be my sister-in-law. It doesn’t matter if she has no husband or ten husbands – she will always be part of our family. Come on, Caroline.” She turned them away from Reece, and then looked back at him. “I will do my best to see that you are never her husband, you wanker.”

Reece’s cold gaze matched that of Nola. “I already have a wife.” He regarded her for a moment longer, and then inclined his head. “Enjoy your class, ladies.”

The tears in Caroline’s eyes blurred her vision and she stumbled as they walked away. Nola caught her closer.

“Shit, Caroline, don’t tell me you’re involved with that tosser!” she exclaimed. “I felt sick to see him pawing you. He called you darling!”

“He’s never called me that before.” It was the only defense Caroline could come up with. “I can’t believe you called Reece a wanker! He didn’t like that.”

“Too bad!” Nola led Caroline to a bench under a tree. “Are you seeing him?”

Caroline stared at her hands, twisted together in her lap. She nodded. “He’s not usually like that. In fact, he’s very nice. I don’t know why he said those things.”

Nola let out a sharp breath. “Nice! Nice, my ass! And he’s married! What are you doing?”

“I know what you’re thinking: he’s married, so it’s improper. And I did have doubts about that myself.” Caroline hitched herself around to face Nola. “But he started it! It’s not like I seduced him. He chased me for months. I think he’s been chasing me since I started at the bank, actually. I never noticed before, when Niall was alive.”

“He started it, so that makes it alright?” Sarcasm laced Nola’s words. “Don’t you think it’s plain wrong to be involved with a married man? What would you have thought if Niall had an affair?”

“I would have thought he was a philandering cheat, or there was something wrong with our marriage!” Caroline retorted. “I would not have blamed the woman. You can’t steal a man who doesn’t want to be stolen, you know!”

Nola looked surprised, and then nodded.

“Not that I want to steal Reece from his wife,” Caroline said quickly. “I don’t want to marry Reece. I don’t even want a serious relationship. But...I have been lonely, Nola. It’s nice to have someone to talk to. A man.”

One dark eyebrow arched. “I didn’t get the impression that all you do is talk.”

Caroline looked down in sudden embarrassment.

But why should she be embarrassed? Other unmarried people had sex! She looked Nola straight in the eye. “It’s nice to do other things too, yes. Don’t worry, he’ll get bored with me and chase someone else. He’s a serial affair-er, I’m sure of it.”

“Does he have children?”

Caroline shook her head.

A reluctant smile appeared on Nola’s face. “Did you really say affair-er? Is that a word?”

“Probably not,” admitted Caroline. She patted Nola’s hand. “I like him. As I said, he doesn’t usually behave like that. And he was so helpful after Niall died. He’s the lawyer I told you about, the one who sorted out the will and insurance and whatnot. I had no idea what to do!”

Nola said, “You should not have let Niall look after finances and make decisions by himself. My brother liked to have everything his own way, but you were entitled to a say, too.”

“Oh Nola, I don’t care about all that! It’s boring. Now I know how a mortgage works, and I know how much goes into my retirement fund every two weeks. I have to know, but it doesn’t interest me. I was happy to have Niall look after that.” She crossed her arms and leaned against the back of the bench.

“You’re not much of a feminist, are you?” asked Nola, but she smiled when she said it, to remove the sting.

Caroline glanced down at her chest and back up. “Well, I’m not about to go burning my C-cups any time soon!”

Nola was startled into laughter.

“I’m not the only woman who’s willing to let a man take charge and make decisions.” She remembered how Reece had ordered her food, and added, “Most decisions, that is. I’m not a very assertive person, you know that. Sometimes it’s easier to go along with what someone else wants than to make a fuss.”

“I still think you need to stand up for yourself more.” Nola chewed her lip and looked at Caroline with concern.

Caroline smiled at her sister-in-law. “Not all women are strong and independent like you. I like my job, but it’s not my life. I always knew that I wanted a husband and children more than anything. Now I’ve lost my husband, and we never managed to have a child.” She blinked back the tears.

“I’m sorry, Caroline! I should stop telling you how to live your life.” Nola gave her a quick hug. “I knew you would eventually see other men. And that’s fine, it is. Ma doesn’t think so, but she’s turned Niall into a saint. You shouldn’t be alone.” She puffed out a breath. “But this Reece! Couldn’t you have found someone else?”

“Like who?” asked Caroline. “Men aren’t exactly lining up to ask me out, you know. Not that I want them to.”

“Like who?” repeated Nola. She snapped her fingers. “That blogger! Ya-noosh! You could suggest meeting up for a coffee or something.”

Caroline leaned away in alarm. “Are you crazy? There’s a rapist running around Sydney, and you want me to suggest a meeting with a complete stranger?”

“Good point. Not so smart. Tell you what, I’ll go with you, as a chaperone. And I’ll bring Deirdre, in case he tries anything.” With a sly smile, Nola asked, “How’s your hip today?”

“I have a bruise bigger than my hand, but I’ll live.” Caroline rubbed the injured spot. “She’s a good teacher. Too bad I was such a rotten student!”

Nola stifled a laugh, and said, “It will be a while before I forget the sight of you heaving on Deirdre’s arm, trying to get her to fall down. It was like watching a little dog nipping at the heels of a cow, and the cow chewing away, thinking cow thoughts, totally oblivious.”

“I think a dog would have had more success,” said Caroline, laughing at herself.

“So, what do you say?”

“To what?”

Nola said with studied patience, “Meeting the mystery blogger.”

“I say no! Again!”

“Why not? He might be hot! Single! Rich!”

“He might have 10 kids! Be homeless! A weirdo!” countered Caroline.

Nola winked. “But he might be hot!” she repeated. “Dad said he was Polish. Hmmm, blond hair and blue eyes!”

“Reece has blond hair and blue eyes. He is handsome, you can’t deny that! But you weren’t exactly bowled over by him,” said Caroline.

With a grimace, Nola said, “You know the saying: handsome is as handsome does. Is he why you cancelled earlier today? Then un-cancelled?”

Caroline nodded. She still wasn’t convinced that Reece truly did have a meeting with an old client. But why would he lie to her?

Nola shook her head, but said nothing.

A long shadow rippled over them as a man walked past their bench, caught in a golden nimbus of early evening light. He was tall and sinewy, and there was something about his movements – a suppleness and a sense of ready strength – that drew the eye. A battered camera case swung carelessly from one hooked finger as he strode toward their college building.

“On the other hand,” said Caroline in a quiet voice, with a nod toward the man, “the mystery blogger might be like Johnny. Hot from behind, but from the front…”

Nola frowned. “Give Johnny a break, Caroline. I think he’s very brave, coming out in public and meeting strangers. All you have to do is make a comment or two about his photographs. Smile. No one else has a problem with him.”

“I can’t help that I always feel uncomfortable around him. I never know where to look. I feel like it’s rude to look at his burns, or that horrible scar under his eye, but I can’t pretend I don’t see them.” She rubbed her arms. “And he makes me nervous. Like a crocodile.”

Nora tilted her head down and looked over the rim of her glasses with amazement. “Did you say crocodile?”

“It’s that way he has of not moving. He doesn’t fidget. But he’s always watching. Like a crocodile – come too close, and wham!” She held her wrists together and slapped her hands shut, imitating the closing jaws of a crocodile.

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous!” said Nola with scorn. “I’ll tell you, no crocodile ever had eyes like he has. Chocolate brown with flecks of gold. I’d kill for eyelashes that long.”

“I’ve never noticed. I’m not like you, Nola! You’re a nurse, you see people like that all the time. I know it’s wrong, but I feel awkward around people who are disabled or disfigured.”

There was no sympathy in Nola’s gaze. “I don’t think you try very hard not to feel that way, either.”

Caroline hung her head.

“You should volunteer on my ward,” suggested Nola. “We always need volunteers to assist with the patients. It’s hard for them. Sitting with them, listening, can help.”

“Oh, I couldn’t!” Caroline’s stomach dropped at the idea of seeing all those people who looked like Johnny, or even worse.

“Suit yourself. It would do you good too, you know. Get you out more, so you could meet new people.” Nola rose, and shook the wrinkles from her skirt. “Let’s go. I have some low-light shockers that all you serious photographers can laugh at.”

* *

As they left the college building two hours later, Nola said, “That last moon shot of yours was awesome. Niall would be so proud of you.”

“I was lucky with that one. The rest were sure no good!”

“Would you stop that? Why can’t you accept a compliment and say, ‘Thank you, Nola,’ instead of putting yourself down? You took the shot. You chose the settings on the camera. Be proud of yourself!”

Caroline gave her sister-in-law a sideways glance and a smile. “Thank you, Nola.”

Nola huffed. “Well, you’re welcome.”

From deep in Caroline’s bag, her phone gave a muffled beep. She pulled it out. “One voicemail.”

“Not from the wanker, I hope,” said Nola, in a scathing tone.

“Stop calling him that!” Caroline held the phone to her ear. “No, it’s from Detective Inspector McGraw. I’d better call him back.”

“I hope it’s nothing serious,” said Nola.

“So do I. But I don’t think he called to talk about my awesome moon shot.”

His phone rang and rang. It didn’t cut to voicemail, so she figured he must be there.

“This is Horace McGraw.” His voice was hoarse, and he cleared his throat. “Hello, Caroline. Thank you for calling me back.”

“You’re welcome. Is there a problem, Inspector?”

“I have something to tell you. It will be all over the news soon, but I didn’t want you to learn that way.”

Her pulse quickened. “Is it about Niall?”

Beside her, Nola stopped walking. Caroline held out a hand and Nola seized it.

“No. It’s about Jayna.”

Dread trickled cold through her veins. She wanted to hang up, now, before he could say the terrible words.

“There’s no easy way to tell you this.” Yet there was a silence, as if he searched for one. “Jayna jumped from the cliff at Clovelly this evening.”

“No! No, it can’t have been her. There must be a mistake!”

“I’m sorry. She’s dead, Caroline.”

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* * * *

About Elizabeth Krall

Elizabeth Krall grew up in Canada and lived in London, England, for many years. She has now settled in Sydney, Australia.

Most of her career was spent as an editor, but now she works as a print and digital graphic designer. An unexpected side-effect of leaving editing was the resurgence of an interest in writing. Her first two novels, Ship to Shore and Too Close, are contemporary romances. Her third novel, In Your Sights, is a psychological thriller.

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