

don't tell my

secret

— mark stewart

Don't Tell My Secret

Mark Stewart

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Edited by: Rosemary Cantala

Revised Edition:

Email mark_stewart777@hotmail.com

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CHAPTER ONE

March 1st 2013

“JAMES, I loved your last crime novel it’s been a huge success.”

“Thank you; Fire Games took quite a while to write.”

James Buxton sat opposite his publicist, Amanda Daltry, a woman who was twenty-years his senior. By interviewing other authors, he discovered she was in her early forties. Somehow, she always managed to get what she wanted. In the four years since they met, she talked straight to the point. She saw things in black and white. A writer either liked or loathed her.

James sat on the fence.

He respected Amanda for the business-woman she portrayed, and he hated her at the same time. The only place they ever talked happened to be in her office after he’d finished a book. Since their first meeting, he’d seen her out at night only twice. The first time happened by accident when his close friends insisted he go with them to a Melbourne nightclub. He saw Amanda sitting at a table amongst five ladies. She held a wine glass firmly in her hand. The second time they crossed paths he was sitting in his BMW convertible, watching her kissing some bloke in a car at a supermarket carpark. He felt surprised she opened the passenger door to the Mercedes sports car and walked off into the night, seeing how the drizzle had changed to rain. What surprised him even more; Amanda didn’t look back at the car. He thought she would change her mind when the driver started the engine. Then he thought she’d wait for the car to draw level with her. Neither guess happened to be correct. The car completed a slow U-turn. At speed the vehicle was driven down the road. It didn’t take long for the engine noise to fade and the tail lights to vanish.

James sat in the driver’s seat of his car thinking about the scene. A crime novel began to unravel in his mind. It was something he’d always been able to do quite easily. He finally made up his mind Amanda must have been ending an affair, though speculation always got him into trouble.

Sitting further back in the office chair, Amanda’s mini-skirt shortened. She eyeballed James through brown eyes. He saw her frown and flick a few strands of long blonde hair from her face.

James used an even pace to walk across the thick cream coloured carpet to the window. He stood watching the cars buzzing past in the Melbourne CBD. He loved the city for the rush. When he needed to, he’d sit at his favorite café observing people going through their daily life while he waited for inspiration to start a new novel. He didn’t have the courage to tell Amanda he’d slipped into the vortex of the dreaded writer’s block.

James turned from the window to focus on Amanda. “From the first day we met, you represented someone who never gets nervous about anything. Today you seem on edge over something?”

“You have an insight many authors don’t possess. Your ability to sense how people are feeling has seen through me.”

“What are you nervous about?”

“Those who pay my wages have insisted I find an author to write a romance novel. You’re the next in line.”

“I don’t write romance. I write crime. I’ve got lots of great ideas on how to expand the Kendal chronicles. Fire Games was just the beginning. In a few short years, there’s going to be a shelf full of crime novels. They’ll be great.”

“James, you’re probably not aware of the fact we receive at least two hundred emails a day from your fans.”

“So, what does that tell you?” he interrupted.

“I know where this conversation is heading,” hinted Amanda.

“It’s plain and simple; readers love my crime novels.”

“James, start writing a romance novel. I’ve booked you into a bed and breakfast hotel in Mt Martha for the next four weeks.”

“I’ve already explained the fact I can’t write romance.”

“Of course, you can. You’re a handsome bloke. Kiss a woman then write a fantasy about her. Better still; go and meet her at a local dance. Chat the woman up for a few hours and go to a cheap hotel somewhere. You know what to do from there.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Do I have to spell it out?”

“I’m not the kind of bloke who jumps into bed with any woman.”

“James, go write me a romance novel.”

“What if I refuse?”

Amanda Daltry stood. Instead of pushing her mini skirt down she left the material sitting high on her thighs. She strolled majestically across the room to the window. Pushing her breasts into James’ arm she lifted her hands, placing them on either side of his head. He then felt her long fingers and red polished nails being buried in his dark hair. He stood an even six feet tall. Amanda leveled her gaze on his eyes. She leaned closer; her long blonde hair brushed his cheek. She swept her lips across the surface of his. On their return, she kissed him. For a long time, they stood at the window in the sunshine locked in the seductive French kiss.

With a back step, Amanda used the tips of her fingers to tap James playfully on the side of his cheek. She turned and slowly walked across the room, sitting cross-legged again at her desk. The provocative grin she threw James faded, replaced by the professional business-woman in her.

“James, there’s a love story in all of us. Go, write me a romance novel. I expect to see an almost finished product on my desk no later than the fifth of April.”

“You’ll have it on time,” he grumbled.

James didn’t look back, marching across the office floor. He yanked the door open to the startled expression of the receptionist. Just for a moment, he wondered if she suspected anything on what transpired between him and Amanda. He also deliberated if she could tell his eyes were ablaze; full of excitement. He’d never been kissed so passionately by a

woman. He allowed his mind to drift back to the supermarket carpark. Amanda Daltry was indeed a mysterious woman. She certainly didn't come across as someone who might be afraid to kiss a man; any man. James couldn't remember the last time he'd been turned on by a woman. He reasoned they only wanted his money, so he avoided women by diving deep into his work.

The young attractive receptionist smiled up at James. To greet him at eye level, the woman pushed her chair back and stood. He displayed a sociable grin, marching across the carpeted room. To avoid any lost time waiting for the lift, James ran down the stairs to the main entrance.

Outside in the fresh air, the sun felt hot. Summer appeared to be extended for at least a month; so, the weatherman reported. James threw his tie and brown suede jacket onto the rear seat of his BMW convertible then slipped behind the steering wheel. He turned the ignition key and eased the sports car into the flow of traffic.

James was still trying to outline a plot over the kiss Amanda had unexpectedly given him when his two storey mansion overlooking the bay came into view. The quaint room he worked in boasted a floor to ceiling double glazed window which faced the West. He loved to watch the sunset each evening. No matter where he was in a novel, when the sun touched the sea he'd stop, sit back and consume the wine in the glass while he enjoyed the view.

James spent most of his time in the room. The fake gas fire looked realistic. It should be. He paid a fortune for the unit. It did a great job keeping him warm in the winter. An air conditioner on the wall kept him cool in the summer. Situated opposite the window was the kitchenette and bar fridge which was always stocked full of drinks and quick meals. Five identical laptops were on his long narrow desktop. Each one was ready to be used. He certainly didn't need to travel twenty minutes down the road to the bed and breakfast hotel for inspiration. Before the writer's block overtook him James rarely left the room. Lately, he didn't watch the sunset in the place. He wandered the shopping malls and ate out most nights hoping to stumble upon inspiration. Ideas which used to flow easily seemed to have left him high and dry.

"Maybe a change of office space is actually what I need?" mumbled James.

Swinging the car into his driveway, he clicked the remote. The garage door slid up. He depressed the second button on the same remote. A bell sounded, indicating the lift had arrived. After opening the narrow door, he stepped into the lift.

The four-foot square metal plate lifted him silently to his bedroom. James changed into lighter, less formal clothes, packed two suitcases and rode the lift back down to his car.

Inside ten minutes James had started driving towards Mt Martha.

The location of the bed and breakfast hotel situated on the esplanade overlooking Port Phillip Bay was an hour's drive from the Melbourne CBD. In the distance, James could see the skyscrapers. They appeared to tower up out of the water. A slight haze covered the sky obscuring the mountains on the other side of the bay.

James parked his car opposite the hotel's main door. The manicured gardens full of flowering shrubs and tall, mature Japanese Maple trees looked a welcoming sight.

The moment James stepped down from the car he could smell the sea air. The breeze immediately brushed his light blue shirt and long white shorts. After swiping his two suitcases from off the rear seat, he stared at the hotel as he squared his shoulders. The old-style building looked cold, quite the opposite of what he was familiar with. Still, he did agree to Amanda's request. Maybe she liked his attitude. If he said he would do something she must have figured out he'd do it.

'It could be the reason why she walked away from the car ignoring the rain that night. The driver didn't live up to her expectations,' James thought, walking towards the main entrance. "A good start to a crime novel," he whispered.

The only noise James heard came from an old pale green two door-sedan. It rolled into the drive and was parked next to his vehicle. He watched the car until it came to a complete stop. It was then he entered the hotel, luggage in tow. James walked up to the main desk where he waited patiently for the mid twenty-year-old woman to look at him. Eventually he placed his suitcases on the red short pile carpet and stood to full height.

"Good morning, Sir, may I help you?"

"Apparently, I've been booked into a room for a month. I'm James Buxton."

The girl checked the ledger on the computer. "Yes, you've been placed in room one on the first floor overlooking the pool for thirty-one days. An anonymous caller paid for the room."

"Why room 101? Is there something unique about that particular room?"

"None I'm aware of," replied the girl. "I'll call for the Porter to take your bags."

"It won't be necessary. I prefer to carry the bags myself. One suitcase has a laptop in it."

"I can guarantee our Porter will see to the safety of your bags."

"Thanks for your thoughtfulness. I can manage," insisted James slightly more forceful.

Totally absorbed, he watched the smiling girl's every twitch and move she made, willing his imagination into rejuvenation. At long last, the cogs in his mind seemed to be grinding slowly. James hoped they'd continue to pick up speed. He'd gather then group the fragmented clues to begin a possible new crime novel. Amanda's kiss, the car parked next to his, now this room 101 overlooking the pool and the girl's standard welcoming smile and cordial greeting.

"Thanks again for your thoughtfulness," repeated James, studying the startled expression on the girl's face. Even though she seemed to be displaying a luring expression, he dismissed any romantic connection she might have been thinking. He flashed a courteous smile, side stepping to collect his luggage.

James saw the driver of the old pale green two door-sedan walk into the hotel. For far too long he watched the woman walking across the lobby towards the reservation desk.

When the young lady glanced his way, James turned his back and walked towards the lift. He pushed the call button. He wouldn't have looked back or even given the woman a second glance if his publicist hadn't given him an ultimatum. He needed more ideas for this so-called crime novel forming in his mind and even more ideas if he was to turn it into a romance novel.

James looked over his shoulder, noting the woman's black hair just covered her shoulder blades. Her three-inch heels on her feet made her look tall. Just like Amanda Daltry, the woman wore a black mini skirt and red shirt. She appeared to be slightly younger than James and resembled a fit athletic woman who played tennis. At the age of twenty-three, James decided he and the game of tennis should part ways. The same day James dropped his racket into the bin he dived head first into writing. In four years, he'd already finished his seventh novel. Amanda Daltry must have seen a natural ability in him. She signed him up the first time they met.

When the bell above his head sounded to notify him the lift door was about to open, James could hear the woman's words echoing in his ears. It wasn't the mini skirt she wore or the words she spoke; it happened to be the tone of her voice. The hum sent a shiver down his spine. He felt electricity shoot from the top of his head to the heels of his feet.

"I'm Miss. Mia Garnett. I'm led to believe I have a fully paid room for the next four weeks?"

The girl behind the hotel's reservation desk looked up the ledger for the second time in as many minutes.

"Yes, you're in room 102." She signaled for the Porter to help carry the luggage of their newest arrival.

James tried hard not to watch Mia Garnett's impressive walk while she followed the man carrying her suitcases towards the lift.

James and Mia stepped into the lift at the same time. The young man placed Mia's luggage next to her right foot. He announced in a confident voice.

"I'll meet you when the lift arrives on the first floor. I prefer to take the stairs. They help to keep me fit."

'Interesting,' thought James, filing the man's words in his mind. The moment the lift door shut he spoke. "It seems we're neighbors."

"I hope you don't make any noise," jeered the young lady in an arrogant voice. "I don't like noise when I'm working."

"I don't either," admitted James. "I'm a writer."

"Good for you."

The lift leveled on the first floor. The opening door revealed the smiling face of the young male Porter. He reached into the lift, swiping up Mia's luggage. Rooms 101 and 102 were at the other end of the corridor. Grabbing his two suitcases, James lagged behind, soaking up Mia's womanly curves.

When the trio reached the end of the corridor, James began his second attempt at striking up a conversation with the young lady.

"Mia, what do you do for a career?"

The woman squared herself to James. "How did you know my name?"

"I heard you introducing yourself to the girl at the reservation desk."

"You shouldn't have been eavesdropping."

"I apologize. It happened to be quiet in the lobby. Your words sounded crystal clear," James explained.

The Porter opened Mia's door and used a wooden triangular shaped wedge to chock it open. After carrying her luggage across the threshold, he waited to show Mia around the room.

Before stepping through the open doorway into room 102, Mia looked directly into James' eyes. "If it's any of your business and it isn't, I'm an author. I'm here to start a new book."

"What sort of books do you write?" asked James.

"Adventure romance," answered Mia.

"It's a big subject," replied James.

"What about you?"

"I write crime novels. I'm James Buxton." He stepped closer, pushing his hand out.

Mia shook his hand. Stepping into the room, she kicked the polished wooden wedge out from under the door and watched the door close on James' face.

CHAPTER TWO

JAMES CAREFULLY placed one of his suitcases on the material covered chair. Unzipping the front, he pulled out his laptop, walked over to the table near the window, placing his laptop near the middle. He stepped into the small kitchenette to rummage through the bar fridge. He found a few small bottles of white wine, unscrewed the cap of one and poured half a glass. Stepping out onto the balcony, James took in the view, inhaling the fresh sea air. Overhead a seagull squawked. He frowned a little when his gaze fell upon the calmness of the bay and the cargo ship slipping past on its way to the Port of Melbourne.

"Why on Earth did Amanda Daltry insist I come to this place? There's no romance here. Thirty-six days to write a novel. What a joke."

Ninety feet from James' balcony, where the vertical cliff face butted up to the road, he discovered a flight of stairs that ended at the beach. A tall, grey-haired woman wearing a long white dress stood on the top stair. She lifted her left hand and waved at James.

Again, the cogs of his imagination started to turn.

James stepped back through the open balcony doorway, placing the wine glass on the table next to his laptop. He ran across the room, lunging for the door, pulling it almost off its hinges. He descended the stairs to the ground floor, two at a time, navigated his way through the pool area and down the short cobblestone lane. At the narrow road, he waited for a car to slip past then sprinted to the stairs. Studying the beach he saw the woman standing at the water's edge.

James subconsciously counted the fifty steps to the sand. He slowed to a walk when he reached the shoreline, noting the woman seemed to have waited patiently for him to arrive.

"Hello there," called James.

"Hi to you," replied the woman.

James stopped walking when he was at arm's length to the lady. The warm wind blew sand against his bare legs as the head wind strengthened. Looking directly at the woman he caught her smiling.

"I'm James Buxton," he announced.

"I know who you are," the woman hinted. "I'm Eloise Swartz."

"You have a nice name."

"Thanks, James."

"So, you've heard of me?" he questioned.

"Yes of course. You're the famous crime writer. I recognized you from the photo in your books. You have good plots."

"I'm happy you've read at least one of my books."

"I've read them all," announced Eloise.

"It's a pleasure to meet a fan," said James.

"Maybe you've heard of me?"

James pondered her question for a few seconds. He shook his head. "I'm sorry, I haven't."

"What about if I told you I write novels too?"

"I still don't recognize your name."

"That's okay. I don't look the same as the photo in my books."

"What sort of books do you write?"

"Romance adventure; or if you like to say, adventure romance."

"You've picked a large subject."

"Yes, I did. I also know why you're here."

"How can you?"

"There are things about life you have yet to know, but you will," said Eloise.

"Why am I here?" questioned James.

"To write a romance novel."

"Did my publicist put you up to this meeting?"

"No. Amanda Daltry doesn't know me."

"How did you know the reason why I'm here?"

"For now, I want to keep it a secret."

"Why?"

"This is your first lesson in suspense."

"I know about the word. I'm a suspense writer."

"That's where you make your mistake."

"I'm not following you!" exclaimed James. He could feel his blood pressure rising. He'd ticked off many people for less. Over the years, a few close associates took it upon themselves to make him their enemy. Amanda instructed him on how to brush them aside. She explained they were probably jealous of his early achievements.

"You need to look at yourself as an author, not a writer," suggested Eloise.

"I do."

“No, you don’t. Deep down you view yourself as a writer. It’s why you have a bout of writer’s block. Be confident and you will overcome the blockage.”

“How do you know about my writer’s block? Nobody knows.”

“Suspense James; if I told you everything, there’d be no surprise.”

The couple slowly walked along the shoreline. James felt intrigued by the woman. Feeling his blood pressure returning to normal his imagination began to kick in again, which in turn allowed him to slot more ideas into place so he could start to form more of his next crime novel.

James studied the woman walking next to him. She looked elderly, possibly in her early eighties. Her salt and pepper hair touched her shoulders. She looked slim, tall and dressed modestly. She smiled at James. He grinned back.

“I have a favour to ask you,” announced Eloise, breaking the silence.

“Name it,” replied James.

“I have one more novel to write. I thought we might be able to complete it together.”

“What exactly do you mean?” asked James, thinking Eloise might be in her last days.

“I’m not dying,” advised Eloise.

“How did you know what I was thinking?”

“It’s written on your forehead. The signals you’re sending are like reading a book. You see the same facial expression on most of the people walking past the café you sit at each day.”

“It’s uncanny how you seem to know everything about me, yet we have never met.”

Eloise took a breath. “Getting back onto the subject of the manuscript, are you willing to help me?”

“Yes definitely. I take it you’re considering a romance novel?” quizzed James, kicking a small mound of wet sand.

“Of course!” chirped Eloise. The tone in her voice sounded slightly higher than usual. “I’ve already thought up a working title you might like.”

James stopped walking. Eloise had caught him off guard. She seemed to draw him in. If she’d only been fifty years younger, he might have changed his mind about wanting to live alone and date the woman. The idea took him to a place of fantasy and to a location somewhere in Melbourne. Another idea entered his mind. He shelved it next to the other ideas. The crux of his next crime novel seemed to be taking shape. At last he could sense his imagination was again strengthening.

“Don’t tell my secret.” Eloise gazed at James, waiting to see his first reaction.

“I love the title.”

“Good, I did hope to start today.”

“Let’s go back to my hotel room and plan what we’re going to write,” suggested James.

“I have the plot already mapped out,” said Eloise.

“You’re one step ahead of me.”

“It is early days. Any input from you will be gratefully received. You should place the information you’re collecting for your next crime novel somewhere safe. You won’t need the ideas for quite some time.”

James displayed a frown as he escorted Eloise back along the beach. They climbed the stairs and walked across the narrow road to the hotel. Eloise waited for James to open the metal gate to the pool area. He marched to the hotel's back door, opening it before Eloise could look at him expectantly.

James walked ahead of Eloise and pressed the lift call button. By the time she stepped up to the lift, the door had opened. It wasn't long before they were standing inside room 101. Eloise strolled to the glass balcony door and looked out over the pool area.

"The view is nice. This whole room has a warm feel to it," sighed Eloise.

"It's comfortable. Would you like a drink or a snack?" asked James.

"I'm fine thanks."

James walked into the kitchenette and pushed the start button on the side of the kettle. "Are you sure, it'll be no problem? I'm going to make myself a coffee."

"No thanks," said Eloise.

James carried his hot coffee to the table and slid onto the seat in front of his laptop. Swiping up the wine glass he left half an hour ago; he swallowed the remainder of his drink. Placing the glass next to his coffee mug he looked up at Eloise, poised to begin.

"I'm ready."

"Where's the typewriter?"

James pushed the 'on' button at the front of his laptop, looking at Eloise's startled face. "You're serious, aren't you?" he chuckled.

"I had you guessing for a full minute."

"You did. I'm starting to see where the suspense is. Seeing how we're getting along so well with plenty in common, if it's possible, I'd like to see you more often other than when we're here writing the novel?"

"What you're suggesting is impossible," said Eloise.

"Why? You don't seem to be the shy type."

"For now, let's leave things the way they are."

"Can I walk you home or buy you dinner when we have finished for today?"

"I value my privacy," insisted Eloise, firmly.

James held up his hands to signal he surrendered. Focusing on the laptop, he typed in the title. He looked up in time to see Eloise staring out of the glass balcony door, a far-away look in her eyes.

"Is your Grandson a sailor?" he asked.

Eloise looked over her shoulder at James. "Why do you ask?"

"The way you're staring out over the bay I thought you might be waiting for a family member to come home."

"The less you know about me, the better."

"Why, what's the harm in knowing something about you?"

"James, time is short. We must begin writing," insisted Eloise, stepping over to the table. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, I am."

"I hope you can keep up while I dictate?"

"Not a problem. The faster you talk, the quicker I type."

“Good. There are a couple of more favors you must agree on before we begin. When we have finished writing the novel, feel free to take the manuscript to your publicist. I want you to have all the royalties.”

James’ jaw dropped open. He was about to blurt his protest when he saw Eloise raise an eyebrow. “I agree,” he said with a sigh.

“Excellent!” exclaimed Eloise. “There’s one last thing; I need you to write the novel in the third person viewpoint.”

“To write a novel in the past tense while you are telling the story is a strange request.”

“I must insist.”

“What chance do I have in knowing the reason why?”

“Suspense James, it is all about suspense.” Eloise giggled at seeing his frown.

Under his breath, James chuckled at the idea too. Good fortune seemed to have dropped into his lap. He wrote a sub note reminding him to type the novel in the third person viewpoint. He even changed the text to bold midnight black letters to highlight the fact.

Eloise nodded her approval.

James watched her step over to the window and stare at the bay again. The woman slowly turned until she stood side on.

“The world has changed quite a bit,” Eloise started.

James looked up from the keyboard. He watched her chest rise then fall as she inhaled and exhaled.

“My story begins in the summer of 1939AD. Lilly had only been married for two weeks when Jack Barrett, her husband, came home early. It was a Wednesday. He walked up to her, displaying a proud grin.”

“Darling, stop preparing the dinner. It can wait. I have some important news to tell you.” Jack leaned against the wooden bench, watching Lilly dart about the kitchen.

Lilly wiped her hands dry on her brown apron, an expectant look in her eyes. “Have you heard some good news about the job you went for last week? Working at the newspaper factory might be good. It’ll be better than the horse stables; more money too. Maybe one day we could fix this two-bedroom house, sell it, buy a larger piece of land so we can grow more vegetables and sell them at the local market.”

“Before I tell you my news, I’ve bought you a present.”

“Jack, you shouldn’t have. We can’t afford it,” complained Lilly, watching her husband marching into the lounge.

Jack returned carrying a large brown paper bag.

Lilly didn’t know what to make of it. She loved the idea of receiving a present, but their budget remained tight. She glanced at the pile of unpaid bills stacked up on the bench.

Jack handed over the bag. Lilly opened the top, looking in. She flopped onto the closest chair the moment she saw the contents. Lifting the dress as she stood, Lilly held it against her.

“We can’t afford this,” she choked.

“Do you like it?”

Lilly looked seriously at her husband. “Take it back.”

“No way and you didn’t answer me.”

“This long white dress is beautiful.”

“Nothing except the best for my wife,” retorted Jack, seriously. “Try it on.”

Lilly changed her clothes in front of the full-length mirror. The white ballroom gown clung to her hips. Jack stepped up behind Lilly, pushing his arms around her waist.

“You look gorgeous,” commented Jack, whispering in her ear. He lovingly moved her to arm’s length. “And we can afford the dress. I’ve joined the Navy. I leave tomorrow morning,” he advised, emphatically.

Fear instantly flooded Lilly’s mind. Using her left hand to grope for the side of the mirror she needed to push her trembling right hand against the wall so that she could remain standing. Staring at Jack through water-soaked eyes, Lilly didn’t have the courage to let go of the wall or the side of the mirror to wipe her tears away. She stammered a blunt reply.

“You can’t join the Navy. What about us? What if there’s a war?”

“There won’t be a war,” snorted Jack confidently, dismissing her words. “Besides, the recruitment officer told me the wages will be double what I’d be earning at the newspaper factory.”

“You can’t go. Please, I can’t stand the thought of not seeing you for months on end.”

“It’ll be fine. The Navy man informed me when I signed up maybe one day I will make it to the rank of Captain. At any rate, I’ll have a permanent job. After our parents barely struggled through the great depression, I’m happy knowing I’ll have a steady income for the remainder of my life.”

“I don’t want you to go.”

“I’ve decided. It’s final,” insisted Jack, his voice deepening.

“Tell them you’ve changed your mind,” cried Lilly, struggling to get her words out.

“There’s no discussing the subject.”

“Why didn’t you talk to me about this idea?”

“I knew you’d disagree.”

Lilly couldn’t stand any longer. She dropped noisily onto the bed. “Why do you want to make the Captain of a ship?”

“The bloke in charge of the new recruits conned a few men into signing up. He also pushed a few away when they admitted they only wanted the job for twelve months. The only way I could convince him of my loyalty was to persuade the old man into thinking I wanted to make Captain. Lilly, after I’ve done ten years in the Navy, I’ll retire. My mates told me when I leave the Navy getting a job will be easy. I’ll be able to name my career. Ex-navy men are first to get a job. I’ll never have to struggle to earn enough money. I’ll be able to buy you a new house. Having kids won’t be a problem. I’ll even be able to afford to buy you a nice dress each month. I don’t want you to end up like the woman across the road. I swear she wears the same clothes every day.”

“I suppose a few new dresses would be nice!”

“I knew you’d come around to what I want.”

“I take it there is no way of talking you out of this idea?”

“No. My mind is made up. You’re looking at a Navy man.” Jack stood at attention in front of her, puffing out his chest. He saluted then swept his wife from off the bed.

Lilly managed to paint a smile on her face. “Having enough money all our lives will be good.”

Jack waltzed Lilly around the edge of the bed humming a love song. He reeled her in close. “There’s one thing I need you to do?”

“What?” whispered Lilly; still trying to digest the idea her husband joined the Navy.

“Kiss a sailor.”

Lilly stood on her toes so she could kiss her tall husband. Before she could protest, she saw his shirt floating to the floor. He stepped out of his pants and helped Lilly out of her dress. Jack gently lowered Lilly onto the bed. After kissing her tenderly he reached out to massage the nook of her neck. He knew she loved the touch. He lowered his head to nibble her earlobes.

“I love you,” whispered Jack.

Lilly replied on a sigh she loved him too.

While Jack made love to her she couldn’t bring herself to be fully persuaded on the fact her husband had joined the Navy. Still, like he said, it was his decision. Somehow, she needed to bury her doubt and trust his judgment.

While Lilly dressed, she decided to give Jack one hundred percent support. In the few remaining hours, she wanted him to see her as someone; he could lean on. When he closed his eyes at night she wanted him to remember her confident expression. When he left for the Navy base and she was away from prying eyes, she could lose it then.

After dinner, Lilly and Jack sat outside soaking up the rays of the full moon and watching the stars. At almost midnight Lilly led Jack to the bedroom. She needed to show him how much she cared.

Lying awake listening to Jack’s breathing, Lilly patted herself on the back over her acting skills. Slipping out of bed, she wrapped her naked body in her pink dressing gown on the way to the kitchen, filled her glass with water and walked slowly outside, lost in her thoughts of how she might cope alone. Lilly sat on the verandah step watching the moon sink towards the horizon.

“I dare not lose it now,” Lilly whispered to the next-door neighbor’s cat after it scampered across the grass to be by her side. She scratched behind the ginger cat’s ears. It pushed against her legs, purring, hoping to get fed.

When the sky began to lighten, Lilly swiped her glass from off the step and walked back into the kitchen to start breakfast. She had almost finished scrambling the eggs and cooking the toast when Jack entered the room.

“I woke. You weren’t in bed.”

“I thought my sailor man should have scrambled eggs for breakfast. I’ve poured beer into a glass. It’s touching the last of the ice. I’m hoping it will be cold enough to enjoy.”

“What a thoughtful thing to do. No wonder I married you.” He walked over and kissed his wife.

“It’s the least I can do seeing how today you become a sailor.”

Jack sat at the table watching the smile on Lilly's face. All the while she hid the butterflies in her stomach from him. He didn't know her knees were knocking from fear she might never see him again.

Jack scraped up the last of the breakfast, swiped his plate from off the table and stood.

"Leave the dishes. I'll do them later," Lilly protested. She quickly gathered the dishes, walked over to the kitchen bench and put the plates in the sink. She opened the small ice chest, taking out the glass of beer, handing it over.

Jack raised the glass to his lips and drank the amber liquid. After placing the empty glass on the table, he leaned over and stroked Lilly's cheek. Staring directly into her eyes he said in a condescending voice.

"Be warned; when I'm away, you must not entertain another man in my bed."

"I'd never play up on you," remarked Lilly. Her frown creased her forehead.

"I'm just mentioning what I fear. The bloke who sells the blocks of ice seems extra friendly."

"He's friendly to almost everyone. He's a married man."

"How do you know he's married?"

"I've seen him and his wife when they go for a walk on a hot night."

Jack grunted. "I've seen him look you up and down too many times to count."

"He probably does it to all the ladies. Don't worry. I'm married to you."

Jack stood, hovering over his wife. Lilly swallowed the lump in her throat. For the first time since she'd known Jack, she felt frightened of him. Already she could see a change in his attitude. It wasn't one she liked.

"It's time for me to go."

"Can I walk you to the train?" asked Lilly. She hoped he'd refuse, but knew if she didn't ask he might think she couldn't wait for him to leave so she could knock on another man's front door.

"I'd love for you to see me off," replied Jack.

In silence they held hands, walking to the station. Lilly felt as though they were leading a funeral march. Instead of ending at the cemetery, Jack was about to leave on an adventure. He'd get paid to see the world, while she stayed home keeping house.

Jack knew he needed to calm his excitement on what lay ahead for Lilly's sake. He looked sideways, studying her sad expression. "It'll work out, great," he announced.

Lilly hoped Jack never again talked about her entertaining another man while he was at sea. The act would make her feel worse than being a prostitute. Even though her nerves were making her feel sick she played it cool by craning her neck and kissing Jack.

"I guess there's no way out of this now?" stated Lilly.

"I'm committed. When I get paid, I'll send the money to you."

"I promise to bank the lot."

"Don't forget to pay the bills."

"I won't. I'll pay the bills the same day the postie delivers the cheque."

"You're my girl," said Jack. He pulled his watch out from his pocket and read the time. He then handed his watch to Lilly for safe keeping. "The train will be here in a few minutes."

“I’ll give the watch back when you return.”

Jack and Lilly stepped up to the narrow window at the ticket booth. They were greeted by a short, thin man with a black tie hanging from his neck.

“Destination?” mumbled the man.

“I was told to tell you, I’m Jack Mathew Barrett. I’m off to join the Navy.”

Lilly saw the man slide off the stool he’d been perched on and step to the other side of the office. She watched him sort through a pile of white envelopes. When he found Jack’s name written on the front of an envelope he put it aside, neatly restacked the pile and swiped the envelope from off the table. Staring directly at Jack, he returned to the window.

“In this envelope is a ticket. It’ll get you to Richmond. From there you will be picked up by a bus and taken to Footscray where you’ll have a medical. If you pass, you’ll be brought back to Port Melbourne to board a ship. I’ve been told to tell the new recruits it’ll be a training cruise.”

“How long is the training?” asked Lilly.

“Five weeks. Your husband leaves in two minutes.”

The man handed Jack the envelope then looked over Lilly’s shoulder at the person directly behind her.

Jack and Lilly stepped to the side. She overheard the man asking if he could buy a train ticket to the beachside suburb of Frankston. He explained he was going to do some maintenance work on his daughter’s house for a few weeks while she rested in hospital after giving birth.

Jack ripped open the envelope, studying the contents. Lilly read the small print. It coincided exactly as the man in the ticket office stated. She certainly needed to hide the fact she still felt sick to the stomach over what might lay ahead.

Clutching the ticket tight in his hand, a small overnight bag in the other, Jack smiled lovingly at Lilly. She leaned in, giving him a kiss as the red rattler slowed on its approach.

Even though Lilly heard the doors of the train slide open and heard footsteps getting on and off the train then several doors being pulled shut, she refused to take her eyes off Jack.

At the front of the train a whistle shrilled.

“Stand clear,” yelled the train guard. “Stand clear.”

Jack inched Lilly closer to the edge of the platform. She didn’t want to take her arms away from Jack’s shoulders. A single tear dropped from her left eye. Jack lifted his hand to gently wipe it away.

“Don’t feel sad. In a few years we’ll look back on this day and say I made the correct decision. When other people are struggling to earn money, we’ll have more than enough to see us through to old age.”

Jack leaned in, pushing his body hard against Lilly’s. She lapped up the contact.

“Not seeing you for five weeks is a long time,” whispered Lilly, trying to stop her voice from quaking.

“It’ll go quick, I promise. Just remember, when I see you again I’ll be a fully-fledged sailor.”

With much effort, Lilly managed to display a weak smile.

“Fella, either get on the train or step away,” bellowed the guard over the shrill of the train’s second and final whistle. His stare looked heartless and cold. “If you don’t get on the train you’ll be left behind.”

Inwardly Lilly willed Jack into changing his mind at the last moment. The only thing she wanted was to walk home wrapped in his arms.

The train started to pull away from the station. Jack ran, jumping onto the step of the last carriage in the nick of time. He waved.

“I’ll write you a letter each week,” called Lilly.

“I expect you to,” yelled Jack. He blew her a kiss. When she started to shrink from view, he settled himself onto a seat in the middle of the carriage.

Lilly couldn’t comprehend his enthusiasm, though she patted herself on the back for keeping up the happy act. When the train vanished around the first bend, she could no longer hold back her tears. They fell from her eyes faster than rain. She crumpled onto the dirty train station sobbing uncontrollably, hoping Jack would jump out of the window and come running back so she could snuggle into his arms.

He never came back that wretched day. Even the sun slipped behind a dark cloud, eclipsing the station.

Lilly rubbed her bare arms from the sudden drop in temperature. Finally, she turned her back on the station. Dragging her feet, she slowly walked home. It took fifteen minutes to walk to the station holding Jack’s hand. It took Lilly forty-five minutes to walk home, alone. When she finally closed the front door, she flopped onto a chair at the kitchen table sobbing, barely having enough strength to lift her head.

The remainder of the day came and went in a blur. Even sleep evaded Lilly. By midmorning the next day, she forced herself out of bed. Sitting on a chair in the lounge-room she watched for Jack’s return.

The shrill of the postie’s whistle forced Lilly to drag her aching muscles towards the letterbox. The postie got off his pushbike when he saw her step off the front verandah. He waited patiently for Lilly to walk to the front picket fence. When he spoke, his greeting sounded friendly.

“Lilly Barrett, are you okay? You look like you’ve been crying.”

“Thanks for caring Mr. Whitaker. Jack left for the Melbourne Navy base yesterday morning. I won’t see him for five weeks. He’ll be home for no more than two days before leaving me again to go to sea for God only knows how long.”

“It’ll be okay. Always look on the bright side.”

“I’ll try. At the moment, I see nothing except darkness.”

Mr. Whitaker put his hand on Lilly’s shoulder. “What you need to do is keep yourself busy. Time will go extra fast if you immerse yourself in a project.”

“Do you have any ideas?” Lilly didn’t want to know if he did or not, let alone think about a project. Again, she rejuvenated her acting skills so as not to upset the postie.

“Maybe you could grow vegetables and sell them at the local market? Or, I’m positive there are lots of things you could do around the house to make it more presentable to Jack when he arrives home. I reckon he’ll be impressed by what you’ve achieved.”

“I’m a woman. There’s not a lot I can do. I don’t have the skills a man does.”

Mr. Whitaker looked down his nose at Lilly. After leaning his pushbike against the fence, he took her by the shoulders.

“Lilly Barrett, let me say this. You can achieve anything if you give it a go. Just because you’re a woman doesn’t mean you can’t do things that are usually done by a man.”

Lilly dropped her gaze to her feet. Mr. Whitaker used his fingers to gently lift her chin.

“Look at me, Lilly. Don’t ever think you can’t do something. If you can keep a secret, I’ll tell you something no one else except my wife knows.”

Mr. Whitaker removed his fingers from Lilly’s chin only to place his hands against either side of her head. The man’s vice-like grip held her a prisoner. She didn’t have near enough strength to begin to escape.

“A few months back I asked my wife if she could teach me how to cook. After we conversed for a short time she agreed. I’ve been an eager pupil. My first solo experience was last Tuesday. I cooked a roast lamb dinner. I insisted I clean the dishes and I swept the floor. Edith was such a treasure saying the meal tasted amazing.”

“You cooked?” questioned Lilly.

“Yes, I did.”

“I don’t know of any man who can cook.”

“Now you do.”

“I won’t tell your secret to anyone,” whispered Lilly.

“Good. I’ll have you know after dinner we were sitting in the backyard watching the sunset. My darling wife tapped me on the arm to get my attention. She said, seeing how you can cook, I want you to teach me how to mow the lawn using the hand mower.”

“What did you say?”

“I agreed.” Mr. Whitaker grabbed his pushbike. Looking directly at Lilly, he winked. “Thanks for keeping my secret.”

“Thank you for building my confidence. You always say the right thing at the right time.”

“I don’t care who a person is; the only thing you have to do is give the idea a try.”

Lilly walked back into the house, thinking about what Mr. Whitaker told her. She found a pencil and a scrap piece of paper in a drawer and sat at the kitchen table writing a list of things that needed doing around the house. Of course, she was frowned upon when she tried to buy paint down at the local shop.

“A lick of paint for the front weatherboards would look nice,” contested Lilly, staring at the tall, thin, balding man who owned the paint shop.

“It’s a man’s job. A woman has no right to paint a house. She is supposed to cook, clean and look after the kids.”

Dropping the money on the wooden counter, Lilly glared at the man. “My money is equivalent to my husband’s. If you don’t sell me the paint, I’ll take my business to the next paint shop.”

Lilly walked out of the shop carrying a gallon of blue paint. On the way home, she started planning exactly how to go about painting the front of her house. Two weeks prior to Jack leaving, she recalled seeing a man standing on top of a ladder, painting. The house

in question was built three streets from where she lived. Lilly decided his home might be a good place to start searching for a ladder.

A thirty-something-year-old woman greeted Lilly when she knocked on the front door. The woman didn't look too friendly.

"Hello there is your husband home?" asked Lilly.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Lilly Barrett. You don't know me. I need to talk to your husband."

"You're right I don't know you. I've seen you, though, walking past my house parading your youthful figure while your husband is at work. Don't look so surprised. I know what goes on around here. Everyone's talking behind your back about your husband joining the Navy and leaving you home alone. Let me warn you, if I find out you're pregnant with my husband's baby I'll get the hammer from the garage."

"I'm not pregnant," said Lilly, abruptly.

"Brian, some woman wants to talk to you," the woman called.

A man in his late thirties trudged up the hallway to the front door. He pushed his wife to the side.

"Well, hello there. I saw you walking up the drive. Do you need some help?"

"To paint the front wall of my house can I borrow your ladder?" asked Lilly, eyeballing the man's wife.

"Certainly, I have one in the garage."

"Don't you dare offer to carry the ladder to where she lives," spat Brian's wife.

Lilly followed the man around to the other side of the house. The outside of the garage looked a mess. The wooden boards not only needed painting they'd all have to be replaced. She spied a motorbike in pieces when the man swung open the front wooden doors. Garden tools were strewn across the compacted dirt floor. Engine parts littered the only bench in the narrow room.

"My ladder is hanging on the wall," announced Brian, stepping up to the sidewall. He swiped the wooden extension ladder from two sturdy hooks and handed it to Lilly. "I'd give you a hand, but my Mrs. will get a bit upset."

"I can manage. I'll return it when I have completed the top half of the wall," advised Lilly, not wanting to spoil what little peace might remain between Brian and his wife.

Lilly waved to Brian's wife staring at her between the parted curtains hanging over the window. Lilly tried to make carrying the ladder look easy. She just managed to walk around the first corner and was out of sight of Brian's wife when she dropped the ladder. Under the shade of a large Elm tree, she massaged her aching arms all the while watching for any nosy people watching her.

"This old wooden ladder must weigh a ton," she grumbled.

Lilly struggled for another five minutes to get the ladder home. Deciding not to have another rest, she lifted the ladder and leaned the top edge against the wall of the house. She climbed the ladder, gave the weatherboards a quick scrub using a sheet of rough sandpaper and painted the top half of the wall.

When she finished, Lilly returned the ladder and ran home to paint the bottom half.

Finally, after five long weeks, Jack marched up the driveway. He looked proud wearing his crisp white sailor's uniform. Instead of forty-eight hours, Jack told Lilly she'd have him home for eight glorious days. Jack studied the newly painted weatherboards at the front of the house and mentioned how great they looked. Holding his wife tight in his arms, Jack kissed her passionately. Each night Lilly enjoyed their union.

At the end of the eighth day, Lilly's world crumpled again.

The headlines on the front page of the newspaper completely shattered her world.

'THE WORLD IS AT WAR.'

Jack left Lilly to go to sea. She felt as though he'd been conned into signing up to join the Navy, not for ten years; for how long the war lasted. Even Mr. Whitaker thought the same.

At first, the monthly pay cheque came by post regular as clockwork. However, by the seventh month, Mr. Whitaker waited for Lilly at the letterbox. He didn't look his usual happy self.

"Nice morning," chirped Lilly, marching up the driveway.

"It is. I'm sorry I have to say there's no pay cheque today."

"There has to be. It's the end of the month!" exclaimed Lilly.

"No one is getting a cheque today," announced Mr. Whitaker.

"I can't understand why not? It has never been late."

"It must be the war slowing things up. Take heart Lilly; maybe I'll be able to deliver the cheque tomorrow." Mr. Whitaker viewed her handy work. "The tulips you planted in the spring look nice."

"I'm glad someone is around to comment. I was hoping Jack might be home in time to see them in full bloom. I dare say he won't," explained Lilly with a sigh.

"On the back of my sad news about no cheque I have a letter from Jack," announced Mr. Whitaker, handing over a white envelope.

"Thanks for your diligence."

"I'll see you tomorrow."

Lilly leaned against the picket fence watching the postie re-commence his mail deliveries. When he was gone, she started to walk back up the driveway.

"Hello Lilly," called Mr. Hutchins. He had waited patiently for her to finish talking to Mr. Whitaker before leaning over the side fence, trying to get her attention.

"I apologize for not seeing you. My thoughts took me away," said Lilly.

"It's quite alright. I have a request to ask. Is it okay to mow your back lawn? I don't mean to pry; I've noticed the grass is ankle deep. I've just re-sharpened the blades on my hand mower. My grass is short. I'd like to give the blades a good test run."

"Yes of course. You can mow the lawn anytime. I'll bake a cake for your trouble. If I don't see you, I'll leave it on the kitchen table. Let yourself in," said Lilly.

"I'll remember to shut the door after I leave. I don't want the flies to get in."

Lilly sat at the kitchen table reading the letter from Jack. After re-reading the letter a dozen times through about which country he'd seen, she placed the letter in an old biscuit tin for safe keeping and slipped it back onto the top shelf in the pantry.

Every night Lilly fell asleep believing the next day the pay cheque or another letter might come from Jack. Each morning the postie told her the same thing. He said the same thing for a whole month. Eventually, Mr. Whitacker handed her a letter.

Again, Lilly sat at the kitchen table. For nearly five minutes she stared at the envelope too frightened to open it. She suspected the contents contained bad news. When curiosity finally got the better of her she swiped up the envelope. Lilly's fingers trembled the whole time she ripped the top edge away. Glancing at the folded paper inside, her fingers started to tremble faster. Lilly placed the envelope back onto the table, walked across the room to the sink and picked up the soup ladle, dipped the end into the metal pot on top of the gas stove and scooped up hot water. She dropped four coffee beans into a mug and poured the hot water on top of the beans. It was then she sat back at the table, snatched up the envelope again and watched the letter drop onto the table. Lilly opened the letter and read it through to the end.

'Hi Lilly, I have been transferred to the HMS Waterhen which is birthed in England. When the ship is fully loaded, we're going to the Mediterranean Sea; love Jack.'

For an hour Lilly cried. When she could cry no more, the postie's words came back, flooding her mind. 'If you keep yourself busy the time will fly.'

Lilly stepped out into the sunshine. She didn't want to, but she wandered down to the veggie patch at the rear of the house. She dropped to her knees and pretended to weed the ground.

For the next eleven weeks, Lilly did the same thing; cooking, cleaning and hoping the next day the pay cheque might be delivered.

By the end of the twelfth week and still no pay cheque, Lilly's savings were down to a few pounds. Groaning at seeing the pile of mounting bills on the table, she walked to the bank.

Lilly pushed on the door. The few people inside the building looked at her. Lilly closed the door and stepped to the rear of the short queue, listening in on the same conversation she'd heard for weeks.

A middle-aged woman filed in behind Lilly. "Good morning."

Lilly turned to face the woman. "Good morning."

"I take it you're here for the same reason I am?"

"Probably," replied Lilly, digging up a smile. "Pay the bills using what little money I have."

"Yesterday I received a letter from my son. He works for the Government. He wrote they have stopped the pay of every air force pilot, sailor and army soldier."

"Why do such a thing? Don't they understand the wife of an air force pilot, a soldier or a navy seaman have bills to pay?" Lilly questioned.

"The war is getting worse. The Government wants the money to make more weapons."

“How are we expected to live? Pay bills?”

“I’ve heard the banks are paying only in food vouchers,” answered the woman.

When the teller beckoned Lilly over, she handed the young man her bank book. He stamped the book and handed it back. Lilly noticed he didn’t seem happy. She sensed he wanted to be anywhere except the bank. His brown hair looked in need of a cut, and his clothes didn’t sit well.

‘They could do with a good iron,’ she thought.

“I’d like to withdraw my last three pounds,” declared Lilly.

“Sorry. The Government has put a freeze on everyone’s bank account. Unless you have a pay cheque from working, the only thing I can give out are food stamps. Please, I don’t want to hear your comment about how wrong it is. Read the poster on the wall behind me.”

Lilly read the poster aloud. “To the women out there, do your part, start working. Get paid for your toil.”

“Sorry about your three pounds. The Government wants it. When the war’s over, they’ll give it back.”

Lilly walked away from the bank feeling worse than when she entered the building. On her way home, she strolled past the paperboy. His shouts echoed throughout her brain.

“Get a job. Get paid. Buy the paper now.”

Feeling embarrassed about not having enough money to buy a paper from the lad, Lilly marched across the road. Every day the fourteen-year-old woke early and walked to the newspaper building in the dark. He’d place a bundle of newspapers in a small wooden cart and stand at the corner near the milkbar trying to sell them. The cheerful expression on his face never altered. Lilly wondered whether he understood how hard life was becoming. When the lad turned his back on her, she tried to count how many newspapers still in his cart. The number of unsold papers made her feel nauseated. He’d only sold one.

Lilly stared at her feet as she slowly trudged past the milkbar. She stopped to view the cake display in the window. The palm-size cakes looked mouth-watering. Pushing her hand into her pocket, she pulled out a sixpence. With a heavy sigh, Lilly decided a few apples at the local fruit shop were more important than one cake.

Lilly walked down the narrow lane next to the milkbar. At the far end, she turned right and walked along the main street. Fifteen minutes from her home Lilly stopped at the narrow gate at the side of a large factory situated close to the Port of Melbourne. The factory used to be busy when the trucks came and went in a steady stream to drop off and pick up goods for local deliveries. The once attractive factory now looked a derelict due to its leaking roof, rusting metal walls and a tall weed infested garden adjacent to the main gate. The large old factory had been transformed overnight into a weapons and ammunition making factory.

In an attempt to discourage intruders, men had rolled out barbed wire along the top edge of the rusty chicken wire fence that encompassed the factory. Lilly read the large hand-written sign tied to the gate.

‘Job vacancy
see the person inside for details.’

Lilly didn't have to weigh her options. It certainly didn't take her long to decide whether she should venture in or not. She needed a job to restock her pantry, estimating at a stretch there might be enough food for six days.

Not knowing how her decision might change her future, Lilly pushed the rusty gate. She marched along the weed covered path to the door. Stepping inside the place for the first time she could smell the musty air. The interior of the factory looked sterile. Grey walls greeted her. Not a friendly picture of a sunset or a painting of children enjoying themselves at the beach hung from the walls. The narrow area she had entered didn't even have a seat.

When Lilly stepped up to a square hole in the wall, she pushed her head through the gap. The small inner office did nothing to improve her opinion of the place. If the young woman seated at the desk didn't look up, nobody would've known she had entered the building.

Lilly changed her mind. She wanted to leave. Something about the place didn't feel quite right. Goose bumps erupted on her arms. A shiver shot down her spine. She didn't like the feeling and wasn't going to stay long enough to discover the reason. There were plenty of other places she could look. Lilly felt positive she'd find work even if it took her the entire week. She turned her back on the twenty-something-year-old-woman a full second too late.

"Morning," said the woman.

Despite the factory's bleak appearance, the young woman's voice sounded friendly. Out of respect, Lilly whirled around.

"Same to you. I'm sorry I disturbed you. I'm leaving."

"Is there something important you came for?" The woman stood. She straightened her dress, walking over to the square hole in the wall.

"No nothing important. Goodbye."

Before Lilly could take two steps, the woman put her hand on Lilly's arm.

"Don't go. You must have come in here for something? We don't get many visitors wanting to have a look around. I'm Stella Johnston. You are?"

"Lilly Barrett."

"Stay right where you are, I'll come out of the office. It'll feel good to stretch my legs. I've been sitting all morning."

Lilly saw the side door open. Stella stepped out, swinging the door closed. Lilly studied her appearance. The woman was blonde, average height and wore a long grey dress. She held a small paper bag in her hand.

"This is my morning tea," declared Stella, seeing Lilly staring at the scrunched bag. "The morning smoko whistle is about to sound. I always go outside in the fresh air to eat. The air inside the factory leaves a stale taste in my mouth."

"I know what you mean. The minute I stepped into this factory I could taste the musty air," complained Lilly.

"What did you say you came in here for?"

“I didn’t. I just happened to be walking past the gate when I saw the sign. I’m wondering if there are any jobs?” Lilly quickly responded to Stella’s fading expression. “It doesn’t matter if there aren’t. I’m positive I’ll discover work elsewhere.”

“It’s not that there aren’t any jobs available here, every factory is the same. If I were you, I’d leave. Go ask the post office for a job.” Stella took hold of Lilly’s arm and pushed her towards the exit door.

A man’s voice stopped both ladies in their tracks.

“Stella, is there something the young lady wants?”

Lilly looked over her shoulder. The voice belonged to a tall, balding man wearing long black pants, a white short-sleeved shirt, and no tie. His facial features gave away he might be at least triple Lilly’s age. He seemed a little annoyed, walking along the corridor towards them. At another office door, he stopped to look Lilly up and down.

“I’m here to find out if there are any jobs available?” Lilly quizzed. Glancing sideways, her question seemed to infuriate Stella. Still suspecting she shouldn’t be in the factory, Lilly wanted to kick her ankle for being seen in the place. She hoped her request would be denied. To smooth things over Lilly flashed Stella a wiry grin.

The man let go of the office door knob and continued to walk towards Lilly. At arm’s length, he stopped. Again, he studied Lilly’s womanly figure.

“Stella, why didn’t you inform this lovely young woman we have an opening?”

“The smoko whistle is about to sound. I didn’t want to interrupt your usual consuming of a cigar.”

The man thrust his hand out. His stern expression melted the moment he shook Lilly’s hand.

“I’m known as Big Joe. My full name is Joseph Carlisle. You can call me Joe. You are?”

“Lilliana. I prefer to be called Lilly.”

“Follow me,” urged Joe over the shrill of the smoko whistle.

Lilly followed Joe down the narrow corridor to a small office. Upon entering, she watched him close the door then walk over to a table.

“Come sit so we can have a chat,” Joe insisted, smirking.

The untidy office looked confusing. Papers littered the tabletop. The remnant of a salad sandwich was in the middle of a dirty plate. The sides of the white coffee mug the man held in his hand were stained brown.

“Thanks for at least seeing me,” said Lilly, trying not to sound overly enthusiastic at her rash decision to enter the building. Although a loud whistle had sounded, somewhere deep inside the factory the constant boom of a machine could be heard.

“I always have time for a pretty woman asking for a job. Do you have any experience?” asked Joe.

“I have to be honest. No.”

Joe leaned back in his chair, sipping the hot tar-like brew. Placing the dirty mug on the table, he stood. “Follow me.”

Lilly felt completely lost inside the hot factory. The further they walked along the narrow corridor the filthier the air tasted. When they came to a closed door, Joe opened it

and stepped through, holding it open for Lilly. After walking past Joe, she glanced around at what resembled the main production area. Large old machinery dotted the grimy concrete floor. Each machine had a filthy narrow bench next to it. A single light globe hanging from a lead hovered above each bench. Over near the windows on the East side, Joe led Lilly to a round dark green machine with a dome top. The old thing looked to have a circumference of four feet.

“This is the bullet making machine,” explained Joe. “This old machine is easy to operate. You take a handful of short hollow copper tubes out of the box and place them in a vertical position on the narrow conveyor belt. The blocked end must be underneath. The copper tubes move along the belt. As the machine rotates, each copper tube is filled with gunpowder then the head of the bullet is screwed on. It is imperative the gunpowder box is full at all times. We don’t want a bullet to go out of here with no gunpowder in it. By the time the machine does a full circle the bullet drops down the chute, falling into the wooden box. When the box is full, signal young Des to take it and get you another box. The job starts at 6:00am in the morning. The whistle blows to go home at 5:00pm. Smoko is at 9:50am; noon is lunch. You work six days a week. Payday is every Wednesday at 2:00pm.”

“Are you saying I have the job?”

“Yes, of course!” exclaimed Joe Carlisle. “The last girl who worked this machine decided to leave a week ago. I’m down to one machine. Now I have you; I’ll be able to make my full quota for this month.”

“Thank you for giving me the job.”

Big Joe smirked, eyeballing Lilly up and down for the third time. He kept up his grin while he talked.

“Of course, you can work on a few more comforts; if you’re interested, come see me?”

CHAPTER THREE

March 1st 2013

ELOISE STEPPED over to the table as James typed the last word.

“The story has started well. Already I think the novel has charisma,” said Eloise.

James sat back, running his fingers through his thick black hair. “It has been a long time since I have typed non-stop for over an hour. The way you were relaying the words sounded amazing. The juxtaposition is perfect. You’re a natural at telling a story. I feel privileged just being in the same room as you. Why haven’t you typed up the novel before today?”

“I have arthritic fingers. They slow me down, but I’m blessed by your enthusiasm. If you’d kindly open the door, I’ll leave you in peace.”

James marched across the room. Reaching out he opened the door.

"I'll see you early tomorrow for another chapter or two. Thanks again for helping an old woman."

"Believe me; it's no bother. Can I walk you home? See to your comforts?"

"What are you proposing?"

"I don't mind cooking dinner for you."

"There's no need to bother; I'll be fine."

James watched Eloise walk to the lift. She slowly pushed the lift call button. The moment the door started to close she stepped into the lift. She waved just as the door finished closing.

Back in his apartment, James opened the bar fridge. He snatched the wine bottle from off the shelf, pouring half a glass. He felt overjoyed Amanda Daltry should be thrilled about the novel. The way Eloise was relaying the story he felt certain another draft wouldn't be needed. He walked to the table. Hovering over the laptop, sipping the wine he re-read the last half a page.

"Amazing," he whispered when he finished reading the last word. "This first draft is too faultless to change. If only I could write perfectly the first time, a novel might be written in a few weeks and not six months."

James polished off the wine. After placing the glass on the table, he started to concentrate on the information he'd been collecting for his next crime novel. In a couple of minutes, he dismissed the notion, deciding the idea sounded good, but nowhere near enough words.

He stepped out onto the balcony to soak up the afternoon sun. Movement in the pool caught his attention. He never liked to stare at someone for too long, however, the woman in the pool, the one he introduced himself to in the lift looked to be a stunning young lady. His mind soaked up her beauty. Swimming breast stroke, lapping the pool she looked entirely magical. The beauty in her thin curved body was beaten only by the long black hair trailing from her head.

James took it upon himself to swipe two clean glasses out of the cupboard, another small unopened bottle of white wine from the fridge and went downstairs to the pool area. By the time, he arrived the woman began toweling herself dry.

She looked up, displaying a grin.

Mia's skimpy black bikini started to stir James into a state of frenzy. "I thought you might like a white wine?"

"You caught me just thinking about holding a glass in my hand. Uncanny," acknowledged Mia. She took the glass from his hand, waited for James to partly fill it then walked over to a seat at the small round table.

James sat opposite, looking directly at her brown eyes.

"I haven't seen you around today. I take it you've been working?"

"Yes."

"How's it going?"

"Very nicely indeed; I'm positive my publicist will love the romance in it."

"You told me you only write crime novels."

“Yes, I did. Amanda Daltry insisted I write a romance novel this time around.” James leaned forward. Even though three feet separated him and Mia and after her stint in the pool he believed he could smell the perfume she dabbed behind her ears earlier in the day. The sweet aroma lingered in his nostrils. “What about you?”

“I’m suffering from writer’s block in a big way. It’s the reason why I’m here. I need to relax for a while. I’m hoping this place will inspire me.”

“It should. The area has stunning ocean views; the surrounding bush helps to make the imagination kick into high gear. This hotel building reeks of mysteries.”

“I’m sorry I don’t hold your enthusiasm. When I look at this place, to me, it reeks of a sterile environment.”

“If there’s anything I can do, I’m right across the hall,” hinted James.

“I’ll try to remember that fact,” said Mia. “I looked up your books on the web. I’ve read the synopsis and the first chapter of the Kendal chronicles. It’s quite impressive.”

“Thanks. Any feedback is extremely valuable.” James dropped his gaze to the table. “Mia, I do owe you an apology. I’ve been too busy to look up yours. I did plan to read your work sometime today. I know this might sound like a cop out, but it’s true. I met this wonderful old lady. She’s asked me to type up her novel.”

“If I were to guess I’d have to say you are having trouble writing?”

James nodded. “I’m suffering from writer’s block too, though I think I’m slowly overcoming the problem.”

“Have you mentioned anything about the blockage to your publicist?”

“No. If Amanda ever found out, I reckon I’d be history. Amanda Daltry expects her authors to spit out the novels while the readers are longing for more. I’m certain she only thinks of the money side of things.”

“What about the time it takes to type up the novel for this woman. Shouldn’t she be told to wait until after you have at least written the first draft of this so-called romance novel you’re expected to write?”

James moved his chair closer to Mia’s. He smiled at her questionable expression.

“The old woman told me to take her novel to my publicist. She wants me to put my name to it. I’ll own the copyright and one hundred percent of the royalties.”

“What a strange thing to say. Doesn’t she want a percentage of the profits?”

“No. She sounded firm on the idea,” said James.

“It’s a shame she didn’t ask me, I’d have done it,” grumbled Mia. “Seeing how you’re desperate for a novel I hope you’re not thinking of stealing her idea from behind her back?”

“I’d never do such a horrid thing,” blurted James. “If I were to do it, I would never tell a soul.”

Mia swallowed the last of the wine and sat back.

James watched Mia close her eyes. He saw her chest rise then fall several times. He heard her sigh.

“I wish I had come across the same luck. I’ve been trying to shake off this writer’s block for two whole years.”

“It’s only been a few months for me. I don’t think I could handle having to wait like you,” admitted James.

“It’s been a nightmare. The only thing I’ve ever wanted to do for a career is to be an author. When I was twelve, I handed my Grandmother the first story I ever wrote. She took it, displaying the broadest smile I’ve ever seen. She promised to read every word. A few days later she handed it back. For the next two hours, we went through each sentence. She was a great teacher. She pointed out several mistakes and helped me to understand how some paragraphs could be written a whole lot better. I remember her looking directly into my eyes, saying, I’ll make a great author one day. Not only have I got the imagination to conjure up great plots, she told me if I practice the editing process it won’t be long before I’ll be able to mingle with the elite. I watched her leave that day thinking, what a professional.”

James saw tears fall from Mia’s eyes. He watched her lift her hand to wipe them away.

“I’m sorry for rambling. I miss my Grandmother. She was the only one who ever showed any interest in my stories. One day I’m going to tell her I made it to the elite.”

“The marcasite locket you wear around your neck, does it contain a photo of your Grandmother?”

“Yes, it does and the locket is made of solid silver.”

“I apologize, I didn’t know. Is there a chance I can see the photo?”

Mia shook her head. “No. I don’t want the photo to be tarnished. On the anniversary of my Grandmother’s funeral, I open the locket, look at her photo for a few minutes then I close it for another twelve months.”

“When did your Grandmother die?”

“One week after correcting my story, a man marched into the bank with intentions to rob it. My Grandmother smacked him over the head with her shopping bag half full of vegetables. He retaliated by shooting her at point blank range.”

“I don’t know what to say,” stammered James.

Mia stood, slapping him on the leg. “It happened a long time ago. At my Grandmother’s funeral, I told her photo, the one sitting on the coffin, I’m going to make her proud. I promised her I’ll be the great author she said I could be. Ten novels later, I was doing okay. Now I’ve hit this cursed writer’s block.”

“I’d like to ask you out for dinner,” said James. He jumped to his feet.

“I always view an invitation to dinner by a man to be dangerous.”

“What if I promise there’ll be no strings attached? No coffee at my place afterwards; just a nice dinner watching the sunset and the moon rise. We can discuss how we can free up our writer’s block and how we’re both so hard done by.”

Mia slowly nodded. “I guess I should get ready to go.”

CHAPTER FOUR

THE RESTAURANT overlooking the beach boasted forty tables. A flickering candle was in a small glass dish in the middle of each table. Already quite a number of people were seated, making the building appear full.

“My last name is Buxton. I’d like a table for two,” announced James, studying the expression on the young girl’s face hunched over the booking’s computer. Reaching out, he took hold of her Mia’s hand. She noted he looked a little smug.

“Did you ring ahead to reserve a table?” asked the girl. “We’re booked solid tonight.”

“Yes, I did. I specifically requested a table out on the verandah.”

“Mr. Buxton, I’ve just found your name. Please follow me.”

The girl escorted Mia and James across the room to the outside verandah. The warm breeze wafting from the North earlier had abated further, leaving the air hot and not so pleasant.

“It is nice outside in the evening air, but a breeze will make it more tolerable,” said James the moment the girl started to walk away.

“Yes, it will,” agreed Mia.

James waited for Mia to sit before sliding onto the chair opposite her. A young male walked towards them holding an open bottle of white wine. His body weight made the verandah floorboards creak several times.

“Would either of you care to have a free glass of wine?” he asked.

“Sounds delightful,” said Mia.

“We’ll both have a glass,” ordered James, looking up at the young man.

“This wine is a house special and is four-years-old,” he explained, pouring the drinks.

“Thank you, I’m sure it’ll taste nice,” said Mia.

When the lad walked away from the table James looked directly at Mia. He raised his wine glass.

“I propose a toast; to the end of our writer’s block!”

“Goodbye to the blockage.”

Mia heard a clink when her glass banged against James’. She swallowed a mouthful. Placing the glass back on the table, she glued her gaze on James. She displayed an appeasing smile. He grinned back then started to read the menu card.

Mia stared through the glass doors at the interior of the restaurant. The girl had been correct. The place looked to be filling fast. Their reservation seemed to be well timed. If James had called any later they’d be sitting on the beach amongst the seagulls sharing a pizza.

James flashed the girl waitress a beckoning expression. She finished taking another couple’s order then walked over. She seemed a little flustered from the heat and stagnant outside air. James was about to comment when she spoke.

“In about thirty minutes when the sun is almost gone the air will feel more comfortable.”

“Thanks for the reassurance,” said James.

“Are you ready to order?”

Mia turned her head away from the people sitting inside the restaurant to focus on the girl. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Please forgive me for leaving, I’ll be right back.”

Mia and James watched her march back inside the restaurant. They saw her disappear into the kitchen only to reappear carrying a small book. Hovering over James, she pushed the book and a gold-plated pen under his nose.

“I don’t mean to spoil your evening; could you please sign my autograph book? My parents won’t believe me when I tell them I met the author of the Kendal Chronicles. Fire Games was a great read.”

“Certainly!” exclaimed James. “I feel ecstatic you recognized me.”

“You look exactly the same as your photo that is on the back cover of the book.”

James signed his name on a blank page. Smiling, he returned the book and the pen.

“Thanks,” said the girl. It was then she turned her attention to Mia. “I’ve seen your photo in the book titled ‘The Girl From Emerald Hill.’ Can I trouble you for your autograph?”

“Certainly,” chirped Mia. “The book’s been out for a good eighteen months. When did you buy it?”

“Yesterday. I’ve only just started reading the first chapter. So far I love it.”

After the girl took the dinner order she skipped away acting delighted at owning another two autographs in her book.

Mia and James devoured a seafood cocktail, shared a lobster dish and drank a latte each for desert.

“I’ve never been in this place. I must have driven past here more than twenty times over the last two years. It’s nice,” mentioned Mia.

“I’m happy you liked it.”

A slow musical tune erupted from the speaker behind them. James dropped his napkin onto the table and stood. He held out his hand.

“Are we leaving?”

“I’m hoping you might like to dance?”

“I thought you said there would be no strings attached to the dinner?”

“I lied,” admitted James.

“Good.”

James escorted Mia to the small three-metre square dance floor. They swayed in unison to the beat of the song.

“You have an attractive smile and lovely eyes,” whispered James.

“You’re not getting mushy?” questioned Mia.

“No. I just wanted to say a compliment.”

“I’ll accept your compliment,” said Mia. “You’re quite a smooth dancer.”

“Thanks for your observation,” remarked James.

He was enjoying the dance. He couldn’t remember the last time he held a young woman in his arms. He didn’t realize how much he had missed the formal embrace.

Standing extra close to Mia felt wonderful. James breathed in the perfume she had dabbed on her neck. It smelt expensive. The breeze finally picked up, wafting the smell of the shampoo she used after her swim into the air. James glanced sideways at her hair. The last of the sun's rays made several strands sparkle.

When the music from the second slow song erupted from the speaker, Mia looked in the direction of the jukebox. Although she couldn't see anyone near the machine, it seemed to be playing whatever it liked. She frowned a little then dismissed the mystery. When she heard the tail end of the third song fading, Mia again looked sideways at the jukebox hoping to discover the person feeding coins into the machine. Not one person approached the jukebox.

James slipped his hands onto Mia's hips, waiting to hear the start of the next song. He was about to lean forward and kiss her when the music commenced. Mia heard the melody, but her eyes were transfixed on James. She longed to taste the man. She prayed the night might go slow. She hoped he felt the same.

Over the years James had dated a number of women. He found they were all the same. He suspected they didn't want a lasting relationship. He did. Mia wasn't like those other women. Holding her close he could feel her love. Her magnetism drew him helplessly in. He studied her face. Mia's eyes were ablaze. James moved closer. The sliver of light between them disappeared. He longed to taste her. To make love to her. He knew falling in love was a foregone conclusion. Somehow, he needed to convey he wanted Mia in his life forever. His no strings attached sentence he said earlier to get her to agree to dinner happened to be a winner; now he wanted so much more.

Swaying only slightly to the music, the couple stood alone in the middle of the dance floor. James could feel Mia's warm breath brush his cheeks.

James stopped swaying. He could feel Mia's hips still moving against his. He saw her lips move slightly apart. The rising full moon over her left shoulder helped to make her two perfectly shaped red lips irresistible. He needed to feel them against his. He applied a gentle pressure to her shoulders. Mia didn't complain or resist the move.

When the music finished, the jukebox fell silent.

Mia inhaled the manly smell of James' aftershave he poured over his face earlier. She closed her eyes waiting for the moment their lips touched. She could feel his warm breath. Slowly and ever so gently the surface of their lips scraped. For a few quick heartbeats, they touched and retouched. When the next song started, they were locked together. For the first time in his adult life, James felt loved. He didn't have to try to conjure up a romantic scene between two characters just to keep Amanda Daltry happy. He was living the scene. James wrapped his arms tighter around Mia's waist. Her cheeks pressed into his. The touching of her skin felt warm, soft, and perfect in every way.

Mia lapped up the loving contact. Later she'd ponder the question; 'could she dare to even think they might have a future together.' Right now, at her fingertips she held a man who seemed to want her, to show her love, a kindness, a gentleness she'd never known. James wasn't like any bloke she'd ever met. He appeared to be easygoing, thoughtful, caring. Mia could tell he possessed a gentle nature. She pushed all her doubts and questions

away. Standing on the dance floor, the moonlight beaming through the window, she just wanted to feel his love.

Eventually, the two dancers walked back to their table.

“Do you want to go?” asked Mia.

James couldn’t comprehend the thought of ending the night. He didn’t want to take his eyes off Mia. Deep down he hoped to enjoy her company while they watched the sky lighten. Reluctantly he said yes on a sigh.

Mia swiped her purse from the table, picking out seventy dollars.

“The meal is on me. I invited you, I’ll pay,” insisted James.

Mia wedged her small bag under her arm. “I won’t be long. I’d like to go freshen up.”

“I’ll meet you at the main desk,” said James, feeling slightly depressed at having to end the night.

Only a couple of minutes had ticked off when James spied Mia walking across the polished concrete floor. She flashed James a luring grin as she stepped level to him. It was then Mia turned her attention to the young lady standing behind the reservation’s computer.

“The jukebox played four nice slow songs in a row. I’m wondering who put the money in the slot and picked out the songs?”

“I don’t know who did it,” the girl replied. “What I can tell you is that the jukebox hasn’t been able to have a song queue for in excess of two years. The owner of this place rang a technician to have it fixed. The bloke came out, checked the machine and said it wasn’t worth it. He went on to say the jukebox was too old. He also said he could fix it, however, he recommended to leave it as is. The Boss said, provided it still worked he wasn’t going to waste his money.”

“To have four songs played one after the other someone must have picked the next song?” remarked James, leaning over the desktop.

Even though the girl looked a little startled at the comment, she nodded her understanding.

“A group of ladies were seated at the table closest to the jukebox. They must have picked the songs when you were kissing?” she suggested.

“Thanks for clearing up the event,” said James. He marched to the door, yanking it open.

Mia hurried to step outside.

“How do you feel about a slow walk along the shoreline?” asked James.

“I’ve always loved a stroll along a pier. A nice sea breeze might be blowing across the far end,” hinted Mia.

“The pier it is!” announced James, smoothly. He reached out, taking hold of Mia’s hand. While they walked, he watched her looking out across the bay.

The moment they stepped onto the sand, Mia stopped and looked directly at James.

“Don’t you think it strange we saw nobody at the Jukebox?”

“I guess so. Maybe the girl doesn’t know the owner of the restaurant paid to have the machine fixed.”

“It could be a solution,” said Mia, thoughtfully.

“I’m not certain there’s a mystery here or not.”

Mia stepped out of her heels. She scooted ahead a few steps, whizzing around in the sand. “We’re writers. We should be thinking about the reason why. I’m convinced if we do, it will help kick start our imagination again.”

“I guess the reason for the song queue could be solved a number of different ways.”

James reached out, snatching Mia’s high heel shoes. He carried them in his left hand and slipped his free hand around hers. He led the way towards the pier via the edge of the water. The gentle lap of the minuscule waves brushing the sand sounded inviting. The weather felt warm enough for a swim. Mia dragged James into the water up to his knees.

Navigating around the end of a rock wall, he stepped onto the pier, dragging Mia up.

They walked along the wooden boards in silence, both entertaining themselves in the mystery. At the halfway point when the warm breeze started to tease the ends of Mia’s hair, she stopped. Leaning casually against the wooden railing she looked seductively at James, sighing heavily. James stepped over, pushing his body against hers. Mia leaned in for a kiss.

James responded enthusiastically.

Finally, Mia whispered in his ear. “I don’t care about the jukebox, I’m glad it worked. Our dance followed by the kiss felt amazing.”

James let a grin slip from the corner of his mouth. “When we were dancing I blocked out everything except us. It felt like we were the only ones on the planet.”

Mia kissed James on the cheek then walked towards the end of the pier. James quickly caught up, slipping his arm around her waist. He could feel Mia copying his move.

They strolled past a young teenage boy holding a fishing rod. In the bucket, Mia found a small Whiting. By the time they reached the end of the pier, the moon, a massive bright ball looked to be at the highest point in the sky. They kissed and hugged while a few men fished. Mia and James watched them come and go. Some were lucky in catching fish. Others went home empty handed.

“It’s nice out here.” James leaned against the end railing. “You’re correct about the breeze.”

“It’s been a lovely night. I haven’t been out for dinner in a long time.”

“Yes, it’s been an extra special night.”

At around two in the morning, James drove Mia back to the hotel. Somewhere in the garden, a cricket started his noisy chirping, searching for a mate.

“I’m not ready to call it a night. I thought you might like to see out the evening sitting next to the pool, sipping white wine?” suggested James.

“Even though we’ve already kissed I feel I must stay committed to what I agreed to earlier about no strings attached.”

“Good,” said James. “It has been a rewarding night. I’ve enjoyed your company immensely.”

“I’ve enjoyed yours too. I’m feeling tired all of a sudden. I think it’s time for some sleep.”

James escorted Mia up the stairs. When they got to her door she looked at him. He felt a prisoner to the moment.

“Now for the awkward part,” he whispered.

“Why?”

“I have to leave you and walk to my room. Seeing how we still agree on the idea of no strings attached, I’d like to honour what I said. When I look at you, it’s not easy. Mia, you’re the most beautiful woman I have ever seen.”

James hesitantly backed stepped.

“Goodnight,” said Mia.

She opened the door to her room, walked inside and shut the door. For a few minutes, she stood leaning against the wall staring into the darkness. Eventually she stepped outside onto the narrow balcony, stared at the mountain directly behind the hotel while thinking about the passion in the kisses, wondering if she should cave in and invite James to make love to her. For seven minutes, she stood trying to decide.

Finally, Mia marched to the bar fridge and opened a bottle of wine. She swiped two glasses out of the cupboard. With a sparkle in her eyes, she walked towards the door. When she stepped into the corridor James opened his door. For a heart stopping moment they gazed at each other.

“You’ve changed into shorts and a light blue shirt,” stated Mia, making small talk.

“I wanted to match your blue mini skirt and bare feet,” replied James.

“I’m wondering what you’d say if I invited you to escort me to the pool? We can polish off the wine and talk while watching the dark sky turn light?”

“I’d say yes,” said James.

The two sat on deck chairs at poolside talking while watching the moon sink in the clear night sky. When the sky started to lighten, James escorted Mia back to her room. Taking the swipe card out of her hand he unlocked the door and pushed it open. Mia hesitated just long enough for James to slip his arm around her waist, dragging her in close. Mia searched his eyes. His pupils were dancing as he studied her face.

“A night without strings?” she whispered, smiling seductively.

“I do remember saying something along those lines.”

“I don’t.”

“Come to think of it, I’m not certain if I did say those words,” whispered James.

“Words have volleyed back and forth between us the entire night. I can’t recall if those particular words were ever spoken by either of us.”

James leaned closer.

Mia met him halfway. For a few agonizing seconds, she actually thought he might suggest they make love. If he did she wasn’t sure if she would be strong enough to say no. More than likely she’d agree. Inwardly she hoped he would ask.

James kissed Mia for a long time.

She kissed him back.

James wanted above anything else to suggest they make love. He wanted her. He needed her. Mia’s body language told him she felt the same. James loosened his grip to relay a message he respected the woman. Hours earlier he had discovered they both didn’t jump into bed on every date. He must take control of himself. Letting the beautiful woman off the hook was extremely difficult.

Simultaneously Mia and James back stepped and said goodnight.

CHAPTER FIVE

“JAMES, IT’S time to start work.”

Eloise stood at the foot of the bed watching the sleeping man. The morning sunlight had already beamed a bright line across his face.

James managed to open an eye. Through blurred vision, he found a woman staring at him. He moved his head to focus on the green crystal numbers on the digital clock next to the bed.

“Do you know what time it is?” he croaked.

“Of course, I do, it’s six in the morning. The best time to start writing.”

Burying his head deeper into the pillow, James applied pressure to both sides of his head hoping the act might stop the throbbing.

“How did you get in?” he moaned.

“I found the door unlocked. You should be more careful. Anyone could walk in.”

“I closed it after I came home this morning,” groaned James.

“You obviously forgot to lock the door.”

James hauled his naked body out of the bed. Forgetting the fact, he wasn’t dressed he stumbled out of the room towards the kitchen.

Eloise covered her eyes, following him.

“Coffee?” he croaked. James reached for the kettle, flicking the on switch.

“No thanks, I don’t drink coffee,” replied Eloise, giggling.

“I do. I can’t start the day without gulping down at least one full mug of coffee.”

“If I were to make a guess I’d say you don’t think too clearly until you’ve swallowed at least two full mugs of the tar-like brew.”

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, James yawned. “I had a late night.”

“Yes, I know. The small restaurant seemed nice. Who did you invite to dinner?” asked Eloise.

“A lovely young lady. She’s a writer just like me.” James stopped pouring crushed coffee beans into a mug to stare at Eloise. “How did you know we went out for dinner?”

“Another lucky guess,” answered Eloise. “What have I told you about writing?”

“I can’t remember.” James swallowed the cold mug of coffee and poured another. He lifted his hand to rub his throbbing temple. “I honestly can’t remember.”

“While you’re having the second cup of coffee, think about it. By the way, do you want to go put some clothes on?”

James’ protruding eyes painted a grin on Eloise’s face. She watched him snatch a dishcloth from the sink and sprint back into the bedroom. A few minutes later he came out

of the room wearing jeans and a short-sleeved shirt. He stood in front of Eloise displaying a red face.

"I apologize," he whispered.

"It's quite okay, though I haven't seen a naked man for a number of years. Tell me about this lovely lady. Did you give her a kiss goodnight?"

"Yes, I did. The sky happened to be lightening when I leaned in for a kiss. It's uncanny how she leaned in at the same time. It was as though she expected a kiss."

"Good for you," chirped Eloise. "You didn't answer my question about writing."

"Did I tell you she's a writer too?"

"Yes." Eloise sat at the table clasping her hands together. She didn't look too pleased.

"Have I said something wrong?"

"You have yet to answer my question."

"Suspense," replied James. "It's about the delivery."

"This is different. You've plainly forgotten what I've taught you."

James sat opposite Eloise looking into her eyes. His brain felt like he was still in a fog with patches of sunlight seeping through.

"James Buxton, if you can't even remember what I have been teaching you, how on Earth will you ever be a more successful writer?"

"I have to view myself as an author."

"Now you're starting to learn."

"It must be the coffee kicking in."

"Tell the young lady you took to dinner last night she has to believe in herself too. I want you to teach her what I'm teaching you. When she sees the light her writer's block will vanish, never to return."

"How did you know about Mia's writer's block?"

"Another lucky guess," whispered Eloise, displaying a snappy grin.

"You're having a lot of lucky guesses. Do you want to enlighten me about them?"

"At this moment, no," said Eloise, abruptly. "It's about the suspense James. If I tell you everything too soon what's there to look forward to?"

James hauled himself from the seat and walked into the kitchen to pour another mug of coffee. He gulped half of the cooling brew, refilled the mug and wandered back to sit in front of the laptop. James reached out, pushing the on button. Exactly where they got up to the previous day came on the screen. James put the coffee mug down.

"I'm ready. Can you remember where you were up to in the story?"

"I know exactly where I got up to."

James lowered his fingers to the keyboard. "Start talking."

"We can move the story along a few months. It's now 14th of December 1939AD. Don't forget to write in the third person."

James glanced sideways at Eloise. "Thanks for reminding me. By the way, your hair seems a little longer and not so grey today."

"It must be the light pouring in through the window."

"Or I must still be tired."

Eloise continued her story after sighing heavily.

“Lilly’s days drifted into months. Still the bullet making machine turned. Every now and then it broke down. She’d groan and go find the maintenance man. He would adjust the internal chain then restart the machine.

One particular morning the machine broke around 9:00am. On the way to finding the maintenance man, one of the other ladies grabbed Lilly by the arm, pulling her into the small narrow cleaner’s shed.

“Suzie what’s wrong?” asked Lilly.

“Mr. Carlisle has been watching you.”

“He is the Boss,” stated Lilly. Her brow wrinkled.

“He’s been watching you with his eyes.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Lilly Barrett, do I have to spell it out for you?”

“Please. Do.” Looking directly into Suzie’s eyes, Lilly noticed her calmness was gone, replaced by a frantic expression. “What’s wrong? We’ve known each other for months now. If you tell me what’s bothering you, I promise to keep it a secret.”

“You started here two weeks after I did. We have grown quite close,” whispered Suzie.

“Tell me what’s wrong?”

“Carlisle thinks just because the men are overseas he can have his pick of women. He makes his move after he successfully lures the woman into his office. A pretty girl like you, I’m surprised he hasn’t tried yet. Though I guess he hasn’t grown bored with me.”

“Are you trying to tell me he expects to have sex with every lady in the factory?” questioned Lilly.

“That is exactly what I’m conveying. I have done lots of research on Carlisle. I’ve been watching and writing down everything he does. He only employs the good-looking women. He waits for the time they have settled into the job and get used to the money rolling in then he makes his move. The first thing he does is to call them to his office. After locking the door, he blackmails every girl into agreeing to have sex. I’ve talked to the other girls. He’s had sex with each one in date order.”

“Why don’t they leave? Tell the police?”

“A few have tried. The cops have a standard answer. There’s a war on. A few days later the girl vanishes.”

Lilly clamped a hand over her mouth to muffle her scream. She glanced around the factory floor hoping no one could hear their conversation. Seeing nobody looking at them she refocused on Suzie.

“What about you?” Lilly questioned.

“He cornered me in his office four weeks ago. I’m the fifteenth in date order. I’m one hundred percent correct. The moment he’s finished screwing me, you’re next in line. After you, it will be the new girl he employed yesterday.”

“Have you warned her?”

“No not yet. Lilly, you have to promise me you won’t tell a soul about what I’m going to say.”

Lilly stared directly into Suzie’s eyes. “I don’t gossip. What you tell me I will never repeat. I’ll take it to my grave.”

Suzie darted her head left then right to make certain nobody was in earshot; especially Carlisle. She cupped her hand around her mouth, whispering in Lilly's ear.

"I'm pregnant. It's Carlisle's baby."

Lilly swallowed the vomit in her throat. Trying to play down the accusation she said quickly. "Are you, positive it's his? Maybe the baby is actually your husband's?"

"Eric left for the Mediterranean Sea fifteen weeks ago. It's definitely Carlisle's."

"What will you do?"

"I've decided I must have the baby," whispered Suzie.

"Maybe you should confront Carlisle. Convince him the baby is his."

"He'll deny the whole thing."

"He won't when you're holding your baby."

"He'll say it's my husband's baby."

"Explain it to his wife."

"I'll get the same result. If I leave this place I'll have no money coming in. If I try to explain to the cops what happened, they don't care. Lilly, I don't want to end up like the other girls; underwater, weighed down by a heavy chain," growled Suzie.

"How do you know it happened like that? Not one of the missing women has ever been found."

"I do know," spat Suzie. "I went to the police three days ago to make a statement about what Carlisle has been doing. The cop I'd been talking to was called away. I saw an official looking paper on the desk. Lilly, I picked it up. The police report under it had a photo of one of the girl's who went missing three weeks after she started in this factory. The report read; a fisherman found her underwater at the end of the pier, weighed down by a thick chain."

Lilly didn't want to see Suzie dead or hear Carlisle got away with raping the female workers or worse; murder.

"There has to be something we can do," whispered Lilly.

"Yes, there is."

"Tell me," urged Lilly. "Suzie, you know I'll help in any way I can."

Seeing the new girl walking their way, Suzie pushed Lilly further into the cleaner's shed. They waited patiently for the young single woman to walk past before continuing their conversation.

"You have to double promise me what you're about to hear you will never repeat. If you say anything to anyone I'll be in a lot of trouble. I might even go to prison."

"I promise. I have already told you I'll take what you say to my grave." Lilly hugged Suzie when she saw her starting to tremble. "It'll be okay. I'll help you get through this. I'll stick by you come what may."

"Thanks. I need a real friend right now."

"You can count on me," insisted Lilly.

For the umpteenth time, Suzie studied the factory floor. Lilly did too. Everyone looked to be uninterested in the two ladies gasbagging inside the cleaner's shed.

"It's almost smoko," mentioned Suzie, fiddling with the inside of her pockets.

"Stop stalling. Tell me what you're thinking?"

Suzie sighed heavily. When she stared directly into Lilly's eyes her face looked hard. Every friendly line on her face had vanished. Her eyes appeared lifeless. Lilly felt shocked at her friend's cold heartless expression and a little nervous at the news she was about to hear.

"I'm going to kill the bastard."

Lilly took a moment to digest the six words. She summed up Suzie as not making a practical joke. This was no laughing matter. She looked hell bent on seeing the six words she just spoke brought forward into reality very soon.

"How?" stammered Lilly.

"It will look like an accident. I've talked to my brother. He's agreed to help. I have already stated I've been recording everything Carlisle does in the day and when he does it. I believe I've thought up the perfect plan."

"Why are you telling me?"

"I need your help for it to work."

Lilly back stepped away. Suzie grabbed her, pushing Lilly into the rear corner.

"Let me go. I can never be involved in anything so horrendous. Besides, I need this job just like you do. No job, no money. What will your husband say if he finds out?"

"He won't. I'll be saying the baby's his. I'll keep the secret all my living days. If Carlisle isn't stopped, he'll keep screwing the workers. Who knows how long this war will last. Lilly, I don't want to end up dead like the other girl."

"There must be another way?"

"There is no other way," spat Suzie.

"There has to be, you just haven't found it yet."

"You're my only hope. Lilly, you must keep an open mind about my plan. If it's true and I know it is Carlisle will make his move on you and soon. Think about my idea. Let me know what you have decided by the end of the day. Remember, you're next on Carlisle's list."

"Maybe you're wrong."

Suzie shook her head slowly. "I'm not wrong."

"The bastard," spat Lilly, sounding colder by the minute.

The girls heard the maintenance man walking along the corridor. It was a good thing he always grumbled over anything. His presence rang the alarm bell. Lilly noted her friend looked panic stricken. Her hands were trembling faster as she pushed her long hair behind her ears.

"Don't tell my secret," whispered Suzie. She abruptly ended the conversation when she saw Mr. Smith.

Lilly stepped from the cleaner's shed in time to bump into the maintenance man.

"You scared me half to death," yelled Mr. Smith holding his chest. "I must have a strong heart. You ladies scare me every day in one way or the other."

"Sorry," said Suzie, stepping from the cleaner's shed. She flashed Lilly a stern look, marching off to the other side of the factory.

"I'm sorry too; I thought you might be in the shed. The way you move around this factory so fast you resemble a twenty-four-year-old," remarked Lilly.

“Bribery will get you everywhere. What is it this time?”

“The bullet machine has stopped working again.”

“Again?” echoed Mr. Smith. He checked his watch, grumbling. “It’s nearly smoko time. I’ll fix the globe in the women’s toilet after I’ve fixed the machine. Carlisle has told me the machines in the factory must have priority.”

“Mr. Smith, if you teach me, I’ll be able to fix the machine myself instead of calling you,” said Lilly.

“I doubt if a woman could grasp the internal workings or appreciate their function.”

“I’m not trying to take your job away. I’m thinking it’ll lighten your workload and you won’t have to walk around this factory as much. I’ve noticed your limp seems to be getting worse.”

Old Mr. Smith scratched his balding head. “I wouldn’t mind slowing down. Nobody knows this; it’s my seventy-ninth birthday tomorrow.”

“Happy birthday,” sang Lilly. “I’ve been misinformed by someone who told me you are only seventy-four.”

“I’ll take your words as a compliment. Lately, I’ve been feeling at least a hundred.”

Lilly kissed Mr. Smith on the cheek for his upcoming birthday.

“How can I say no? Come on, I’ll give you a guided tour of the internal workings of the machine.”

Mr. Smith carried his small tool box and led the way to Lilly’s machine. Satisfied Mr. Carlisle wasn’t around he got to work. Lilly listened intently to Mr. Smith’s explanation of what each part did on the machine. Even though Mr. Smith wasn’t convinced Lilly understood the internal workings of the machine she lovingly renamed the ‘Old Clunker,’ he felt a deep sense of pride that he could relay to someone what he knew.

“You would have made a great teacher,” hinted Lilly, out of the blue.

Mr. Smith glanced sideways at her. He lifted his hand, smudging grease on the end of Lilly’s nose. He laughed at the way his only pupil giggled.

Finally, he began to explain what went wrong.

“To stop the chain from rattling then falling off the sprocket you must turn the adjustment knob on the inside of the machine.”

“Why can’t you replace the old chain with a new one?”

“Lilly, there’s a war on. This factory runs on rags for replacement parts. Carlisle has been informed don’t ask for spare parts, in turn, he told me. Don’t get me wrong, it’s a good thing. It keeps me in a job, though it’s getting harder to keep these old machines working.”

Mr. Smith banged the square green cover closed. He pointed his finger directly at Lilly’s face. He displayed a cold uncaring expression, quite the opposite to his friendly attitude for the past fifteen minutes. Lilly felt somewhat taken-a-back by the look.

“I’m going to give you a timely warning about this machine or any other in this factory. I don’t want to see you ever put a finger inside a machine while it’s moving. If you’re brave enough to do what I just did, it’s not hard. Never forget to pull the power lead to the machine out of the wall socket. If I catch you not heeding my warning, I’ll foot you up the arse. Do I make myself crystal clear?”

Lilly desperately wanted to backstep away from the man, but through fear her feet were frozen to the floor. She had never heard Mr. Smith talk so angrily. She could feel his eyes boring a hole into her brain. She loathed the feeling. Slowly Lilly managed to complete three feeble nods.

Mr. Smith winked to lighten the moment. "I'm sorry I spoke harshly to you." He lifted his left hand to show Lilly the reason why. "I learned the hard way. The end of my middle finger was ripped off when I serviced a machine thirty years ago. I was in a rush to get to another machine in the fastest possible time. I decided not to turn the power off at the wall. I took a short cut. I paid the price." He reached out and lifted Lilly's hand to eye level. "I'd be unhappy for the remainder of my days if I saw part of a missing finger on one of your beautiful hands." Mr. Smith leaned forward, kissing her knuckles. He flashed a grin, pushing past Lilly as he rushed off to fix the light globe in the women's toilet.

Lilly needed to adjust the Old Clunker to stop the rattle a couple of times over the next hour. When she opened, the green cover the third time, she stared at the inner workings trying to think of a way to fix it permanently. With an idea in mind she marched off to the spare parts storeroom. Just inside the small room she spied a small tin of paint. She grabbed it and a screwdriver then trotted back to the old bullet making machine. She dabbed a small amount of paint on the chain every six inches. When she had finally moved the chain a full lap she started counting the white dots in an attempt to discover the exact length of the chain.

"Three-foot ten inches. I reckon that is the same length as my new bicycle chain. When it's lunch time I'll go out, get the chain off my bike and replace the chain in the Old Clunker. I'll have to walk home, but at least if this works the machine will be permanently fixed."

Lilly closed the back cover and pushed the start button, quickly settling into an easy rhythm. Her fourth wooden box for the day looked to be almost full when she spied Carlisle watching her. She felt as though his perving eyes were undressing her. When he started walking across the dirty concrete floor towards her she began to panic. Every muscle in Lilly's back instantly tightened, sending a cold shiver down her spine. She could feel her heart pounding harder forcing her head to throb. Using her peripheral vision, Lilly saw Carlisle not more than ten feet away. She gulped down the lump in her throat. Her cheeks drained of colour.

"Have you seen Suzie?" Carlisle called.

"She's not well. She's in the loo throwing up," snapped Lilly, not looking at the man.

Carlisle turned his head towards the women's toilet block. He looked to be teetering on whether to go and investigate. Finally, he grumbled. "I want to see you in my office."

He waited for Lilly to power down the bullet making machine. When the revs died he led the way along the narrow corridor. Lilly felt like she was being escorted to the police station where she'd be interrogated, or worse, tortured into telling any secrets she knew. Suzie's warning made her headache feel worse. Her footsteps sounded distant. The noise her boots made swirled around inside her brain. She saw Carlisle open the door to his office. His smirk appeared evil. He watched Lilly enter the room. The last thing Lilly saw was Stella's concerned face as the door was slammed shut.

Waiting for Carlisle to walk behind his desk, Lilly wondered if Stella knew what might have happened to the other women. If she did, why didn't she warn her or the others of the danger of working in the factory? She decided Carlisle might be blackmailing her into silence. Eyeballing Carlisle, Lilly made up her mind Suzie must be correct. Still, she needed the proof before committing herself to Suzie's plan.

"Take a seat," instructed Carlisle, pointing at the chair opposite him.

Lilly sat on her hands in an attempt to hide her nervousness. A nerve in her leg twitched several times. She crossed her legs to block the feeling. She watched Carlisle step over to the window. For a long time, he stared outside.

"There's a war going on," he said finally. "Over the past twelve weeks you've settled into the job nicely. I'm most impressed." Carlisle returned to his desk. He flopped onto the seat staring directly at Lilly. "I love the colour of your green eyes. They have a shine to them." He leaned sideways, opening the top drawer of his desk, pulling out three one-pound notes. He placed them on the desktop under Lilly's nose one at a time. "A bonus," he remarked. "It's not much, but you deserve it. There is another two pounds if you do what I ask. Five pounds will set you up for quite a while. The money will help you to buy a new dress, maybe get your hair curled. A beautiful woman like you should have nice things."

Lilly saw Carlisle stand. She watched him walk over to the door. She heard the lock click.

"You have needs, so do I," he whispered.

Carlisle stepped to where Lilly sat. Placing his hands on her shoulders he gave her neck a quick massage. She stiffened at his touch.

"I'm not that kind of girl."

"Yes, you are."

Lilly could feel him leaning into her. She saw his hands move down her arms and grope for her breasts.

Shocked at knowing Suzie's story was without a doubt one hundred percent correct, Lilly jumped to her feet. Trembling from head to foot from a mixture of embarrassment and rage she glared directly at Carlisle.

"Stay away from me," she spat. "I need to work. I don't want to be bullied by you."

"Ask yourself why you got the job in the first place? I'm not a bad person. I have a contract to supply weapons and bullets for the war. I believe I'm keeping up my end."

"Not with me you're not."

"When you go home tonight have a good think about my offer. The one I'm about to make. If you volunteer to have me seven times, I promise you'll have a job in my factory for the duration of the war. Let me warn you, if you don't turn up for work I have two hundred women who want your job. No work means no money to pay bills. I can guarantee you'll be at the local whore house inside a week."

"What happens after the war?"

"The men come back, they take the jobs you and the other women have been doing and you will go back to cooking, cleaning, keeping house like a good little wife. I'll never tell a soul about us. If you want to go to the police, by all means go. They've come here many

times. They'll say to you there's a war on. When you work at the whore house you might even see a few coppas. It'll be easier for you to come to me willingly than never to be able to work anywhere in Melbourne. Let me explain. I have plenty of friends who run a lot of factories around here. I meet them at the local pub three times each week. We have a few laughs and swap the names of the young ladies who are willing participants in our little idea. We also jot down the names of the ladies who disagree. They're the ones who want to cause trouble. When they leave the job they're in to search for another they don't get employed."

"You blackmail innocent young women into having sex so you can go on enjoying a love game?"

"Blackmail is such a harsh word," taunted Carlisle, sarcastically.

"You're a demented man."

"Be very careful of your hurtful accusations. The last woman who said, no, to the love game lost her life accidentally falling off the end of the pier."

"Weighed down by a heavy chain," growled Lilly.

"I have no idea what you're talking about. The police reported her death to be an accident."

Carlisle ran his fingers through Lilly's long mouse-coloured hair. He lifted a generous handful, smelling the strands slipping between his fingers. Again, he groped for her breast.

Lilly pulled away. She flashed him one last horrid stare then marched to the door.

"I'll have you the minute lunch is over tomorrow. Don't be late," ordered Carlisle.

Lilly yanked open the door and ran along the corridor to her machine, fuming on the inside. Powering up the Old Clunker, she watched it rotating slowly for a few minutes. Feeling overwhelmed and depressed, she flicked the power button off. Unable to see Suzie, she went to search for her friend.

Lilly found Suzie talking to one of Carlisle's newest recruits. She looked to be a pretty little thing; long blonde hair, hazel eyes, slightly shorter than Carlisle. She seemed to have the qualities he loved in a woman; desperate to find a job and enthusiastic at finally landing full-time work.

Suzie saw the thunderstorm etched on Lilly's face. She quickly dismissed the new girl by saying if you have any more questions let me know, I'll be over at dispatch.

Lilly took hold of Suzie's arm, pulling her towards the narrow dead side of the factory where sheets of metal had been dumped and long weeds grew up the side of the fence. Lilly shouldered the rusty narrow door. The moment Suzie stepped outside, Lilly slammed the door shut.

"I told you. The minute I saw you following Carlisle to his office I knew what you were in for," growled Suzie.

"How did you know the reason why I tracked you down? For all you know I've told Carlisle what you're planning."

"I can see it on your face. You also told me you'd take my secret to your grave."

"If I allow him to screw me, what does that make me?"

"Worse than a prostitute," said Suzie. "I still feel dirty even after I've scrubbed my skin red raw in the shower. Lilly, I can still feel him." She spat at the closest weed, lifted

her foot and stepped on the yellow daisy flower growing out of its center. "I wish I could do the same thing to his head."

"If I don't let him screw me I'm out of a job."

"Correct," snarled Suzie.

"If I can't earn enough money there's no way I can pay my bills. If something breaks in the house I need money to fix it. Winter is on the way. No money means I won't be able to buy wood or briquettes for the open fire."

"Look at it from my point of view. If Carlisle finds out I'm pregnant I'll lose my life. Two women have already gone missing from this place; I don't want to be the third. At least he hasn't screwed you yet." Suzie studied Lilly's face more closely. "Please tell me he hasn't."

"No. He expects to screw me tomorrow. Carlisle told me the police found one of the ladies at the end of the pier. They reported her death as accidental. I can't see how they decided on that solution when you told me she'd been wrapped in a heavy chain."

"Did he mention she was pregnant?"

"No, he didn't."

"The bastard," spat Suzie. "After I warned her not to say anything she went and told him. If I don't put a stop to Carlisle, I'll never see the birth of my baby."

"I'm in. I won't ever stand back and allow women to be used as meat for a man's pleasure. The sooner he arrives at the pearly gates to explain his reason for screwing hard working women and murdering them the happier this workplace will be. There's only one thing; he has to die early tomorrow."

"What time does he expect to screw you?" asked Suzie.

"Immediately after lunch. Just thinking about him touching me makes me want to throw up. He also warned me not to be late," said Lilly.

"Okay, he dies just before lunch tomorrow," growled Suzie.

"How will it happen, exactly?"

"I need you to fill a small paper bag with gunpowder," explained Suzie.

"After I fill the bag what's next?"

Suzie whispered in Lilly's ear the exact idea.

"Don't worry, I'll do my part. Make sure your brother is here by 11:45 am."

"He'll be here," insisted Suzie, under her breath.

CHAPTER SIX

PREOCCUPIED IN thinking about Suzie's plan, Lilly still managed to march outside, measure her bicycle chain, discovered it was the exact same length as the chain used in the 'Old Clunker,' and in fifteen minutes had replaced the chain and closed the back cover of the machine. She displayed a proud expression sitting next to Suzie eating her lunch

knowing she might have permanently fixed the machine of the chain rattle and ultimately stopped the chain from falling off the sprocket.

Lilly and Suzie sat in silence in the shade of the factory wall a good distance from the other women. Both were contemplating the murder they were going to commit in twenty-four hours. Inwardly Lilly went over the plan at least a dozen times trying to detect any problem that might see them in jail for decades or hanging at the end of a rope. To her horror, she easily discovered several possibilities where their plan could fail. Not wanting to worry Suzie, Lilly started thinking of a backup plan. Within five minutes she was smiling inwardly and patting herself on the shoulder at her new idea beginning to unravel.

Walking her bicycle home, deep in thought, Lilly stopped outside the general store. She stepped inside the shop and walked up to the young man serving a customer. When he'd finished, he greeted Lilly with a jovial tone of voice.

"Can I help you?"

"Where's Mr. Finch?" asked Lilly, noting the possible seventeen-year-old lad's short back and sides' haircut and long face helped him to look slightly older.

"He's gone to make his usual home deliveries. I'm his Grandson, Jason. I've been given the responsibility of running the store until he gets back."

"I had hoped to see Mr. Finch to discuss opening an account. I'd like to buy a thin cigar for my Boss. It's his birthday tomorrow. Knowing how he loves smoking a cigar I'm certain he'll be thrilled at receiving my gift."

"Didn't you get paid today?" questioned the lad.

"Yes, I did. I have a couple of bills which must be paid this week. Opening the account until I get paid next Wednesday will be perfect." Lilly flashed a grin.

"I can see you have a trustworthy face. If you buy two cigars, I'll open the account. When you get paid next week finalize the account then."

"Jason, you drive a hard bargain. However, I agree. My name is Lilly Barrett."

"Nice name," commented Jason. "There's a good movie showing next week. If you're available, I'd love for you to accompany me?"

Lilly threw him a genuine smile. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, Jason, I'm married."

"Just my luck; the first pretty woman who walked into this shop since I began work an hour ago, said no."

"If I was single I'd say yes."

"At least I got a sale."

"You did well to convince me to buy two cigars. Please don't feel intimidated over me saying no to your date proposal. Keep asking the question. I reckon in no time a nice girl will say yes."

Jason handed over the cigars when he finished recording the sale. "I'll remember what you taught me." He grinned at the young dark-haired girl entering the shop. "Here's hoping," he whispered under his breath.

Lilly walked out of the store. After swiping her bicycle from off the ground she started to walk home. Just for a moment she glanced back inside the store.

"By the expression on your face, the young lady must have said yes to your question," she mumbled.

Next morning Lilly dressed as the sky started to lighten. She squeezed into her white dress Jack gave her for a present. The same one she cut in half the night before. Checking her appearance in the mirror she felt a little self-conscious at showing so much skin, especially to another man. By cutting the high neckline into a long V shape at the front and the back of the dress, she didn't leave much to the imagination. Lilly needed to be careful or her breasts might fall out when she moved. The thin black belt clipped around her waist helped to make her look even more alluring.

Leaving her bra on the bed, she slipped into her bib and brace overalls, stuffed three long narrow strips of white dress material into her overall pockets; two in the left and one in the right. She placed the two cigars and several matches inside the top pocket. To help hide what she wore underneath Lilly put on a thick dark coloured jumper. Her black two-inch high heel shoes were already in a medium size brown paper bag. Lilly squeezed her feet into solid boots, swiped her lunch from off the bed, the second jumper from the chair in the corner of the bedroom and closed the front door of her home a little earlier than usual. She lived in the hope she would be the first one to arrive at the factory.

Lilly hadn't slept much, going over the finer details of her backup plan. She suspected her body might be running on pure adrenaline.

A truck rumbled to a stop at the top of her drive. At least two hundred large hessian bags full of briquettes were stacked on the truck's long tray. A rough unshaven man, dark tattoos inked on his arms walked towards her.

"Morning," called the man. "Where do you want the two bags of briquettes you ordered?"

On a sigh, Lilly answered confidently, thankful he didn't ask the reason why she was up and about at such an early hour.

"Can you carry them to the chook pen at the rear of the house?"

"Yep, no probs."

"Be careful not to damage the side of the outhouse. The wall closest to the chook pen is just hanging on. I don't want to be sitting on the toilet seat in full view of the neighbour's kitchen window. If the wall collapses, I don't have the money to replace the wall."

In the cooling temperature, Lilly opened the small rusty gate and followed the man carrying the bags of briquettes down the narrow path. In a few minutes, he had completed the delivery.

"Nice chooks," said the man in a gruff voice. "You get many eggs?"

"Some," replied Lilly.

"I don't suppose you could spare a few?"

Lilly stepped into the pen. She used her left foot to push a nosy chook away, checked the laying box, swiping out three. She handed over the warm eggs.

"Can you put the amount I owe for the briquettes on my account?"

"Seeing how you gave some eggs, I'll tell the Boss you'll pay next week."

"Thank you," chirped Lilly.

"Righto. The dunny man will be here soon. I better move the truck. I don't want dunny slops spilt over the briquettes," groaned the man.

Lilly chuckled at imagining the scene.

“Don’t laugh. He’s a grumpy old man’s son. He’s the one wearing the little black beanie, dark blue shorts, and white singlet. He tossed a toilet can at me last week for getting in his way.”

Lilly cringed at the thought of sewerage being thrown through the air. She followed the short balding man with coal dust covered hands to the truck, closing the gate behind her.

“Have a good day Mrs. Barrett.”

“You too, and thanks again.”

Standing in the dark, Lilly waited for the truck to turn left at the end of the street. When it was out of sight she started to walk towards the factory. Looking over her shoulder, she wondered if she’d ever see the house again. To push the impending murder out of her mind for at least ten minutes, Lilly prayed for a warm winter and the two large bags of briquettes would see her through until spring. She sighed and shook her head, knowing more than likely she didn’t have near enough briquettes.

Lilly walked past the lad selling his morning newspapers. She so wanted to buy the paper from him every day, however, she needed to cut her spending to the bone. Though the lad never grumbled, he seemed to know of her plight about having no money. Even if she didn’t buy the paper he greeted her each morning by tipping his cap.

Lilly did manage to stretch her money enough to buy the morning paper every Saturday. Once read, the newspaper could be reused for heating. Her mother taught her from a young age how to rip the pages into strips, soak the newspaper in water for half an hour then they could be molded into paper bricks. Briquettes and paper bricks were a great combination. Both could burn for ages. The only problem was Lilly didn’t have the money to buy the paper more often.

Suzie arrived at the factory the same time Lilly did. They found Mr. Smith hard at work fixing a leaking tap near the side door. Already the bucket of water used for the stray dog had overflowed onto the dry dusty ground.

“Good morning Mr. Smith,” chirped Lilly. “I knew you’d be early. Seeing how it is your birthday today, I baked you a muffin last night.” She took the muffin out of the paper bag, the same one she swiped from off the bed and handed it over.

“Happy birthday,” chimed Suzie.

The old man blushed when the two ladies sang the traditional birthday song. His face went redder when they kissed him on the cheek.

“Thanks, ladies. I’ll have this beaut looking muffin at smoko,” announced Mr. Smith.

Lilly and Suzie walked off leaving Mr. Smith humming to himself. When they stepped inside the factory Suzie’s friendly expression instantly vanished. She took hold of Lilly’s shoulders, glaring at her.

“What’s the big idea behind the joyous mood?”

“More people witnessing us, enjoying a happy start to the day the better. Mr. Smith just happened to be born on the perfect date,” whispered Lilly.

Suzie’s smirk quickly returned. “What an excellent idea.”

“It’s part of my backup plan.”

“What plan?”

“I thought up another plan in case the first one goes pear shaped.”

“I didn’t think we’d needed one.”

“I don’t want to be jailed,” hissed Lilly angrily.

“Nothing will go wrong.”

“In case it does, do you want to hear my idea?”

Suzie brushed her long brown fringe from her eyes, staring at her friend.

Lilly explained the idea of why she cut her dress short and told her the details of the backup plan.

“By mixing both our ideas this act we’re attempting seems flawless,” admitted Suzie.

“We can only hope. What about your brother. Will he be here on time?”

“I talked to him last night and again this morning. He’ll be here. He told me nothing would stop him from getting here by 11:55am,” advised Suzie, confidently.

“Five minutes until the lunch whistle sounds. It’s going to be close. We can’t have any witnesses.”

“Nobody in the factory is going to know,” insisted Suzie.

“How certain are you that your brother won’t change his mind and DOB us into the cops?”

“Positive. Don’t worry. There’s no way I’m having my baby in jail.” Suzie handed Lilly a paper-bag the size of her hand. “The only thing you have to do is fill the bag with gunpowder and put the bag in Carlisle’s coat pocket.”

Lilly took the bag, hiding it under her jumper. Focusing on the side door, she looked for Carlisle.

“He’s not due to arrive for another twenty minutes. You should be able to fill the bag and stash it without anyone knowing. I’ll go and keep Mr. Smith busy. If he tries to enter the factory, I’ll stall him.”

“Thanks,” said Lilly.

After another quick glance around the factory, Lilly marched over to her machine. Again, she checked for Carlisle in case he entered the factory from another direction. Spying Suzie standing at the side door looking out onto the carpark, Lilly grabbed the paper bag from under her jumper, pulled the wooden cover off the gunpowder box, dipped the wooden scoop into the powder and half-filled the bag. Quickly scrunching the top closed, she placed her spare jumper over the paper bag. Looking around the factory floor again and still seeing no one, Lilly wrapped the small bag in the jumper, slipping the bundle on the shelf under the bench. By the time, she got back to Suzie the first few ladies were approaching the factory door. They were too busy chatting to notice Suzie and Lilly staring at them.

At smoko Suzie and Lilly marched towards the toilets. They walked past Mr. Smith’s small maintenance shed. Lilly noted the tools hanging off the walls. Oil stains covered the floor. The two small tins of petrol that were used to take off any extra grease on the machines were still full and in their usual spot on the other side of the chicken wire covered door. Lilly pushed her hand into her pocket, pulling out two narrow strips of dress material, handing one to Suzie. Both girls picked up a tin of petrol and walked towards the side door to the factory.

Suzie opened the factory door. She placed the tin of petrol she carried onto the ground outside in the fresh air and pushed most of the long narrow piece of material inside the tin to soak up the petrol. Lilly walked up behind Suzie, placed the tin of petrol she held onto the floor inside the factory and stuffed two-thirds of the second strip of material into the tin.

After closing the door, Suzie led the way to the toilets.

Inside the ladies, Suzie handed over a small bottle of perfume. Lilly soaked her arms and hands with the sweet, smelling lotion. She even tipped a level capful onto her hair.

“Do you think I’m wearing enough perfume to disguise the smell of the petrol and the gunpowder?” questioned Lilly.

“I reckon,” replied Suzie using her hand to swat the air. “You reek of the stuff.”

“Good.”

Thirty minutes before the lunch whistle sounded Lilly picked up the small bag of gunpowder, from the bench and stuffed it under her jumper. Holding the small bottle of perfume in her right hand she nodded at Suzie on her way to Carlisle’s office.

Suzie rushed up behind her. “Don’t forget, the paper bag must be in the right-hand side pocket of Carlisle’s coat and not in the left pocket.”

“It’ll be there. Make sure you create a disturbance outside the office a minute after I walk in. If Carlisle isn’t stopped by the noise he’ll be turned on by the skimpy dress and the smell of the perfume. He’ll insist on screwing me right there and then. If he does he’ll discover the contents of the bag.”

“Don’t worry I’ll produce a mighty ruckus. The noise will stop him long before he gets close to touching you.”

The two women walked quickly along the corridor. Eight feet from Carlisle’s office door Lilly slipped out of her boots, dropped her jumper onto the floor and her bib and brace overalls to her ankles, straightened the extra short dress and pushed her feet into the two-inch shiny black high heel shoes.

“The short dress will certainly distract Carlisle. It barely covers your arse,” whispered Suzie.

“Promise me there’ll be a commotion.”

“It’ll happen.” Suzie handed Lilly the bag of gunpowder and the small bottle of perfume.

“Either way I know Carlisle must be stopped. It’s just that I feel embarrassed about letting him see so much skin. Tell me honestly. How do I look?”

“If I were a man I’d want to screw you too.”

Lilly stepped up to Carlisle’s office. She tapped on the door three times, hoping the number might sound enticing. Painting a seductive grin on her face she waited to hear his voice.

“Enter,” he bellowed.

Lilly waited for Suzie to slip past her. It was then Lilly stepped inside the office. She closed and locked the door. Battering luring eyelids at Carlisle seated at the desk, Lilly could tell his eyes were already starting to undress her. Lilly let go of the door handle and

stood in a provocative pose in front of the man. Carlisle boasted a smirk as he walked across the floor. When he reached Lilly, he slipped his arm around her waist.

Clearing his throat, he said smoothly. "Lilly, you're early. It's good to see you've changed your mind about the bonus." Carlisle reached out, flicking hair from her face. "I knew you were a great looking Gal, easy on the eyes the moment I saw you. Wearing an extra short dress has definitely turned me on." He slid his hand under her dress and onto her thigh.

Lilly closed her eyes hoping to block out the need to vomit.

"I can tell you like my hand on the top part of your leg," whispered Carlisle in Lilly's ear. He lowered his head slightly to nibble at her earlobe. "You smell delightful. Walk over to the table where the sunlight will help make your hair shine. I want a good look at you."

Strolling seductively across the room, Lilly began to over exaggerate the dipping of her hips. She didn't have to look at Carlisle to know his brain memorized every movement. Her seductive grin reappeared the moment she whirled around on her toes.

"Do you love my surprise?" whispered Lilly.

"I do. The bright coloured dress helps your skin to glow on those wonderful long legs of yours. Even my wife doesn't own a dress like the one you're wearing."

Lilly turned in a slow circle. She wanted Carlisle to see the low cut back once more. When she faced him, his pupils appeared to be large round marbles.

"My husband gave me the long dress for a present. When the war started I forgot all about it. I thought by cutting the dress in half the new style might help to heighten the ecstasy of the act. What do you think of my creation?"

"I absolutely adore it. Make another twirl. I love the way your body moves."

Lilly began another slow turn. When her back was to Carlisle, she studied his coat draped over the back of the chair. Spying what appeared to be the correct pocket an evil sneer creased the ends of her lips.

Carlisle bounded across the floor. He stood pushing his body against Lilly's. Again, he slid his hand under her dress. Lilly hid her cringe well.

"I see you brought me a small present?" whispered Carlisle.

He went to grab the bag out of Lilly's hand. In a desperate move, she whipped it around behind her back.

"Do you want me to guess what's in the bag or can I have it now?"

"You'll get it soon," suggested Lilly. She pursed her lips teasing Carlisle into forgetting about the paper bag. "I thought about what you told me all last night. I can't see the harm. I'll certainly keep the secret."

"I'm glad you decided to see things my way."

"Several romps together should be easy to live with."

"It's better than drowning." Carlisle reeled Lilly in closer.

His chilling words made her feel more nauseous. For a second time, she needed to fight the urge to vomit on the floor. When she saw Carlisle step behind her, Lilly could feel his hand move from off her shoulder down to her left breast. She quickly swallowed the vomit in her throat. The time had come for her to be the perfect actress. Suzie and the other

women in the factory were counting on her. At least she knew beyond any doubt of Carlisle's intentions.

Carlisle applied more pressure to Lilly's breast, forcing her to twirl around. He leaned forward in readiness to kiss her. His lips didn't feel nice or tender like Jack's. In fact, his rough treatment began to hurt. Lilly stood her ground acting out the scene. Eventually, she managed to push him to arm's length. To appear more alluring, she slowly ran her fingers through her hair.

"Do you like the perfume I'm wearing? If it doesn't excite your manhood there is a different one stashed near my machine. There's nothing wrong with a backup plan," stated Lilly.

"I've already admitted I love the smell. Where did you buy the bottle of perfume?"

"I made a batch from a family recipe," answered Lilly, trying to make the lie sound realistic. She prayed Carlisle's advances might slow long enough for the ruckus to begin.

"Remarkable," he commented. "Maybe you could splash the contents of the other bottle on your neck tomorrow. You do remember we have a second date after lunch?"

"Twice in two days. I'm impressed. A deal is a deal." Lilly pouted at Carlisle. "I'm not one to go back on my word. Am I right in saying you will have me seven times?"

"Yes. It'll be my pleasure."

Carlisle placed his hands onto Lilly's hips. She wanted to run. She wanted to poke his perving eyes out. She wanted to vomit on his beloved coat.

"Now I've excited you, I'll come back after lunch."

"I insist you stay."

"Isn't what you desire more of a thrill the first time if you have to wait? Forty minutes isn't long."

Carlisle reeled Lilly in again, pushing his body hard against hers. "I can't wait. I'm an impatient man."

"Suspense helps to build the act," taunted Lilly, trying to avoid sounding nervous. To her Carlisle appeared to be growing edgy. If Suzie didn't start the ruckus soon she wouldn't be able to stop the man from raping her.

Carlisle wasn't going to wait any longer. He used his left hand to reach behind Lilly's head, pulling her in close. She loathed the idea. However, she needed to take what he dished out. Lilly's chest heaved faster. Her cheeks were reddening from nerves. Again, she fought the need to vomit. Carlisle pushed his lips against Lilly's. He slipped his right-hand higher under her dress. His fingernails scratched the surface of her leg. She felt he was ready. Then Lilly heard the unmistakable sound of his zip opening. She cringed when Carlisle started to get between her legs.

Just when Lilly's plans were about to fall apart, a mighty ruckus outside the door forced Carlisle to swear under his breath. He zipped his fly closed, marching to the door. Stepping outside he pulled the door shut.

Lilly leaped into action. She quickly slipped the paper bag she held in her hand into his coat pocket and unfolded the top. Next, she twisted the cap off the small bottle of perfume she clutched in her other hand and sprinkled the coat, draining the remainder of the bottle. She then waited for Carlisle to step back into the room.

“What’s all the noise about?” Carlisle yelled, directing his question at his receptionist.

“Suzie thinks her pay was short a full pound.”

“Impossible,” bellowed Carlisle.

“I said the same thing.”

“Suzie, why didn’t you talk to me yesterday when you were paid?”

“After counting the money four times I couldn’t find you!” she shouted.

“Next time, try harder.”

“I hope there isn’t a next time.”

“I’m positive the bank didn’t make a mistake; they’re the ones who make up the pay.”

“I told her she has to talk to the bank,” explained Stella Johnston.

Suzie glared at Carlisle, sidestepping towards the office door.

“Stella and Suzie get back to work,” ordered Carlisle. “I’ll discuss the problem tomorrow morning.”

“How do I pay for dinner tonight?” moaned Suzie.

“I’ll go and talk to the bank manager later to clear up any discrepancy. Now get back to work. I’m busy.”

“What guarantee do I have in getting my money?” questioned Suzie.

“I’m not going to warn you again,” spat Carlisle.

“Okay, I’m going. There’s no need to growl at me. The only thing I want is my money,” huffed Suzie.

Carlisle stepped back into his office, closing the door on Suzie’s face. His emotions had cooled. He so wanted them to be hot again. Soaking up Lilly’s inviting posture, Carlisle studied her entire body from her ankles to her head. He watched her going through the motion of dabbing more perfume on her neck. The act excited him until he saw his wet coat. Carlisle marched across the room, glaring at Lilly through cold heartless eyes. He grabbed hold of Lilly’s arm and escorted her across the room to the door.

“The minute lunch is over I want you back in this office. I certainly don’t appreciate perfume spilled over my coat. I’m married. I don’t want my wife to find out about me screwing you. Understand?”

“Yes, of course. I look forward to satisfying your urges.”

Lilly nervously watched Carlisle check his watch, grab his coat and push his hands into the coat sleeves. He looked up, glaring at Lilly.

“The lunch siren is about to sound. You’re free to go. Shut the door on the way out.”

Lilly backed out of the office and shut the door. To be certain Carlisle wouldn’t hear what was happening she walked twelve feet away from the door. Lilly stooped, placed the bottle of perfume on the floor, slipped her feet out of the high heel shoes, pulled up the bid and brace overalls and pushed her feet into the boots; the jumper she slid over her head, yanking it down to her waist while she followed Suzie along the corridor to the exit.

“Are things set?” asked Suzie, hiding the high heel shoes under her jumper.

“The gunpowder is in the coat pocket. Let’s hope your brother gets here in time. If he doesn’t and Carlisle finds the bag of gunpowder he’ll work out what’s going on and call the police. The way I’m dressed, I’ll be up for attempted murder and for encouraging him to screw me.”

“Don’t worry, my brother will be here.”

Lilly and Suzie stood at the factory’s side door. Suzie opened it slightly. Sunlight streamed in through the gap. Lilly focused on Carlisle’s large black car. It looked to be a solid vehicle, not more than a few years old.

‘More solid than a cliff face,’ Lilly thought.

A metal door close to the office, swung open. Carlisle stepped into the sunshine, pushed the door shut and marched towards his car.

“There’s exactly five minutes until the lunch whistle sounds. Carlisle’s on time,” whispered Suzie. She darted a nervous glance up and back down the factory fence, looking for her brother. “Robert assured me he’d be here by now. This isn’t good. The plan is starting to go wrong. I think we should call the whole thing off. Lilly, I’m sorry for dragging you into this murder idea. I’ll tell the police I planned the whole thing and you were trying to persuade me not to kill Carlisle. I’ll tell them I convinced you to dress seductively to arouse him.”

In her panic, Suzie missed Lilly’s evil sneer. “It’s okay. We’ll switch to the remainder of the backup plan. There’s no way Carlisle is going to rape me. He’s not leaving his car alive. I’m also determined not to spend years in jail over an attempted murder charge or any other charge.”

Suzie again glanced along the fence line. “I can’t understand why Robert isn’t here. Either way, it’s too late, don’t do it. The lunch siren is only two minutes away. When the whistle sounds there will be too many witnesses.”

“If what I’m about to do goes wrong I’ll say it was my idea. You’re innocent of any wrongdoing. Besides, you’re pregnant. Your baby needs you to be out of prison.” Lilly took hold of Suzie’s shoulders. “When the car catches fire I want you inside the factory. Promise me you’ll stay here to watch my back?”

Reluctantly Suzie nodded.

Lilly again focused on Carlisle. She watched him sitting behind the steering wheel blowing cigar smoke out of the window. Switching her attention to Suzie, Lilly spoke quietly. “Wish me luck.”

“Luck,” Suzie whispered.

Lilly pulled the long narrow piece of dress material from her overall’s pocket, snatched the tin of petrol from inside the doorway and the one on the outside. She scanned the area hoping to see a young man loitering about. Disappointed, Lilly knew she couldn’t wait any longer, the lunch whistle had to be imminent. The stunt needed to be done by then. If she was late getting back inside the factory everyone would know she did it.

As the last of the seconds ticked off Lilly sprinted towards Carlisle. She stopped running when she reached the rear of the car. From there she walked casually towards the driver’s door. She saw smoke from the cigar Carlisle held billowing out of the open window. The closer she got the louder the music from the car’s radio sounded. The noise painted a smirk on her face. If she made any noise, there was a good chance Carlisle wouldn’t hear her.

Lilly placed the tins quietly on the ground and wound the long strip of dress material she held in her hand around the front door handle. By holding the material, she hoped

Carlisle wouldn't be able to get out. Next, she pulled out the long thin strips of petrol-soaked material from both tins. Lilly didn't glance back at the factory to see if anyone might be watching. She didn't bother to check the time. She needed to stay totally focused on the next sixty seconds and prayed the lunch siren didn't sound.

Straddling the petrol tins, she hovered over Carlisle.

"You scared the crap out of me Lilly," he croaked, dropping his cigar on the floor. He reached out to turn off the music.

"I didn't mean to startle you. Would you like another cigar?"

Carlisle remained silent for a moment. Lilly could feel her body starting to tremble from nervousness. She felt a headache coming on from the stress. The throbbing of her temples made her vision blurry. If the murder didn't happen soon Carlisle might smell the petrol fumes wafting in through the window. She pulled out the cigar from her overalls' top pocket, shoving it in his face.

Carlisle immediately placed his half eaten sandwich on his lap and grabbed the cigar.

"I'll forget about the one on the floor. It's almost finished anyway. How can I resist a new cigar from a babe? Lilly, you look a whole lot different in overalls. Seeing you in the white dress cut high up the legs certainly aroused me."

Lilly watched him light the end of the cigar. Closing his eyes, he looked to be enjoying the taste.

"About the babe thing; I've decided I'm not going to be your whore. I've also discovered something important about the dead girl who used to work here," she snarled.

Carlisle opened his eyes. He stared directly at Lilly. "What did you uncover?"

"She was pregnant. You killed her."

"You have no proof. Even if you did nobody believes what a woman says." Pointing the cigar at Lilly's nose he taunted confidently. "It's going to be a real pleasure in screwing you. Knowing there's no one to stop me; I've decided I'm going to screw you a lot longer. I'm looking forward to your services every day for the next three months, possibly even longer."

"You disgust me. What would your wife say if I told her?"

"I've been down accusation road many times. You'll never talk to her. I have another heavy chain ready to be used. It's in the boot of the car. Want to take a look?" He pulled on the handle to open the door.

Lilly used her hips to slam it closed. "I take it everything I've heard about you murdering the last girl who worked here is true?"

"Last three actually. Don't look so shocked. There's a war on. It's called getting away with blue murder."

Lilly reached into her pocket, pulling out a match. She scraped it along the side of the car.

Carlisle heard the match head ignite. "What are you up to?"

"The last thing you'll ever hear is; Suzie's pregnant. She's having your baby."

Lilly lifted both narrow petrol-soaked strips of material at the same time, dropping one over Carlisle's eyes, the other she stuffed into his coat pocket full of gunpowder. In one swift move, she pushed the lit match through the open window, dropping it on the material

poking out of his pocket. Carlisle instinctively removed the petrol-soaked material from off his eyes just in time to see the bright flash near his hip. He went to pull the material out of his pocket and throw both rags out of the window when he saw a second flash.

The gunpowder ignited.

Lilly squatted out of sight. Holding the material she had wound around the door handle in a death grip, Lilly could feel Carlisle starting to shove on the door to get out. He screamed as his hands and face caught fire.

Trembling from nerves, Lilly needed to use all her strength to keep the door closed. With her one free hand she threw both cans of petrol, one after the other through the open window. The moment the petrol in the cans ignited, she started running back to Suzie, gathering the short piece of material in her hands. Hearing the lunch whistle over the sound of the car fire's roar, Lilly swallowed the bile in her mouth. She must get back inside the factory before anyone saw her. Only then could she run towards the car carrying a bucket of water.

Suzie opened the door just wide enough for Lilly to squeeze through the gap. When she stepped inside the factory Lilly whirled around and started to run back outside. Instead of sprinting in the direction of the car she darted off to her right, towards the bucket of water Mr. Smith filled each morning for the stray dog in the area. Ten feet from the bucket she saw Mr. Smith bursting out of the factory doorway and reaching for the handle of the bucket. He shuffled towards the car. For an old man, he still moved quite quickly.

Lilly focused on the burning car. The interior erupted in flames. The driver's door opened. Carlisle fell to the ground completely engulfed in fire. He screamed for help. Flames shot out through the windows blowing glass fragments twenty feet in every direction. The windscreen blew out, smashing into pieces as it tore through the chicken wire fence.

Lilly saw Mr. Smith stumble over his own feet, dropping the bucket. Water sprayed across the dusty ground. Running over to help Mr. Smith to his feet, Lilly held her nose to block out the stench of Carlisle's charcoal remains.

"I'll help to refill the bucket of water," advised Lilly, picking it up off the ground.

"It's too late. Even if Carlisle is alive he's better off dead. Besides, water will only help to spread the fire."

Suzie sprinted over, herding Lilly away from Mr. Smith. "Perfectly executed," she whispered.

Lilly pushed her hands into her overall pockets. Through bulging eyes, she looked sideways at Suzie. "It's not perfect. Damn it, we have a loose thread."

"We left nothing to chance," growled Suzie.

Lilly didn't hear what she said. In desperation she started to search her pockets a second time. Panic swept her face, deepening the lines on her forehead. She took a moment to glance over her shoulder at the group of women watching the fire. Satisfied they weren't looking at her she recommenced her frantic search of her pockets.

"Calm down, you will draw attention to us. What's wrong?" mumbled Suzie.

"The small bottle of perfume; I don't have it. I put it on the floor near Carlisle's office while I changed back into my overalls. Please tell me you picked it up?"

Suzie's eyes grew wide. She hesitantly shook her head. When she spied old Mr. Smith marching towards them she mumbled under her breath.

"Stay calm we have company."

Mr. Smith took hold of Lilly's arm, dragging her away as the fuel tank exploded. From a distance of forty feet the heat still felt intense. A plume of black smoke billowed into the air. Fifty women workers filing outside to start their lunch stood, pushing their back against the factory wall, viewing the gruesome scene. Lilly realized not one female worker expressed any sorrow or appeared ready to scream at seeing Carlisle being cremated next to his car.

Mr. Smith pushed Lilly against the fence.

She eyeballed him.

"I saw what you did."

"I have no idea what you mean," said Lilly, trying to sound innocent.

"I might be old, but I still have a good sense of smell and great eyesight. A young woman wearing a short white outfit and black two-inch high heel shoes on her feet captures my attention. Seeing how the material is a bit unusual for this time, I decided to watch what was happening from the office doorway at the far end of the corridor. After you and Suzie ran past me I walked up to Carlisle's office to try and discover what you and Suzie were up to."

"You saw me entering Carlisle's office. It doesn't mean anything."

"Doesn't it?"

"No. I went into his office to ask him if I could buy the bullet making machine."

"Wearing a short white dress and a lot of sweet smelling perfume; I'd say highly unlikely. Lilly, did you lose a small bottle near Carlisle's office? What meager amount of liquid is still trapped in the bottle smells exactly the same as you."

"What do you want me to say?"

"I reckon you'd have a lot of explaining to do if I made you take off the jumper and the overalls in front of every worker in the factory."

Lilly gulped down the knot in her throat. If Mr. Smith hadn't seen her nobody would know.

"What are you going to do?"

"Let me explain it this way. I saw the whole petrol thing. If the lunch whistle sounded a few seconds earlier it could have easily backfired. I'm glad it didn't. Lilly, hide your surprised expression. I warned you about losing pretty fingers. Petrol soaked fingers could have been burnt off if things went bad."

"Everything went to plan. Is that what you want to hear?"

Mr. Smith studied the crowd watching the burning car. No one, not even Suzie was looking at him. "I'm going to say this only once. When I'm finished I never said a word. If you tell anyone I'll deny everything. I'm old, the cops will believe me."

Lilly frowned, wondering what he might say.

"Carlisle deserved it. I know he killed at least two lovely young ladies. I also know Suzie's pregnant with his baby. Don't ask me how I know, but I will tell you the walls in this factory are paper thin."

“I’m going to have a wild guess. I believe you intentionally tripped over your own feet.”

Mr. Smith’s shrewd grin revealed she had hit the nail on the head. He leaned closer to Lilly’s ear.

“I’m old. Things happen when you least expect it. I’ll never tell a soul.”

“I won’t either. I guess someone should call the police.”

“I’ll do it. You go talk to Suzie. Here, take this.” Mr. Smith placed the small empty perfume bottle into the palm of Lilly’s hand. He patted her clenched fist. “You don’t need me to tell you how to get rid of it.”

A wave of relief gushed through Lilly’s veins. Her shoulders slumped. She felt weak at the knees. At the unrehearsed part of the plan she pulled the second cigar out of her pocket. “Here, I want you to have the cigar.”

“I hope this isn’t a bribe?”

“No. Yesterday, I was forced into buying two cigars. I didn’t have to use the spare one.”

“I’m not following what you’re talking about,” said Mr. Smith, dropping the cigar into his pocket.

“I decided I could use the spare cigar for backup in case one didn’t entice Carlisle enough. The cost of a second cigar was a small price to pay for freedom. I can’t return it and I don’t smoke. You might as well have it. For what it’s worth; happy birthday.”

Mr. Smith flashed Lilly a smile. He winked and walked off.

Lilly was about to step back inside the factory when she saw Suzie marching towards her. She grabbed Lilly by the arm, escorting her towards the six-foot tall industrial rubbish bin on the other side of the main gate. A lone figure stood at the fence watching the fire.

“Robert, where were you?” growled Suzie.

“Sorry Sis, the cops stopped me. They were wondering why I was loitering around the area. It took me ten minutes to convince the cops I got lost on the way to joining the army. They watched me walk off in the opposite direction. When they were out of sight I jumped a few fences to make it back here. I see I’m a little late.”

“It’s okay. Everything worked out, in the end, thanks to Lilly.”

“I better go. If the cops see me here they might think I did it,” whispered Robert.

“Yes, go now. Mr. Smith is about to ring them,” advised Lilly.

Robert sprinted off. At the end of the road he turned the corner and disappeared.

Suzie looked sideways at Lilly. “What did Smith talk to you about?”

“He asked if I’d been hurt in the fire.”

“Did he see anything?” quizzed Suzie.

“He saw me running towards the bucket of water, nothing more.”

Suzie leaned against the industrial bin, exhaling her tension. “Lilly, we actually pulled off the perfect murder.”

“It does look like it. When I get a chance, I’ll find and get rid of the empty perfume bottle. The only other thing we have to do is convince the cops Carlisle’s death happened to be an accident.”

In less than two minutes every woman in the factory stood outside watching the car fire. At 12:17 in the afternoon Lilly dropped the small empty bottle of perfume into the industrial rubbish bin as a police car rolled through the open gate, stopping near the office door. Mr. Smith limped over to greet the officer.

“The deceased is Mr. Carlisle.”

“Who might you be?” asked the Constable.

“My name is Dirk Smith. I’ve been working in this factory for the past thirty years. The dead man’s full name was Mr. Joseph Carlisle. He’s been my Boss for the past ten years.”

“Who was the first person to witness the car fire?”

“Me. I ran to get the bucket of water. I fell over my left foot sprinting towards the car. My legs aren’t what they used to be. By the time, I picked myself up off the ground I knew I didn’t have any hope of saving big Joe. As you can plainly see where the bucket finished up I nearly made it to the car.”

The Constable grunted noisily. He walked over to the car to take a closer look. After pushing his head through the broken front passenger side window to scrutinize the interior, he had to hold his nose to block out the smell.

“Have you any idea how the fire might have started?”

“No,” replied Mr. Smith. “By the time I got my lunch and made it to the outside factory door, the car was already engulfed in flames.”

“Can you explain why there are two tins on the front seat?”

“I have no idea. All I can tell you is that Joe Carlisle sometimes sneaks out a few minutes before lunch to smoke a cigar. My guess is there must have been a petrol leak,” said Mr. Smith.

“That could explain the fire. Do you have any idea who was the last person Carlisle talked to?”

Lilly stood at the side waiting for the question to be asked. She bravely stepped forward. “I think I might have been the last person Mr. Carlisle was talking to.”

The Constable looked directly at Lilly. “Who are you?”

“I’m Mrs. Lilly Barrett. I’ve been working in this factory for a few months.”

“Can you shed any more-light on this accident?”

“I don’t think so. About 11:30 this morning I knocked on Mr. Carlisle’s office door. I did hope to see him walking around the factory.”

“You stopped work to see him?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a bit odd. Didn’t he get upset over losing productivity?”

“Not really. He was a good Boss; friendly and always easy to talk to. He made mention when he gave me the job his office door would always be open. Anytime I wanted to talk, the only thing I needed to do was to knock.”

“How thoughtful,” the Constable snorted. “What did you want to see him for?”

“I wanted to ask Mr. Carlisle if I could buy the bullet making machine after the war.”

“Why? This factory must be full of extremely old equipment. In my opinion, this whole area needs to be placed on the condemned list.”

“There’s a war on. We all have to do our part,” said Lilly. “To answer your question, I believe the machine will make great lollies.”

“What did he say to your request?”

“He actually loved the idea. We were going to discuss a payment plan after lunch. If I may add something which might explain the fire; Mr. Carlisle had a daily habit of running his fingers through the gunpowder. He’d do it every morning before the whistle sounded to start the day. For three months I have watched him scoop handfuls of the gunpowder from the box at the bullet making machine. He’d watch the powder flow between his fingers then wipe his hands of the dust while they were inside the pockets of his coat. He confided in me he loved to feel the gunpowder. I guess after years of wiping the dust from his hands his pockets might have been filling. It’s possible when he lit his cigar he might have forgotten to blow the match out, which in turn ignited the gunpowder in his pocket.”

“It does sound plausible. The only thing that doesn’t add up is the two empty tins on the front seat,” said the Constable.

“That is easy to explain. Mr. Carlisle told me he loved soup. Last night I made a batch of homegrown tomato soup. I didn’t have a large enough container to put it in. I did find two small tins. He gratefully accepted the soup and told me he’d have it for lunch.”

“Trying to stay in the Boss’ good books?” grilled the Constable.

Lilly painted a grin on her face, ignoring his comment. “I told Mr. Carlisle I made the best soup. He said he’d let me know what he thought. I guess I’ll never know.”

When the Constable finished writing his notes, he looked up, snapping the book shut.

“I’ll organize someone to tow the car away and have the body removed. By the day’s end this mess will be cleaned up. I’ll go inform his wife.”

The Constable shook Mr. Smith’s hand and walked back to the police car. Lilly heard the car’s engine rev. She watched the Constable reverse the car out onto the street and drive away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

March 3rd 2013

“THE LAST two chapters sounded even better than the previous two,” James declared.

“Yes, they flowed quite nicely,” recited Eloise. “I’m feeling a bit drained. I think I’ll call it a day.”

“Can I buy you lunch?”

“I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“It’s no trouble. It is the least I can do.”

“Don’t worry about me, I’m fine. If you’d kindly open the door, I’ll be on my way home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Bright and early,” stated James. He opened the door, waiting for Eloise to walk past him.

Seeing his puzzled expression, she stopped. “Is there something wrong?”

“I’m not sure. I have a habit of watching people.”

“Yes, I know. I have already mentioned I’ve seen you sitting at your favorite café on numerous occasions.”

“It doesn’t matter.” James shook his head.

“Say what you were going to ask.”

“What I was thinking about is not a question it’s what I have observed.”

“Interesting,” said Eloise.

“Your hair seems darker and slightly longer than when we first met.”

“You have probably been looking at the computer monitor too long. I suggest you make yourself a coffee then knock on Mia’s door. Enjoy her company for the hours that remain in the day.”

Eloise began to walk in the direction of the lift.

“I forgot to ask. Where’s your home?”

“Not far,” answered Eloise. The moment the lift door opened she stepped inside the lift. The last thing James saw was her smile.

Mia opened her apartment door in time to see James about to knock.

“I heard the muffled voice of that woman dictating her novel for a long time. You must be tired. How about I buy you lunch down the road? The cafe on the corner has a balcony overlooking Port Phillip Bay. The weather’s nice. I’m hoping the idea of food might entice you into saying yes?”

“The idea sounds great,” said James. Hearing his mobile phone ringing, he was about to excuse himself when Mia interrupted.

“You answer the phone; I’ll get ready. We’ll meet here in the corridor in twenty minutes.”

James ran into his room in time to swipe the mobile phone from off the table. “Hello,” he puffed.

“James, how’s the novel progressing? Tell me you’ve at least started?”

“Ms. Amanda Daltry, hi fancy you, ringing me right now.”

“James, tell me some good news about the novel?”

“It’s coming along great. I’m halfway through the second draft.”

“Already?” questioned Amanda. Her voice sounded full of doubt.

“Yes. It’s fantastic. I believe it’s the best novel I’ve ever written.”

“I hope you’re not lying to me, James?”

“I don’t lie.”

“I guess I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“I won’t disappoint.”

“You know what happens if you do?”

“Yes. I can guarantee the novel will be completed on time.”

“Is there a title?”

“Don’t tell my secret.”

“Sounds intriguing. Tell me, how is the romance between you and the young lady progressing?” asked Amanda.

“How do you know about Mia?” James darted his gaze about the room searching for a small camera in a wall or the ceiling. Seeing none he again asked the question, walking to the balcony. He stepped into the sunshine when Amanda answered.

“I keep my nose to the ground. James, someone is always watching.”

“Have you been spying on me?” James searched the bay looking for someone standing in a boat staring at him through binoculars.

Amanda started to laugh. “Don’t be silly. I’m teasing. I’ll take your word the novel is under way. Don’t let me down.”

“I’ll have the novel on your desk by the due date.”

“That’s the kind of news I love to hear. We’ll speak again next week.”

James ended the call and dropped his mobile phone back onto the table. He showered, shaved and got dressed. On the way to the front door, he snatched up his wallet, phone, and the electronic door card, slipping them into the pockets of his shorts.

He opened the door to Mia’s smile.

“Perfect timing,” she chirped.

“Yes, it was. Shall we go?”

James and Mia were holding hands long before the lift door opened on the ground floor. They stepped out into the sunshine and walked along the narrow sandy track snaking its way through the tea-trees towards a group of shops down the other side of the hill. They emerged from the scrub when the land flattened out. On their right, they spied the sparkling sea.

“Maybe after lunch, we could have a swim?” hinted Mia.

“Good idea.”

The café in question was a short three-minute walk further on. There were at least seven people in each shop the pair walked past. The clock hanging off the wall at the entrance to the café displayed the numbers; 12:30pm.

“I didn’t know I had skipped breakfast. Now I have stopped typing I realize I’m starving,” moaned James.

Mia stepped up to the front desk. The young attractive seventeen-year-old girl displayed a doubtful expression.

“Unless you have a reservation we are fully booked today,” she announced.

“I do have a reservation. 12:30pm under the name of Garnett.”

The girl checked the left-hand side of the large book. “Yes, I can see you have. Please follow me.”

Mia and James were shown a small table upstairs, overlooking the bay. Several single mast yachts were moving slightly in the sea breeze. In the middle of the channel, a large cargo ship was slowly making its way to the Port of Melbourne. Mia and James ordered a seafood meal and a white wine. Mia leaned across the table after the girl walked away.

“How’s the novel coming along?”

“It’s shaping up to be amazing. If I had time to stop for a break you could’ve met Eloise.”

“You should have said hold on for a minute so you could call me.”

“I didn’t want to break her thoughts. I tell you something, Mia; the woman makes the story sound true. She’s such a natural writer.”

“Does she still want to give the manuscript to you?”

“Yes. I guess I could bring the idea up again. However, the woman sounded firm about giving me one hundred percent of the royalties.”

“I can’t understand it. Who would dictate a whole novel and not want any royalties? Don’t you think it’s a bit strange?” grumbled Mia.

“Yes, I do. It is a blessing though,” declared James.

“When she’s close to the end and not around I’ll have a read,” said Mia.

“How’s your novel coming along?”

“I’ve typed one line. I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Maybe you’re tired.”

“I don’t feel tired. In fact, I believe I’m bordering on insomnia. I’ve written twenty novels. All of them have sold well, but I have dried up.”

“It’ll come back to you.”

“I hope so. I miss the keyboard. I feel as though I’m going through withdrawal symptoms from not typing.”

“Eloise told me to tell you the blockage will evaporate when you believe in yourself,” advised James.

Mia displayed a skeptic look. “How did she know about my writer’s block?”

James shrugged. “I have no idea. It’s like she knows what’s going on.”

“Ask her?”

“I already know what she’s going to say; suspense! It’s all about suspense. If she says too much too soon where’s the suspense.”

“Maybe she’s a teacher on holidays,” suggested Mia.

“I don’t think so, but now you mention it, teaching does fit her style.”

“Ask her what she did for a career, other than writing novels.”

James nodded as he saw a middle-aged man carrying their lunch to the table. A second man much younger than the first brought their wine. James waited for the food and drinks to be placed on the table then looked directly at the younger man.

“Can I please order two flat white coffees?”

“Yes Sir.” He jotted down the order, walking back to the bar.

Mia leaned over the table, whispering. “I’ll try Eloise’s idea of believing in myself. It might be exactly what I need.”

James and Mia consumed the meal and the wine chatting like old friends. Again, James could feel the love flowing unhindered between them. A cool breeze buffeted James’ shirt. Goosebumps erupted on Mia’s arms. A few couples left their table and walked towards the stairs.

“Let’s finish our coffee then make our way back to the hotel,” suggested James.

“Besides, you’ve gone quiet on me.”

“Sorry, I’ve been thinking about what Eloise told you. The minute I sit down at the keyboard I’m going to believe the words will be on the page. I’ve nothing to lose in trying.”

They stood as one. James led the way down the narrow staircase to the ground floor. He paid for the lunch, took hold of Mia’s hand and followed her outside.

“The sun’s out again, and the cool breeze has gone,” said James.

“Yes. The sun feels extra hot now we’re off the balcony. I’ll race you to the pool!” squealed Mia, pulling her hand away.

She had caught James on the back foot. All he could do was watch Mia surging ahead. He sprinted after her. Halfway back to the hotel, his windpipe started aching from him breathing too fast. It had been years since he’d gone for a run. When he got to the pool, he saw Mia dive to the bottom of the seven-foot deep end fully clothed. James dropped his wallet and phone onto a chair and dived after her, catching Mia swimming along the bottom.

James looked up at the surface. He’d never been so deep. It felt surprisingly good, suspended underwater, not touching anything; just hovering.

Mia reached out, gripping James’ shoulders, reeling him in. She pushed her lips against his as he wrapped his arms around her waist. Slowly they floated to the surface. After taking a deep breath, Mia and James swam down to the bottom of the pool for another round of kissing.

When they broke surface for the second time, Mia swam to the side of the pool, hoisting herself out. She walked to the closest lounge chair where she sat, waiting for James. They lay in the sun holding hands.

For over two hours they talked, laughed and drank a bottle of wine they ordered from one of the hotel staff walking past. It didn’t take long for both to realize they had fallen in love. Mia, felt they were a perfect match. They shared the same passion. Being authors was the best feeling. The idea of writing together gave Mia’s imagination a long awaited kick. She even started to think her writer’s block might be due to the fact she was single. James’ presence and his natural smile started to renew her confidence.

James looked upon Mia’s uncanny arrival to be fate. He didn’t care how or why they were brought together he just knew he wanted Mia in his life forever.

“How do you feel about dinner then a dance?” asked James, looking sideways at Mia.

“I’d say it sounds wonderful.”

“I know of a small nightclub up a side lane close to the Melbourne CBD. There’s dancing every night.”

“I’ll be ready in an hour,” said Mia.

“Right, sixty minutes it is.”

At Mia’s apartment, James used her electronic swipe card to open the door. He held it open while she walked across the threshold.

Upon entering his apartment, James ordered a taxi then rang the nightclub to book a table. After a quick shower and a change of clothes, he managed to step into the corridor outside his apartment at the same time Mia opened her door. James displayed his natural smile.

“Excellent timing,” said Mia.

“It was. You look amazing,” commented James.

“Thank you. I decided to bring this new dress along for an occasion such as this.”

Mia stood in front of James wearing a long black slim line dress. The material hugged the contours of her body. Gold coloured lace lined the sweetheart neckline. She had twirled the ends of her long black hair which made her hair bounce while she walked. The gleam in Mia’s eyes matched the sparkle in the diamond earrings hanging from her earlobes. Three-inch high heels helped her to look picture perfect.

“You scrub up good yourself. A black suit, white shirt and the dull red tie helps you to look debonair.”

James took Mia by the hand and escorted her to the lift. The door opened before either of them could reach for the call button.

“Someone likes us,” said Mia.

James got busy kissing Mia the moment the lift door closed. They moved apart when the door opened on the ground floor level. They stepped out, watching an elderly woman push her way into the lift. Looking at Mia and James, a slight grin deepened the fissures in her face.

“What a creepy old woman,” said Mia, after the lift door closed.

“She was acting a little weird,” mumbled James.

When they stepped outside into the warm evening air, a taxi was parked close to the main entrance with its motor running. James opened the rear passenger door and helped Mia to slide to the other side of the car. James slipped onto the seat next to Mia. Leaning forward he tapped the driver on the shoulder.

“Do you know the small nightclub called the Ritz? It’s close to the Melbourne CBD.”

“Yes, I do. Nice place to eat and dance the night away.”

“How long will it take to get there?”

“Forty minutes if the traffic is light.”

James sat back. The taxi eased out of the drive and headed for Melbourne.

Thirty-seven minutes after leaving the hotel the driver stopped the car outside the Ritz. James paid the fare and ran around the car to the driver’s side to help Mia out of the car. When the taxi eased away from the curb, they faced a rundown old-style solid red brick building with a torn and faded jutting out canvas canopy. Only a few small lights were working, lighting one side of the narrow bluestone path.

“I have my doubts about this place,” grumbled Mia. She scrunched her nose at the almost derelict looking nightclub and its surrounds.

James pushed his arm around her waist. “I know this place doesn’t look like much on the outside. However, it’s nice on the inside. I’m positive you’ll love it.”

James led the way to the rear of a short queue. Mia glanced at the ladies waiting for their turn to go inside. They all wore a long evening dress which would have kissed the ground when they walked if they didn’t hold their dress up. Switching her focus on the men, Mia noted they all wore a black suit and tie.

A security guard standing at the entrance to the nightclub yelled at the top of his voice. “Does anyone have a table reservation?”

Mia and James sidestepped out of the queue. Marching to the front, the dagger eyes from the other couples was their reward for the unsolicited move.

“Name?” questioned the security guard, seeing them approaching.

“The reservation should be under the names of Mia and James Buxton.”

James studied the man. He stood at least six-foot-four and wore a black creased dinner suit. His square chin made his face look long. His smile never eventuated.

The guard scrolled his index finger down the page, stopping at the names. “You can go in,” he snarled.

Stepping inside the building, Mia was surprised at the grandeur. The interior resembled a wedding reception. Round tables dotted the perimeter of the parquet dance floor and stage. Every two-seat table was covered with a white medium length tablecloth. A small bouquet of flowers around a long tubular glass with a candle in it had been placed in the exact middle. A full length dull red curtain in prestige condition hung off the wall behind the band’s musical instruments.

James’ pre-booked table for two was located in the rear corner. The few times he had brought a lady to the place they always mentioned how good the food tasted, adding how relatively easy they could talk.

A twenty something-year-old girl scooted across the dance floor, beckoning Mia and James to follow. Directly opposite the band, she squeezed past two tables on the way to the rear of the nightclub.

“The polished wooden floor makes you feel like a dance,” hinted Mia.

James gently squeezed her hand. “Yes, it does. I hope the band plays good music tonight so we can get up on the floor.”

Table forty-one at the rear of the nightclub looked elegant. It had been set slightly different than the others. Instead of a bouquet of flowers a single long-stemmed red rose in a tall crystal vase was in the middle of the table.

In a few minutes, a different girl walked over with a computer pad in her hand. “Are you ready to order?”

“Two chef specials,” said Mia and James in unison.

“Two white wines,” added James.

“Your meal will be exactly twenty minutes,” advised the girl. She collected the menu cards and walked off towards the next table.

James noticed the musicians stepping onto the stage. Each muso appeared to be middle-aged and wore a grey suit. James stood when he heard the music. He looked down on Mia, an expectant gleam in his eyes.

“Please say yes to a dance?”

Taking hold of his hand, Mia stood. “Yes.”

James led the way to the dance floor. Several other couples, mostly older, joined in on the slow waltz. James navigated Mia around the outside of the floor skirting around the slow-moving couples. After completing three laps of the floor the band gave up the last note. Mia had just caught her breath when the next song started.

“The elegant swing waltz,” announced the main muso through his microphone.

The Tango came next followed by another extra slow waltz to finish off the music bracket.

Mia and James stood in the middle of the dance floor staring into each other's eyes; neither wanted to say a word. Mia swayed to the melody of the song. James held her firmly in his arms. If there was any light between them, no one could tell.

A woman standing next to table forty-one watched Mia and James dancing. She too swayed to the beat of the music, lost in a time of long ago. When Mia and James finally stepped off the dance floor and made their way back to their table, the woman blew them a kiss. She turned her back and walked away.

"Did you feel a cool breeze brush your cheek?" quizzed Mia.

"Yes." James glanced around the room searching for the open door. "I can't see what might have caused it."

"Maybe the air-conditioner caused the breeze?" suggested Mia.

James shrugged. He pulled Mia's chair out, waited for her to sit then sat on the chair opposite. They were seated just in time to see their dinner being delivered to their table.

After their meal, the couple again walked onto the dance floor. Two hours of solid dancing, numerous coffees, a few glasses of wine each and dessert helped to make 2:00 in the morning come around quick.

James and Mia walked out of the nightclub. The fresh air washed away their tired feeling. James hailed a taxi. Opening the passenger door, he waited for Mia to slide across the rear seat. He sat next to her, pulling the door shut.

"Mt Martha," instructed James leaning towards the driver.

The car zoomed away from the nightclub.

They made great progress. Just on twenty minutes, James had paid the taxi fare. He escorted Mia to her apartment door. Slipping his arms around her waist, he looked directly into her eyes. James saw Mia gulp.

"What I said to you when I first asked if you would like to go out for dinner I meant it," James said.

"No strings attached?"

"Yes and I still feel the same."

"Don't you want to come in for coffee?"

"I'd love to."

Mia dragged James inside her apartment kicking the door shut. They walked outside onto the balcony, looking at nothing in particular. Eventually, James placed both his hands, on Mia's hips. She met his gaze. He displayed a serious expression.

James spoke in a low voice. "I love you, Mia."

"If you hadn't said something when you did I'd have said I love you. I'm happy you spoke first. I wasn't sure how you'd react."

James gently caressed Mia's cheek with the palm of his left hand. He felt her hands slip around his back, dragging him in closer. Just for a moment, he saw Mia's eyes glistening. He saw her blink. He felt her smile. Then she closed her eyes.

James pushed his lips tenderly against Mia's.

For a long time, they stood on the balcony in a loving embrace. Mia and James had no idea their every move was being watched. Perhaps it was a good thing. The love pulsating between them might have been broken. Mia looked to be enjoying the taste of James' lips. He looked to be just as thrilled.

Somewhere close to the balcony a cricket chirped. Mia and James didn't hear its love song. However, they subconsciously started to sway. Eventually Mia opened her eyes and gazed lovingly at the man who held her in his arms.

The medium size bush growing out of the pot in the corner of the balcony moved in the cool breeze.

"Did you feel a cool breeze brush your cheek just now?" quizzed Mia.

"I did," whispered James. "Uncanny."

Mia took hold of James' hand, leading him to the bedroom.

The moonlight shining through the partly open curtain helped to make the room look romantic. James and Mia shed their clothes. While they made love, both could hear the cricket's constant love song.

At 4:00 in the morning Mia sat on the sofa cuddling James. They were content to sit in the dark waiting for the sunrise.

By 4:30 they were asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SUNSHINE QUICKLY moved closer to James. The moment it shone on his left eye he woke. Hovering over him and Mia he could barely see Eloise's blurry form.

"It's good to see you have clothes on this morning James," whispered Eloise.

"How did you know I was here? How did you enter Mia's apartment?"

"Don't wake Mia. Come on; we have work to do." Eloise lifted a finger to her lips.

"I can't just up and leave Mia."

"Trust me; she'll be okay. When Mia knows the truth, she will fully understand."

James peeled himself from under Mia. Reaching out, he carried Mia to bed. He needed to trot to keep up with Eloise marching towards his apartment.

With Eloise standing at the computer desk, James continued his barrage of questions.

"Why was my apartment door wide open?"

"I opened it five minutes ago," admitted Eloise.

"How?" he quizzed.

"Suspense," answered Eloise. "We must start work. Time is short."

James watched her step up to the balcony door. Using a quick sweep of her hand, the curtain parted, pouring sunlight into the room.

“The kettle has boiled. There’s a fresh mug of coffee steaming next to the laptop. Your bacon and eggs have been dished up and the dishes have been washed.” Eloise glanced over her shoulder. “Don’t just stand there, go eat breakfast.”

“What about you? Can I fix you something to eat?”

“Thanks for the offer, I’ve already eaten.”

Although James portrayed a puzzled expression he said thanks.

“Why do you seem a little puzzled again this morning?” quizzed Eloise.

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yes.”

James swiped the plate of food from off the bench and sat at the kitchen table watching Eloise slide onto the seat opposite him.

“Don’t let the food get cold. Eat up.”

“When did you make breakfast?”

“All remaining questions will be answered when the novel is finished.”

“Why not tell me now?”

“You should know the answer,” moaned Eloise.

“Suspense,” James grumbled. He scoffed the food down then sat back looking suspiciously at Eloise. “The eggs tasted free range. I didn’t buy them. They weren’t in this room.”

“James, please stop being the detective. There’s no mystery. I brought the eggs with me. I have two chickens at my place. If I didn’t bring breakfast how could I convince the young man who let me into your apartment to open the door?”

Sighing heavily, James walked over to the laptop. He pushed the start button and only needed to wait a few seconds for the words to come up on the screen.

“Are you ready to start work?” asked Eloise.

“Almost,” he announced. “Every time you either go home, or you arrive to begin telling the story you look slightly different.”

“What about now?”

“If I didn’t know you were eighty I’d say you looked no older than fifty.”

“Thanks for saying such a nice compliment.”

James fidgeted on his seat. “I’m ready when you are.”

Again Eloise stepped up to the sliding glass balcony door. She acted the same way as on previous times by looking out over the bay. She eventually sighed and squared herself to James.

“We can move the story on a week. Everything has calmed down. The mood in the factory has stabilized. Production of ammunition, plane and tank parts has resumed in earnest. Even the Old Clunker seemed to be churning out more bullets per hour. There was a real excitement in the air. The workers had been informed they were about to meet their new Boss.”

“Lilly, the whole factory seems to be alive,” commented Suzie, walking up to her at the bullet making machine.

“Yes, the rumor of our new Boss arriving this morning at 9:30 has the place humming. Even Mr. Smith has a spring in his step.”

The echo of the smoko whistle reverberated throughout the factory.

Lilly checked her watch. "It's too early for smoko. It's only 9:00am."

"Everyone outside," called Mr. Smith. He started to herd the women workers towards the outside door. "Suzie, Lilly, let's go."

"I hope this has nothing to do with our secret. Yesterday, I saw someone driving a black car slowly past the factory," whispered Suzie.

"Don't panic. Lots of cars go past each day."

"Lilly, I'm positive I saw the driver staring at me. I'm feeling a bit nervous. If a smart cop thinks about Carlisle's supposed accidental death and begins to ask me questions I'm afraid I'll spill everything about what happened."

"Stay calm. If a different cop is out there, act innocent. If we can convince him we don't know anything other than what we said a week ago, he'll leave."

The eighty women working in the factory switched off their machines. They filed outside in double quick time. Lilly and Suzie were the last ones out. The weather looked fine. However, rain was expected late in the day. Already the temperature felt like it had started to drop. The only evidence of the burnt-out car or where Carlisle died was a patch of blackened ground.

The group watched a black car, the same model as Carlisle's swing onto the factory grounds through the open gate. It stopped at the side fence. A man of average height, balding and brandishing a grey moustache, walked over carrying a metal bucket. Everyone watched him turn it upside down and step up, towering over the women. He summed up the group to be slightly nervous. He stepped off the bucket so he could look at each of the workers at eye level.

"Good morning ladies," he called. "I'm your new Boss. My name is Harry Finestone. Please call me Harry. The reason I got off the bucket is simple. I want you to think of me as your friend, not a Boss. My office door is always open. There is one rule I need everyone to remember. If one of you ladies wants to talk about something I will come out of my office. I'll set up a small table and a couple of chairs near reception. I want each person listening to my voice to feel safe when you talk to me. I'm well aware of what happened here recently. Accident or not it's not my place to judge. In fact, it's none of my business. I have many years, experience in the factory industry. I believe a happy work environment is a productive one. I want to say thanks in advance for the work you do here. It must have been extremely difficult to get used to a change of roles. Your husband or father used to work while you ladies stayed at home bringing up the kids. I admire you for the commitment. This war will not last forever. When the day arrives and peace is declared, you'll be happy to know I will give each of you a bonus of two pounds on the last day of work."

"What do you mean our last day of work?" asked Lilly, taking a step forward.

Harry answered Lilly's question by looking at the entire workforce. "When the men come back from the war they'll take over your jobs. Hopefully, things will return to normal reasonably quick." It was then Harry switched his attention to Lilly. "I apologize if you thought I was rude by not looking directly at you. I believe your question involved everyone here. You know my name; may I ask yours?"

“I’m Lilly Barrett.”

Harry walked over, pushing his hand out. Lilly shook it then stepped back level with Suzie.

“If there are no more questions I’ll personally meet everyone over the course of today. Thanks for listening.” Harry checked his watch. “Smoko is in about half an hour. You have my permission to take a longer break.”

About 3:00 in the afternoon Harry wandered over to the bullet making machine. Lilly had her back to him. For nearly a full minute he watched her progress. She jumped a little when she finally saw him.

“I’m sorry I startled you. I didn’t want to interrupt while you were pouring gunpowder into the funnel.”

“Thanks,” said Lilly. “I’ve been working this machine for a little over three months; pouring gunpowder into the funnel still makes me slightly nervous.”

Harry reached out to shake her hand. “We met at the meeting. You were the only one who asked a question.”

“Yes, thanks for answering. I love the idea of talking openly and not in your office behind a closed door.”

“Good to hear. I don’t want rumors floating around the factory I might be a maniac who loves to chase women.”

Lilly faked a grin. The moment Harry focused on the machine her smile faded.

“I’ll give out some information about myself,” continued Harry. “I’m sixty. I’ve been married to the same wonderful woman since I turned nineteen. We raised three children. They are wonderful boys. One died in the war.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Lilly interrupted.

“It’s okay. It’s been a while. My wife and I will see him in heaven one day. I go to church to pray each Sunday. I work six days a week. I live four minutes up the road. I drove today due to the fact the weather is about to turn bad. What about you?”

“I’m Lilly Barrett. I’m married, no children yet. I’m twenty-four. My house is a fifteen-minute walk from here. My husband is in the Navy.”

“Do you have any more questions?”

“What you said earlier about when the war is over, and the men come home, we won’t be working here?”

“Correct.”

Lilly turned her head to wipe the tears away.

“It’ll be okay. Everyone will have to make adjustments after the war.”

“I do have another question, but I don’t want you to think it’s absurd.”

“No question is bizarre. In fact, I love hearing diverse questions, the ones that are never asked. For example, the last factory I worked at a lovely young woman asked me if I could install an oven. She wanted to cook her roast dinner during the day, so when she got home, she’d only have to sit and eat. She complained of feeling too tired from working to start cooking at the end of the day.”

“How did you respond?”

Harry chuckled. "I said I'd do my best to find an oven. I did get one installed. I don't know if it'll be used to cook her roast dinner or not, the bloke who took over from me didn't like the idea."

To Lilly, the man seemed genuine, a real likeable sort of bloke, but she needed to tread carefully until she knew more about him. After all, he only just arrived.

"You wanted to ask me a question?" quizzed Harry.

"What are my chances of purchasing this bullet making machine I'm standing at when the war is over?"

"Why do you want to own this old machine?"

"I have an idea floating around in my head when my husband returns we could start a small business."

"Making bullets?"

Lilly lifted her hand to muffle her giggles. "No, I'm hoping to make lollies. I believe this machine will be perfect for what I need. Of course, providing the lollies come out okay."

"I have no objections. I'll make a few phone calls to find out how you can buy the old thing. When the war's over, I'm sure nobody will want the old museum piece."

"If it's okay with you, could I trial the making of the lollies in the machine at some stage?"

Harry rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He looked directly at Lilly. "Certainly, though I must insist on one thing."

Lilly pouted, bowing her head.

"Please, let me eat the first lolly the machine makes. Don't tell anyone, I'm a sugarholic."

"I won't tell your secret."

"Don't forget, I want to eat the first lolly made by the machine."

"It's a deal," said Lilly.

At the end of the day, Lilly jogged home to begin working out a nice tasting recipe.

A few hours of cooking and Lilly had no ingredients in the cupboard. Lilly mixed up the last batch, wrote down the exact amount of each ingredient and poured the lolly compound into a clean pot already on the stove. When the tar coloured lolly mixture felt cool enough to touch, Lilly rolled it into the diameter of a sixpence and cut the long strand of lolly goo into thumbnail lengths using a sharp knife.

"Here goes nothing," she whispered, popping a lolly into her mouth. Using her tongue to push the substance around her mouth, she concentrated on the flavor. When the lolly started to dissolve, her eyes sparkled. "It's the perfect recipe. It tastes great. I need a second opinion."

Lilly marched to her neighbor's house carrying a dozen lollies on a plate. After knocking on the door, she waited patiently for someone to answer.

"Lilly, what brings you out at 10:30 in the evening?"

"Gwen, I'm sorry it's so late, I want you to try one of these lollies. I need a second opinion on the taste."

The middle-aged woman Lilly was staring at seemed exhausted. Raising three boys and two girls, cooking, cleaning and working at the local haberdashery shop six days a week found her more than ready for sleep.

The dark haired woman took a small square. For a few agonizing seconds, she didn't comment. When she swallowed the lolly, she held her hand out for another.

"The lolly leaves a lasting taste in my mouth."

"Please say you liked it?"

"I loved it. Where did you get the recipe?"

"It's a family secret. It was handed down from my Grandmother," explained Lilly, trying to sound convincing.

"I'd love for you to tell me."

"Sorry, I'm not allowed."

Gwen took another six; one for her and one each for her children.

"I'm thinking along the line of selling them," said Lilly.

"It's a great idea, but if you want my opinion nobody has any money because of the war. Producing hundreds will take too long. You'll need a machine. Quite frankly the bank won't let you borrow a shilling."

Gwen's damaging words hit Lilly hard in her stomach. Managing to form a grin she whispered on a sigh. "I'll have to wait and see what the wind whips up."

Goodnight," moaned Gwen. "I hope I didn't turn you off the business venture?"

Lilly walked back to her house feeling sorry for herself. She sat at the kitchen table staring at the last five lollies on the plate. She bowed her head, dropping a tear over the news Gwen had told her.

Eventually, Lilly stood. Still feeling disheartened over the news, a determined expression swept her face. Pulling open the door to the ice chest she positioned the small plate of lollies on top of the cup size block of ice and went to bed.

CHAPTER NINE

THE NEXT day happened to be Saturday. Lilly woke long before the sky started to lighten. Sitting in bed, the side table lamp burning bright, she finished her letter to Jack. On the way, out of the house, she grabbed a small paper bag and placed the leftover lollies in it. She swiped the letter from off the table and stepped out into the early morning air.

Four houses away she spied the milkman's horse and cart. She stood under a gum tree to watch, hoping not to scare the horse.

"Morning," called the milkman. He darted across the road carrying a wire basket full of pint bottles of milk. In seconds, he had returned to the cart, only to grab another half a dozen pint bottles and dart to the other side of the road again.

Lilly counted the seconds waiting for his return. "I'm amazed at how fit you are," she called.

"I have to keep up with the horse," the milky explained. "Have a nice day."

"You too."

On the way to work, Lilly made her usual deviation to the general store to buy a stamp for the letter to Jack. What Gwen told her a few hours earlier weighed heavily on her mind.

"Morning Lilly," greeted the man standing in the doorway of the general store.

"Good morning," she replied, jumping a little. "You startled me."

"My apologies. I didn't take too much notice of how many people might be around this time of the morning. What will it be, the usual stamp?"

"Yes please, Mr. Finch."

"I bet your husband looks forward to receiving the letters. You're more regular than a clock."

Though she smiled, Lilly's thoughts were taking her elsewhere. The far away look in her eyes helped to back up the fact.

Mr. Finch swiped his hand in front of Lilly's face several times to get her attention. In the end, he spoke.

"I can tell you have troubles on your mind."

"How do you know?"

"I've been having a one-way conversation. If we didn't know each other, I'd say you were ignoring me. What's up, Lilly?" Mr. Finch stopped what he started doing and leaned his elbows on the counter.

"I've got this idea about starting a business selling lollies. My dear neighbor told me I'd never get a loan from the bank."

"Your neighbor is probably correct. Now or after the war, the Government will need all the money they can get. Borrowing for a brand-new business might be difficult if not impossible."

"I've dwelled on the idea most of the night and again this morning. I'm determined to find a way to not only start my business I want to see it grow into a success. I just don't know what to do," stated Lilly, groaning heavily.

"Forget about borrowing from the bank. Save the money instead."

"Do you think I can?"

"If you cut your spending budget to the bone and I mean to practically zero, I believe you could save up enough to at least make a start."

"I think maybe that might be a great idea." Lilly held up her bag of sweets. "Try one. Another opinion will give me encouragement."

After Mr. Finch tasted a lolly his face broke out into a grin. "Fantastic," he reported.

"Are you being honest or just polite? Answer me truthfully. I'm strong; I can handle the truth."

"Lilly, if I say they're great I mean it. I tell you what I'll do. You make up batches of the sweets. I'll split the profits down the middle with you."

Lilly's eyes sparkled at the idea. "You have a deal."

“At least it’ll help raise some revenue.” Mr. Finch slid the stamp across the counter. “This stamp is on the house. Put that money towards your business.”

“Thank you, I will. The day I get paid I’ll go buy more ingredients and pay you for the two cigars,” chirped Lilly.

“Righto,” replied Mr. Finch. “When my Grandson told me he sold two cigars and didn’t get the cash, I did lose my temper. When he explained who bought them, I apologized. I knew you’d never forget to pay.”

“Thanks for your understanding. When I’ve made my next batch of lollies I’ll bring them over.”

“I’ll be waiting to sell them.”

Humming to herself, Lilly skipped out of the store. She made it to the factory in time to see Harry opening the main gate. She ran to catch him up.

“I’ve brought a few lolly samples.”

“I’m more than interested in tasting your cooking.” He pushed his hand into the open bag. The minute he tasted the sweet mixture he began to nod. “This is the best tasting lolly I’ve ever tried. I reckon they might be a winner.”

“If I could borrow the money I’d be able to start today. I’ve just secured my first outlet,” stated Lilly.

“I recommend you don’t borrow any money or put your savings in the bank. The Government will confiscate the lot, leaving you penniless for the duration of the war. Take my advice; find a safe place somewhere around your home for the money. I do.”

“Can you tell me an example of a safe place?”

“I put my money in a tin then bury it.”

“I’ll take what you’ve told me under advisement,” said Lilly. “Have you made any progress about me being able to buy the bullet making machine?”

“Sort of. I’ve found out the Old Clunker isn’t worth much. In my opinion when the machine isn’t needed, it’ll be just about worthless.”

“How much do you think I could buy it for?”

“A few pounds I suppose. I’ll make more phone calls.”

Lilly bid Harry a good day and ran inside the factory to start work. Ten feet in from the door to the outside, Suzie held out her hand for a lolly. She wasn’t disappointed. A couple of other ladies sprinted across the factory floor also eager to sample the home-made sweets.

The weeks slowly dragged into months. Lilly’s sweets were selling. She wasn’t making a lot of money, but they were selling, cementing the idea of a viable business for Jack and her to dive into when he returned home.

Each Saturday morning Lilly bought her stamp at the general store. She’d drop off more lollies and get paid for the previous week’s sales. To cut her budget even further, Lilly needed to make a tough decision. It was early November. The weather felt warm. She couldn’t sleep. Lilly stepped outside and sat on the back verandah of her small house. Even the birds seemed to be awake. She looked up at the clear moonless night sky. She’d been crying over her plight of not sending a weekly letter to Jack. Harry told her the news she could buy the Old Clunker provided she gave the army ten pounds. She needed to save

another five. Lilly couldn't see any other option except write to Jack once every two weeks. Even the lolly sales were dropping. The few dozen, she sold each week she religiously put towards reaching the ten pounds. The war seemed to be taking its toll on everyone.

Lilly jumped to her feet. Strolling down the path, she swiped up the short handle shovel lying on the ground. In front of the second tomato plant, she pushed the metal blade into the soft dirt. She heard a thud. Placing the shovel against the fence, she dropped to her knees and dug her fingers into the ground. Each Saturday night she'd dig up the old biscuit tin and open the lid. This time, Lilly counted the money inside the tin and added another pound. She felt proud of the fact she had six pounds towards the bullet making machine.

Lilly reburied the tin, smoothing over the soil then walked back inside the house.

It seemed less than a minute before the sunshine covered her eyes. Lilly always enjoyed the Sunday morning sleep in.

At exactly 7:00am Lilly heard a knock on the front door. Pulling on her pink dressing gown, she tied the long cord around her waist, rushing down the hall. The closer she got to the door the more nervous she felt. Lilly opened the door to a man wearing a police uniform.

One hundred different scenarios simultaneously tumbled through Lilly's mind. On top of her list sat Carlisle's murder. Did the police finally put two and two together and tracked her down, or did they question Suzie, forcing her to confess. Lilly's head started throbbing at the idea someone, maybe Mr. Smith decided to tell how she murdered Carlisle.

Glaring directly at the Constable, Lilly's knees began to feel weak. She leaned against the wall to stop herself from crumpling to the floor. Her heart pounded inside her chest. Her windpipe and lungs ached from breathing too fast. Forcing herself to slow her breathing, Lilly listened to the laborious wheeze.

"Good morning," announced the tall, handsome Constable. "Is your name Mrs. Lilly Barrett?"

"Yes," she answered hesitantly.

The man took off his hat and produced an envelope, thrusting it at Lilly.

"What's this? It looks official."

"It's a letter from the Royal Australian Navy," reported the Constable.

"The Navy?" echoed Lilly, still trying to compose herself.

"Mrs. Barrett, the letter is self-explanatory."

Staring at the Constable's somber expression, Lilly gathered her wits, realizing he wasn't going to arrest her. She pulled open the envelope and began to read.

"To Mrs. Lilly Barrett, we the Navy need to inform you, petty officer Jack Barrett has been wounded when the HMS Waterhen was bombed and sunk in the Mediterranean Sea.

Most of the crew who were on the Waterhen was picked up by the HMS Perth. Jack sustained bad injuries. Of his medical condition or his where-a-bouts is unknown.

We will endeavor to locate him:
Regards the Royal Australian Navy."

Lilly painted a brave expression on her face as she waited to hear any more facts the Constable might know.

The Constable saluted, turned and marched back to the police car.

Lilly clung to the front door watching the police car's exhaust pipe smoking. When the car was out of sight, she melted to the floor, sobbing. Not knowing if Jack was alive or dead played heavily on her nerves. Her headache grew steadily worse. The whole day came and went in a blur.

The next morning Lilly again started to walk towards the factory to begin the day. Her feet felt like they were inside concrete boots. Her walk was slow and tedious. Even the milkman couldn't get a smile out of her.

"Lilly, are you okay?" he asked. Stopping his horse, the milkman ran over.

"I'm fine."

"Bad news?"

Lilly felt her head nodding. "Jack has been injured. I've no idea if he's alive or dead."

"If he's dead the authorities would have informed you," explained the milkman. Trying to sound encouraging, he continued. "Stay strong. It'll be okay. The day the war is over, he'll be home."

"Thanks for your support," sobbed Lilly. With much effort she managed to smile at the man as he sprinted off to catch up to his horse.

Lilly somehow made it through the next ten months. Walking into the general store for her usual fortnightly stamp, Mr. Finch met her at the counter.

"Here you are," he announced, sliding the stamp under her nose. "The stamp is on me. Keep your money today." He leaned his elbows on the counter, whispering close to Lilly's ear. "From now until the end of the war, the stamp is free. Go back to your weekly letter mailing too. By the way, here are two pounds for the sweets. I've found more regular customers wanting to taste your lollies."

Lilly vaguely acknowledged the good news. "Thanks for your help. Mr. Finch I owe you an apology."

"Whatever for?"

"I haven't been too talkative of late."

Mr. Finch patted Lilly on the arm. "I understand."

"There's still no news if Jack's alive or dead and I have no idea if he actually gets my letters."

"In my opinion, no news is good news."

Lilly paused to think about his statement and to work out what he might have meant.

"I guess you're right. If the Navy discovered Jack had died they'd be knocking on my door."

"I'm certain it's the standard practice."

Lilly exited the general store. She folded her arms and hunched her shoulders against the predawn air. Fifty feet from the store she heard someone shouting her name. Looking over her shoulder, Lilly saw Mr. Finch running up. To be polite, she retraced a dozen steps.

“Lilly, the war is over! I’ve heard the news on the wireless just now. They reported we won.”

“We won!” echoed Lilly. Instead of shouting for joy, she remained reserved, not daring to hope Mr. Finch’s words were correct.

“The man on the wireless reported the Japanese have surrendered.”

As if switching on a light, Lilly’s eyes sparked to life. “Thanks for telling me. I do pray you are correct. If I weren’t running late for work, I’d love to stay for a chat. I have to go.”

Lilly started running. When she closed in on the boy selling his newspapers, she slowed to a walk. The lad tipped his cap at her.

“Get your paper now. Good news today. Buy your paper,” he yelled.

Walking past the stack of unsold newspapers, Lilly read the headlines of the day.

‘WAR IS OVER. WE WON.
FIRST SHIP HOME IN TWO DAYS.’

Lilly snatched up the paper. She read the entire article. The teenage boy trotted over.

“Morning Lilly. Good news Eh!”

“Do you know what this means?” asked Lilly, staring at him.

“The war is over,” explained the boy.

“Jack’s coming home.”

Lilly let her bottled scream out. She hugged the fourteen-year-old lad and lifted him off the ground. Feeling overjoyed, she kissed the teenager. His cheeks were bright red when she finally let him loose.

“Have the paper for free,” he offered. “I loved the kiss. It’s a shame I’m not older.”

Lilly giggled and pulled the cap over his eyes. She leaped high into the air and sprinted down the road. Still a fair distance from the factory, Lilly saw Harry waving the workers away from the factory’s side gate.

“Lilly, go home. The war’s over. Go back to your life. Start a family. Thanks for your toil. If you come back tomorrow, the last pay will be handed to you plus the bonus I promised.”

“I’m out of a job?”

“We’ve been through this several times over the past year. When the men step off the ship, they will be working at some of the jobs the women have done since the war began. Lilly, I’m proud of you and of every lady who worked in this factory.”

“What about the Old Clunker?”

Harry scratched his head. “I forgot about our agreement.”

“I need the machine.”

Harry glanced up and down the road. Satisfied no one would see, he opened the gate, allowing Lilly to slip through the narrow gap. He quickly ushered her inside the factory. After shutting the door, he relayed to her what was about to happen.

“This place is going to be transformed into a warehouse for other machines, spares parts and army equipment. The first delivery is today. If you want the machine, you’ll have

to take it out before the first truck arrives. By tomorrow, it will be buried in spare parts. It'll be too hard to dig out."

"Yes, I want the machine!" shrieked Lilly. "The problem is; I have no idea how to move it."

"You've been a great worker, Lilly. I'm going to stand by our agreement. While I make a phone call, find Mr. Smith and tell him to help you. In five minutes, I'll be at the machine."

"What about paying for the Old Clunker?"

"Yesterday I made a few more phone calls. Nobody was interested in what I asked. I finally talked to an important person working for the Government. He suggested I take it."

Lilly ran off. She found Mr. Smith sitting by himself at a bench smoking a cigar to celebrate the end of the war.

"Please help me. Harry told me to ask you for help. I need to move the Old Clunker out of this factory."

Mr. Smith took one last drag of his cigar then placed it on the bench.

"I know exactly what you need. I want you to go out to the scrap metal yard on the dead side of the factory, find me some angle iron and bring it to the Old Clunker."

Lilly had no idea why Mr. Smith wanted the metal. Recalling what he told her when he bailed her up at the fence just after Carlisle died the thought of explaining her skimpy dress made her feel a little nervous yet again. She'd known Harry and Mr. Smith for a long time, but how much did she know of the men. Were they actually in cahoots together? Maybe they informed the police on what she did. Maybe they conjured up a plan to get her into a confined space where she couldn't get away. The police could come along at their leisure and arrest her. Lilly started to tremble as she struggled to push the rusting door open.

Standing underneath the metal door frame, Lilly stared at the tall weeds and the scrap metal. She quickly decided the chicken wire fence with the barbed wire running along the top edge looked too high and too dangerous to climb over if someone locked the door while she scrounged around for the metal. She felt trapped. Spying a short wooden log, she wedged the door open. Satisfied the makeshift alarm should give her a few seconds to get back inside the factory and make good her escape, Lilly, moved away from the doorway to begin her search. She walked around while watching the door.

Twenty feet from the doorway Lilly found the angle iron. She walked over to the metal, sizing up the weight. Glancing back at the doorway her constant thoughts of being trapped were making the nerves around her eyes twitch. The idea of shutting her eyes for any length of time in an attempt to stop the twitches made her feel like vomiting. Above all else she must watch for any movement at the door. Lilly swallowed the bile in her throat.

Lilly screamed when she heard the scraping of a boot on the concrete floor at the doorway. Mr. Smith's facial expression appeared cold as he stepped onto the weeds. Lilly was trapped. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. Her only exit had been blocked. Lilly's mind flashed up a scene of the gallows; of her walking in slow motion, her gaze zeroing in on the hangman's noose. The rope looked to be moving ever so slightly. Stepping directly under the noose, the wooden trapdoor creaked. Lilly could feel the rough, thick rope around her neck. The fibers were scraping her skin. The scratches felt deep. She

hoped blood wasn't surfacing. Seeing a man standing in the shadows holding a black hessian bag, his deep chuckle sounded evil. His cold emotionless eyes watched Lilly's every move. The man looked more than ready to slip the death bag over her head. To her left, Carlisle's family and friends were waiting for the clock to tick off the remaining few minutes of Lilly's life. Carlisle's wife sat in the front row left of center, crying over her loss. She didn't believe her husband could ever be a rapist or a murderer.

Lilly felt convinced the man deserved what he got.

The ghosts of the dead girls he raped and murdered stood at the rear of the small crowd waiting to welcome Lilly into the after-life. They were still wearing the heavy chain Carlisle draped around them. They seemed pleased the man had died.

"Are you okay?" Mr. Smith shuffled up to Lilly.

His voice snapped Lilly back into reality. She thrashed her fists about in desperation hoping to avoid capture. Mr. Smith raised his hands to block her punches.

"It's okay. I'm here to help you get the metal."

Lilly's shoulders slumped. She vomited on the ground.

"What's wrong? Do you feel sick?" He took hold of Lilly's shoulders to help her keep balance.

"No," she croaked. "For a few seconds, bad thoughts entered my mind."

Mr. Smith kissed her forehead. "If the thoughts have anything to do with Carlisle's death you can rest easy."

"Please, don't tell my secret to anyone," pleaded Lilly.

"I've already forgotten the incident."

Lilly sighed nervously at hearing his statement. "I can't wait to get back inside the factory," she admitted, thankful her time out amongst the weeds would soon come to an end.

"Come on, we have to hurry. I've already spoken to Harry. He's outlined a plan to get the Old Clunker out of here." Mr. Smith pointed at several long strips of angle iron. He grabbed hold of one end. "We'll move one at a time. When we have enough, I'll shut the door."

Lilly clutched the other end of a ten-foot strip of angle iron. Leading the charge, Mr. Smith navigated around the machines. In a matter of minutes, they'd shifted the metal to the Old Clunker. On their last trip, Harry stood next to the bullet making machine. A long chain and a pulley lay on the floor at his feet.

"Ready to start work?" he questioned.

Lilly expressed a grin. Her answer came back as an excited nod.

Mr. Smith shuffled off towards his maintenance shed. When he returned, he was dragging a small metal cart full of welding equipment.

"How do you know exactly what needs doing?" Lilly asked, looking at her Boss.

"Mr. Smith and I have been in this business for a long time. We worked together in the same factory. Mr. Smith taught me when I was an apprentice."

"We have to make a sturdy frame out of the angle iron. When that is done we can lift the machine three feet off the floor. Lilly, when we get the machine to your place the frame

can to be reused to help make a shed. We'll form an insert that can be bolted together when you tell us exactly where you'd like the machine," said Mr. Smith.

"I take it we'll have to push the Old Clunker into the backyard. Five metal pipes the same thickness, each about three feet long should do the job. One of us will place a pipe on the ground at the front of the machine while someone picks up the one at the rear when the Old Clunker rolls off it," instructed Harry.

"How are we going to get the machine from here to my place? It's a fifteen-minute walk?" questioned Lilly.

"Bazza the milky will be here in half an hour. Come on, we have a lot to do," said Harry.

The men set to work. They moved fast. They measured the angle iron and the welder cut the metal easier than a knife slicing through butter. Lilly was asked to search for a pipe about two inches in diameter. She eventually found one fifteen feet long. Ten minutes of struggling found her back at the machine.

"While we cut the pipe, I need you to search for some nuts and bolts," instructed Mr. Smith.

By the time Lilly returned, the frame was almost built. Even the pipe had been cut into five equal lengths.

A truck rumbled through the main entrance and stopped at the roller door. Three men got out and walked over.

"G'day, in the factory. The first lot of equipment is here. Where do you want them?" called the driver.

Harry downed his tools, staring at the men.

Lilly placed the pile of nuts and bolts on the closest bench and eyeballed the driver. The man looked rough and talked tough. His two front teeth were missing. Something or someone had bitten a chunk out of his left ear. He wore shorts, boots, and a sleeveless brown shirt. Tattoos of an anchor were inked on both his arms. He looked Lilly up and down then winked at her.

"If you want me to show you a good time, just holler, sweet lips."

Harry stood to full height, pointing to the side wall. "The young lady isn't interested in you. Start storing everything on the other side of the factory."

"Strange you'd answer me instead of the gorgeous woman. I never heard her say nothin."

"She doesn't have to say anything. I'm her Boss. By the looks of you, I'd say no girl in her right mind would ever be interested in you. If she did show any inclination, she must have rocks in her head."

"Is that what you reckon? You wanna fight for her? Winner takes all." The man shoved a fist under Harry's nose.

"I'm not in the mood for a fight."

"You don't wanna cause, you know I'd win. The last man who tried to fight me bit half my ear off. He won't be doing it to anyone else. If you wanna fight, I'm game."

"What sort of rules do you fight by?" asked Harry.

"I play dirty. I have no rules."

Harry launched himself at the man, downing him with the first blow to the jaw. The fight was over before anyone other than Harry knew the fight had even begun. The stocky truck driver staggered to his feet, spitting blood onto the concrete floor. On his third step, he fell over Mr. Smith's welding equipment. His cohorts ran over, helping him to his feet, blood gushing from his nose. The two men took their mate outside and sat him on the ground, leaning him against the truck's rear wheel. It was then they re-entered the factory.

"Do you want to join your mate?" Harry growled, raising his fists.

"Dave must have got out on the wrong side of the bed this morning. We're not here to cause trouble, only to deliver the goods," groaned one of the remaining two men.

"Good to hear."

Lilly watched the two men unload the metal walls from the truck and store them against the factory's West wall. Harry watched them too.

When the truck drove away, Lilly turned to Harry. "Thank you for defending me."

"Easy done. I believe a man should treat a woman with respect. Someone had to teach the bloke named Dave some manners."

"I see you still got the moves," snorted Mr. Smith.

"Thanks to you, old friend," chuckled Harry.

"I don't understand." Lilly volleyed her attention between the two men.

"I taught Harry how to box. He might've been a champion if he didn't meet his wife. She convinced him to give the boxing idea away."

"Looking back, I reckon I made the right choice," quoted Harry. He chuckled again. "At least I still have my teeth."

His comment made Mr. Smith and Lilly laugh. Finally, Harry spoke seriously.

"The sheets of metal those men delivered will make perfect walls and roof for the shed."

Lilly looked excited at the amount of help she was receiving. "I suppose you have a way of getting the truck back here so everything can be loaded then unloaded at my house?"

"Help is at hand," advised Harry, pointing to the main door.

Lilly watched Bazza the milky steer his horse and cart through the main entrance to the factory.

"G'day," he called cheerfully, pulling back on the reins. The Clydesdale obediently stopped. "It looks like I'm in time to lend a hand."

"I don't know how to thank you blokes, enough," cheered Lilly, watching the slick operation unfold.

"Free lollies will be sufficient for me," hinted Mr. Smith.

"Me too," chimed Harry.

"You have a deal," said Lilly.

"What lollies?" Bazza questioned.

Lilly pulled the small paper bag out of her pocket. Bazza viewed the few remaining lollies enthusiastically. He reached in and took one. After he'd swallowed the sugar coated lolly, he was all smiles.

“That was the best lolly I’ve ever tasted. You can put my name down for a few hundred. I reckon the blokes back at the dairy will buy some too.”

“I’ll keep you to your word,” said Lilly.

Bazza studied the work in progress. He grunted, walking back to the big male Clydesdale. He poked the horse in the ribs, forcing it to do a U-turn then made him start to walk backwards. When the gap between the cart and the Old Clunker was no more than a couple of inches, he patted the massive horse on the neck then raised his hand in front of its eyes. He let go of the reins and walked over to the machine.

“Are you certain you want the old piece of equipment on the cart?” Bazza questioned.

“Yes,” insisted Lilly. “I’ll need five metal walls too. The ones leaning against the factory framework are perfect for what I need.”

Bazza marched across to the other side of the factory, sizing up the square walls. In a show of strength, he carried the walls back to the cart and leaned them against a bench. He then helped Mr. Smith to tilt the machine. The act allowed Harry to place the thick chain underneath both sides of the Old Clunker. Fortunately, the machine had been bolted to a large square piece of half-inch thick metal plate, making the leaning process relatively easy.

“Now for the fun part,” said Mr. Smith.

The men bolted three of the walls together and dragged it across the floor until it was directly above the machine. They secured the winch to the top of the metal frame. With little effort the chain on both sides of the bullet making machine was hooked. Harry pulled hard on the chain. The winch rotated. Slowly the slack in the chain tightened. Reaching up, Bazza used his strength to help pull on the chain.

The machine slowly rose, into the air.

When the Old Clunker looked clear of the cart, Bazza focused on Lilly.

“I need you to push the nose of the Clydesdale. It’ll force him to walk backwards which in turn will make the cart roll. When I say hold his nose, Mick will stop.”

With a snort and a shake of his head, Mick started walking backwards. When the middle of the cart appeared to be directly under the Old Clunker, Lilly stopped Mick. The machine was quickly lowered onto the cart.

Harry and Bazza turned the frame with the winch still connected on its side and dropped it onto the cart. The walls and the roof of the shed butted neatly against the cart’s front and sides. Bazza climbed onto the front of the milk cart, waiting for Lilly to sit next to him. Harry and Mr. Smith jumped into the cart to steady the frame’s overhang. Bazza was shown the thumbs up signal; he flicked the reins and the Clydesdale was on the move.

Mick soon began to trot along the road in an Easterly direction. Bazza knew Lilly’s address, he ran past her house every morning.

Minimal traffic helped them to make great progress. A tad longer than four minutes found the group turning into the narrow road where Lilly lived.

Bazza forced Mick to perform another U-turn. The group of four stepped down from the cart while Bazza made the horse walk backwards. Slowly the cart was backed up the driveway. Lilly ran to open the side gate on the right-hand side of the house. Harry and Mr. Smith dragged the shed walls off the cart and carried them to the backyard. The three-foot-

long pipes were placed on the ground in readiness. Bazza connected the chain to the winch and heaved on the chain. When the Old Clunker was clear of the milk cart, Lilly pulled on Mick's nose. He, in turn, dragged the milk cart away. Lilly gave the horse a loving pat. Mick lowered his head and started to eat the short green grass.

"I'll push the Old Clunker from the rear," said Bazza. "Lilly, you grab the pipes from under the machine when they roll out and hand them to Harry. He'll place them on the ground at the front of the machine. Mr. Smith, you help steer where we need to go." Bazza looked at Lilly. "Where exactly do you want the machine?"

"Anywhere in the backyard is great. You three have done more than enough."

Bazza folded his arms. "We've come this far. Moving the machine to the exact place you want it will be a good thing. I suggest close to the house."

"Sounds good," agreed Lilly.

"Try to keep the machine rolling. If we stop too many times it'll be harder to get it moving again," suggested Harry. "On the count of three, we begin."

Painfully slow the machine moved down the narrow garden path. When it got to the end of the house, Mr. Smith needed to shoulder it several times before it changed direction. Groaning profusely from the effort, the group finally managed to position the Old Clunker next to the house.

They stood back to view their handy work.

"Fellas, thanks for your mighty effort," said Lilly.

"It certainly was a struggle," admitted Harry.

The group followed Bazza along the narrow path to the front of the house. Bazza clambered up onto the front of the milk cart.

"I'll be seeing you," he said.

"For your help, can I offer you a drink or some home grown veggies?" asked Lilly.

Bazza looked down on the top of her head. "I'm right thanks. Say hello if you're up early."

"I will."

Bazza flicked the reins. Mick lifted his head and trotted off, dragging the milk cart behind him.

"Thanks again," Lilly called.

At the corner, Bazza waved his hand in the air. In seconds, he'd gone.

Mr. Smith followed Bazza. Harry bolted the middle section of the shed together, making it wider.

"I'll finish the roof," insisted Lilly. "I have to do something."

"Are you positive you can manage?" Harry asked.

"Yes, and again I thank you for organizing everything. I couldn't do any of this on my own."

"All the best for the future. I hope the lolly business kicks off," called Harry, marching away from the house.

Lilly closed the side gate and walked back to the Old Clunker. She sat on the verandah staring at the machine.

A slight cool breeze fanned Lilly's face. Goosebumps erupted on her arms as doubt slowly crept into her mind about the business venture and how Jack might react to the news. Will he be pleased or angry? Lilly closed her eyes, conjuring up the noise of the Old Clunker as it spat out her lollies. Displaying a grin, she folded her arms. No matter what Jack thought, the Old Clunker had been delivered. The war was over, and Jack will be home soon. She needed him. She wanted him to smile at her, to touch her, to make love to her. There was a lot to catch up on. She wanted to hear his stories. She wanted to tell him hers. She imagined sitting next to Jack in front of the open fire talking about the Old Clunker. She wanted to tell him the news in a letter months ago. She had even written the letter. Dismissing the idea, she burnt the paper. She wanted to surprise him. Besides, she didn't know if he even got her letters. It had been months since she heard the news the ship he was on had been sunk. She had no idea if he was alive or dead from his injuries. She only knew the name of the hospital he'd been at.

Lilly's grin fell away. She opened her eyes. They had turned cold, hostile. She scoffed at her secret.

"We will discuss everything, except Carlisle," she spat.

Hearing a noise coming down the narrow path, Lilly stepped off the verandah. She rounded the corner of the house and found her neighbour, Mr. Hutchins who regularly cut her lawn, approaching.

"I couldn't help notice the machine on the cart. I came over to have a look."

Lilly grinned at her nosy neighbour and led the way into the backyard. She watched him study the machine with great interest while she told him of her plans.

"I hope the machine serves you for a long time," he said.

"I do too."

"I bought the newspaper this morning. I came over to let you know the first of the medical ships bringing the men home will dock at Port Melbourne tomorrow morning at 8:00am. Lilly, there's a full list of names, which ship each soldier is on and exactly when it's due to arrive. To save you the trouble of spending hours searching for Jack's name he's coming in on the 9:00am ship."

"He's alive?" quizzed Lilly, tears flowing over her cheeks.

"Yes, he is."

"I'll be there. My Jack is finally coming home."

CHAPTER TEN

LILLY FELT too excited to sleep. She could hardly wait for Jack to step off the ship. She dressed before daybreak and left the house at 6:00am. The morning air felt crisp. She suspected the temperature might steadily rise until it rained later on in the day. She didn't care about the weather; all she wanted was to be walking next to Jack. He would help her

to feel safe, dry and warm. Lilly even pushed the Old Clunker from her mind, if only for a short time.

Lilly walked briskly towards the Port of Melbourne. By 6:30am she sat on the sand not far from the start of the wharf searching the bay, watching for the first Navy ship to arrive.

A woman about Lilly's age, walking along the shoreline stopped to stare out across the peaceful water. Her arms were folded tight. She didn't know Lilly sat watching her. The dress she wore looked homemade; rough around the edges. Lilly wondered how many years it might take for the fashion to change from morbid dark to happier colours. Lilly shook the sand from her dress, strolling over.

A short distance away from the woman, Lilly saw her drop to her knees.

"Are you okay?"

The woman looked up. "I take it you're here to meet a ship?"

"Yes, I am," said Lilly. "What about you?"

"I'm here for the same reason."

When the woman stood, her shoulders were down at the ends. She acted as though the weight of the world was pushing down on her shoulders. The woman went to walk on, stumbling slightly in the soft sand.

"You look cold. Here, have my cardigan," said Lilly.

"Thank you." The woman slipped her arms through the sleeves. Taking hold of the open edges of the cardigan, she dragged the thin material until the edges overlapped each other. Again, she wrapped her arms around her. "Now you look cold."

"I'll be fine, the sun will be up soon," answered Lilly, thinking up what she hoped was a suitable excuse.

"You're right about the sun. However, nothing will ever warm my chilled feelings," moaned the woman.

Lilly stared directly at her face. The stain made by her tears gave away more information than she probably wanted to say.

"Is your husband alive or dead?" asked the woman.

"My Jack's alive. He was wounded, but he's alive."

"I have to go," the woman rasped, turning her head away.

"I'll come too. If nothing else, it'll save you from being by yourself."

"I'd rather be alone."

The woman picked up her pace. The narrow gap between the two widened rapidly. The gentle lap of the waves hitting the sand hardly made a noise. A seagull flew overhead towards the fishing boats that had just been tied up at the wharf.

"I don't mean to impose. The ship Jack is on won't dock for a couple of hours yet. I wouldn't mind talking to someone. It might help to pass the time," hinted Lilly, running up.

"I won't be much of a conversationalist," complained the woman.

Lilly shrugged. "I don't care if we walk in silence."

The woman flashed a worried expression. "I apologize for sounding rude. Don't think I'm trying to brush you away."

"I'd never think such a thing. I'm Lilly Barrett."

"I'm Martha Greene. I don't want to spoil your moment. You deserve to see your husband."

"Aren't you happy your husband will be home?" asked Lilly.

Martha stood in front of Lilly staring at the sand between her feet. "It's a strange feeling knowing I can't cry anymore. Does that make me a bad person?"

"No. If I was made to guess I'd say you've been crying most of the night."

"All night," corrected Martha.

"Is your husband coming home on the 8:00 or 9:00 o'clock ship?" asked Lilly.

"He'll be here at 8:00 o'clock."

"I have to wait a further sixty minutes."

"I wish I were forced to wait," croaked Martha.

"I'd prefer to have Jack home at 8:00am."

"No, you don't," spat Martha.

"I'm not following what you mean."

"Did you read yesterday's newspaper?"

"No."

"Now I understand why you're confused over which ship you want your husband to be on."

"What's wrong with Jack being on the first ship?"

"It's the dead ship," advised Martha, abruptly.

"Who'd say such a thing?"

"The newspaper reported the soldiers or sailors who are on the first ship are all dead."

"You can't believe everything you read. There must be some soldiers alive."

Martha's eyes looked cold. Her shoulders sagged lower. Lilly felt uncomfortable standing so close to the woman. In fact, she wanted to run. Get away.

Martha spoke in a long monotonous deep whisper, staring directly at Lilly.

"I'm not particularly interested in any other soldier; my dead husband is in a box on the ship due to dock at 8:00am."

Lilly didn't know where to look. A wave of guilt engulfed her. She wanted to be happy Jack would soon be home. At the same time, she felt upset Martha's husband will be arriving in a box. Lilly watched the woman bow her head and shuffle away.

"Why don't we walk to the wharf together? I want to be standing next to you when your husband comes off the ship," called Lilly, running after Martha.

"It's okay. You don't have to feel guilty. It's a part of life."

Lilly stopped walking, allowing Martha to keep going. Eventually Martha looked over her shoulder.

"I'd like it if you'd walk me to the end of the wharf."

Lilly walked next to Martha. Strangers started flooding the end of the wharf. Lilly saw a gap in the crowd. Taking Martha by the hand they squeezed through, ending at the railing. Martha and Lilly stared out across the bay in silence. There didn't seem to be anything to say.

By 7:45am, the first Navy ship came into view. The sea of faces swarming the wharf seemed to be doubling every few minutes.

It took fifteen minutes for the ship to dock. A gangway was wheeled into place bridging the gap between the ship and the wharf.

"Thanks for waiting with me. I can't avoid the inevitable. This part I have to do alone," said Martha.

"I'd like to stay by your side until the end."

"I'll be fine. Knowing your husband will be walking off the next ship gives me some comfort. I pray you have a happy future, Lilly."

Martha walked off to the other side of the wharf, mingling amongst the other widows. Lilly sighed heavily at the morbid scene. Wives of dead husbands, children in tow all standing around staring at the ship, waiting to take their husband to the cemetery.

When Lilly finally turned away, she spied the next Navy ship. It sat low in the water. Lilly pushed her way back to the railing and watched the ship creeping towards the wharf. A gangway was pushed close to the edge in readiness.

The large ship slowed. Its mighty engines were finally silenced. A sailor threw a thin rope narrowly missing Lilly. The middle-aged dock worker gathered it up and started to drag the ship's thick mooring rope towards the solid steel cleat bolted to the pylon. The ship was tied off, and the gangway wheeled into place. Each sailor or soldier saluted then shook the hand of the Captain as they disembarked from the ship.

Lilly overheard the person pushing the gangway; 'the walking wounded was on this ship.' She didn't like the title. If her Jack was on the second ship, she wanted to be the first person he saw.

10:00 o'clock came and went. Lilly felt her emotions sink. She started to think if the list of names in the newspaper was actually correct. She glanced across at the other ship. Maybe Jack was on that one. She witnessed Martha leaning over a coffin. A military man looked to be talking to her. As Martha stepped back to allow the coffin to be loaded into a truck, a different army truck blocked Lilly's view. Feeling frustrated at losing sight of Martha, she returned her attention to the ship in front of her. There were several large holes near the deck where paint was burnt off when she sustained damage. Then Lilly saw that the side railing had been torn away.

As more men limped through the open hatch, Lilly watched them salute the Captain. They turned and hobbled down the gangway to the arms of wailing women.

Lilly spied a bearded man. His hair looked straggly. His uniform looked worn. In a few places the stitching was gone, leaving small holes. The man saluted the Captain then shook his hand. He walked slowly down the gangway, leaning heavily on his walking stick. Halfway to the ground, he stopped to study the women who were still waiting. He spied Lilly pushing her way through the thinning crowd. She waited at the foot of the gangway, looking up at Jack through excited eyes.

"Jack," she called.

"Why did you come here?" he questioned the moment his feet touched the wooden dock.

Lilly hugged his neck. "I wanted to welcome you home."

"I still remember where we live."

"I know. I wanted to be here for you."

“Before you ask, yes I’ve been wounded badly. I got a medal for my heroism. Big deal. They said thanks for my effort and gave me a walking stick.”

“I don’t care about the stick. I’m just happy you’re home,” sobbed Lilly. “Come on, let’s go.”

“It’ll take us three hours to walk home,” whimpered Jack.

“Good, it’ll give us a chance to catch up on what’s been happening,” replied Lilly.

Out of the corner of her eye, she studied Jack’s face. He looked and sounded different. When he left her, he displayed a look of pride. He was a man with a goal. He knew what he wanted. Now he appeared to be a different person. Lilly suspected the war had changed him into a man who was bitter and cold. She saw him slouch over the stick. She heard him cursing each step he took. He seemed to have lost his patience, his will to be happy. He came across as a man who wanted to die.

Lilly slipped her arm around his waist. “Let me help you,” she whispered.

Jack growled, pushing her away. “You can help by staying away. Look at me. I’m a cripple. I’ll never work again. I’m worthless now.”

“Don’t say such horrible thoughts,” croaked Lilly, choking on her words. “When we get home, you’ll be alright.”

“I’m never going to be right.”

“Jack, please, kiss me.”

He jeered at the command. He turned his head to stare at the ship. He seemed lost in his thoughts.

“Jack, I love you, I’m here to help in any way I can. I’ve missed you so much. Jack, look at me. Say you love me. Kiss me. Promise you’ll never leave me again.”

“I should have died out there. At least you could’ve met a man who has the full use of his legs.”

“I don’t want anyone else. Jack, I want you. Take me home. I need you to make love to me.”

Jack gazed at his wife’s face. Seeing the tears in her eyes, he caved in. He stepped closer allowing her to slip her arms around his waist again. Hesitantly he lowered his head. When their lips touched Lilly could feel they were cold, unfamiliar. She sensed they were lips that might never feel warm again. In a nightmarish way, they reminded her of Carlisle’s lips.

Lilly and Jack walked slowly towards their home. Lilly quietly sobbed, wondering what might have happened to change her husband so much. She wanted to ask Jack a million questions. Thinking better of it, she decided they could wait for a later time. She held him tighter and hid her tears by turning her head away.

“In a few weeks, you’ll be okay,” she mumbled.

When they stepped up to a long wooden seat outside the shops, they stopped for a rest.

“Let me into your world,” whispered Lilly. By placing her hand on Jack’s arm, she hoped the act might reassure him. She gazed into his eyes willing him to shed some light on what happened.

"I'm never going to tell you what I went through. You won't understand. I saw things a person should never have had to see. I wish I had joined my three mates when they jumped off the ship and drowned four hours out from Melbourne."

"Don't talk that way. I'm glad you didn't. In a few weeks you will think differently."

Jack slapped Lilly's hand away. "Can't you understand nothing will ever be the same again? If I don't use my walking stick, I won't be able to go anywhere. If they didn't confiscate my gun, I'd have killed myself."

"Please, Jack, I'm glad you're here."

"Are you?"

"Yes. I don't care if you have to use a stick. There are men worse off than you. I met a woman today her name was Martha. Her husband came home in a box."

"At least she'll get over her loss. Every waking minute you'll see me for what I am; a cripple."

"You're alive. That's what I care about," said Lilly.

"What about work? We'll be starving for the remainder of our lives. In a few years, you'll be looking elsewhere for a man who will be able to support a family."

"We'll manage. I've been working."

"No wife of mine is going to be working. I'll be the joke amongst the men."

Lilly continued the conversation by lowering her voice. "Two years ago, I started to think about what if you couldn't work when you came home. I got an idea about starting a business. We can do it together."

"Don't be stupid," he spat. "The bank will never lend us any money. Forget it. Why think of such nonsense." Jack scanned the shops. Spying the doors to the pub opening, he glared at Lilly. "Got any money?" he growled.

"I have some from the lolly business I started. Jack, they're selling. I've scrimped and saved enough cash to go into full production. I thought I'd have to buy the old bullet making machine. Jack, I got it for nothing. It's at our place right now. There's enough surplus money to buy the ingredients to make at least a thousand lollies."

Jack started to laugh. The gargle made Lilly cry. Leaning on his stick, Jack managed to stand. Hovering over Lilly, he held out his hand.

"Give me the money."

"No. I've saved hard for our future."

"There is no future. I'm going to the pub. Give me the money," Jack demanded.

"Our future isn't, you, going to the pub to drink away the pain. You'll be dead long before your pain goes. If you listen to me, we'll have a future."

Jack raised his hand. He looked more than ready to slap Lilly across the face. She glared at him, hurt and dumbfounded that he would raise his hand, let alone act like he might hit her.

"Give me the money," he growled.

Lilly bowed her head. She loved Jack, but there was no way he was getting her money just to drink it away. Finally, she lifted her head and stared at him through her tears.

"I'm scared of you," she sobbed.

"Good. Give me the money."

“No. What are you going to do, hit me? Is that what you want to do for my disobedience?”

Jack raised his hand higher.

“Go on. If it makes you happy, hit me. You fought the enemy. The war is over. If you want to put it all behind you, I’m not the one you need to fight. I want my old Jack back.”

“He’s gone. He’ll never be back.”

“I don’t believe you. Jack, you’re not the only one who struggled; I’ve struggled too.”

“You don’t know the meaning of the word.”

Lilly slowly stood. Jack pushed her to the ground next to the seat. Leaning over her he spat at her face.

“Give me the money.” He reached for his wife’s throat.

Lilly just managed to slide backwards out of the way and jumped to her feet.

Jack glared up at her. Leaning on the walking stick, he slowly straightened.

Lilly’s tears flowed over her cheeks. Jack glared at her through cold, wild eyes. Again, he reached out for her money. Lilly pushed his hand away. Again, he raised his hand to hit her.

“Okay, Jack, you win.”

Lilly pushed her hand into her skirt pocket. She took out two pounds and dropped the money on the ground.

Jack reached down to take it.

Lilly slammed her foot down on his hand. “I’ll give you what little money I have on me after I have my say.”

He stared up at her with murderous eyes.

“If you take the money across the road and drink the lot, just so you can piss it out against a wall, go right ahead. I’ll be the good wife so you can brag about how good you have it when you’re drunk. I’ll cook, and I’ll clean. I’ll let you screw me. I’ll raise our kids. My lolly business will be a success. The money you’re about to take from me is all you will ever get. You want money, find a job. For your information, Jack, I know what it takes to survive. I’ve done things I should never have had to do. Don’t you ever come crying to me that I have no idea what you went through? Stop for a minute and think about what I might have needed to do. You step inside the pub, you’ll always be there. You will never be a husband to me.”

“What did you have to do?” questioned Jack.

“I vowed to someone I’d never tell anyone our secret. I’ll keep my vow to the grave. It’s your choice; me or the pub?”

Lilly took her foot off Jack’s hand. She turned her back on him and started to walk home. Jack watched her leave, expecting her to turn around and run back. When Lilly turned the corner, Jack hobbled towards the pub. He opened the door and entered the building, mingling amongst the other sailors.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

LILLY RAN home. When she stepped onto the grass near the letterbox she dropped to her knees, vomiting. She'd lost Jack to the pub. Lilly crawled towards the front door, knowing she didn't have near enough strength to stand and walk inside the house. She sat, leaning against the door, sobbing. Lilly had no idea old Mr. Hutchins was watching her from the front porch of his house.

A determined stone-cold expression swept the old man's face. Hutchins didn't take the time to explain to his wife where he planned to go; he walked off down the road, hobbling at a fairly quick pace.

When Mr. Hutchins saw the outside of the pub, he abruptly stopped to think about the warning his wife told him all those years ago, when he first stepped off the ship at the end of the First World War.

'Don't drown your sorrows in a beer glass.'

Her warning still rang crystal clear in his ears. It was as though she had said those words yesterday.

Hutchins willed his mind to make his old legs and feet move faster. Pulling open the door to the pub, he could hear the excited voices of the men talking over each other trying to be heard. They were telling their hero stories. He knew they'd be reciting them inside the pub for years, if not decades. He dropped his coat on a side table and closed the door.

The haze of cigarette smoke had filled the room. At a guess, Hutchins estimated about forty soldiers and twenty sailors were standing around in small groups of five or six. He focused on the barman. The young man didn't have time to glance at the door; he needed to fill the empty glass each man was holding before they swore and ridiculed him for taking too long. Further to his left Hutchins saw a small cleared area where a group of ten men was playing a game of Two-Up. Toss two pennies into the air and bet on what landed face up; heads or tails. He didn't walk into the pub to play the illegal game or swap his stories about the war. Hutchins entered the room for one reason only.

The old man stood to full height, arching his back. A few bones clicked. He ignored the arthritis in those joints. On his right, Hutchins saw the man he came to find sitting by himself at a table near the window staring into the almost empty glass in front of him unperturbed at the noise in the room. A walking stick hung over the back of the chair. Hutchins snaked his way through the crowd. Hovering over the ex-sailor, Hutchins now looked a giant of a man. He coiled his fingers into tight fists and spoke in a tough voice.

"I didn't have any trouble finding you."

"What do you want?" growled Jack.

"I'm here to talk some sense into you."

"Forget it old man. I couldn't care less about what you have to say," snarled Jack.

"Okay, let me put it this way, I'm here to give you a warning."

Jack grunted and gestured a flippant wave of his hand, easily dismissing the threat.

"Pull up a chair; we can shout each other a drink."

"I'm not here to drink," barked Hutchins.

"A man enters the pub for two reasons. He's either here to have a drink, or he's here to fight."

"I've already told you I'm not here to have a drink," growled Hutchins.

Jack stared into his eyes. "I've killed people who came against me. I didn't even know their name. Go home; you're too old to fight." Jack swallowed what remained of the white froth in the glass then refocused on the old man glaring at him. "Are you still here?"

"So, you think I'm too old? Let me tell you something Jack boy; I can easily whip your arse. Stand up; I'll prove it," taunted Hutchins, leaning his fists on the table.

Jack laughed sarcastically. He raised the empty glass and threw it down onto the floor. Wet glass fragments spewed across the room in a gush. Jack made a move to stand.

"Scared old timer?"

"There's no way I could ever be scared of you."

The noise in the room instantly fell to a graveyard quiet. The barman stopped pouring beer into a glass to watch.

Hutchins pushed his hands under the table. In one all mighty lift, he sent the table flying through the air. A few soldiers were bowled off their feet. Hutchins stepped forward boasting the expression of a champion boxer. In one fast jab to Jack's cheek, Hutchins sent him flying after the table. Jack slowly staggered to his feet, glaring at the old man. Hutchins pointed his finger directly at Jack.

"Be warned, I've seen Lilly cry for the last time. Get out of this place. Go to her. She's been such a strong woman since the day you left. I told her you'd be arriving on the ship today. She was awake all night. She walked out the house in the dark. She wanted be early. She was determined to be at the wharf watching the ship come in. Let me tell you something, young fella; I know what you needed to do to survive the war. I did the same. My lovely wife found me drowning my sorrows in this place just like you. I'm telling you what she told me. If you want a happy future with a wonderful woman, go home. Never come in here again. If you do, you'll never leave."

"I killed people," spat Jack. "They probably felt the same way I did. They didn't want to go to war. They didn't want to die. I looked into their eyes as they took their last breath. I saw them cry until they died."

"I did too," admitted Hutchins. "Let me tell you a story. In the First World War, my job was to plant bombs on the beach. One particular moonless night when the soldier on guard duty walked along the sand, I walked too. When he stopped, I stopped. You have no idea how much noise sand makes. Jack, a while back, I decided to go for a slow walk. I just happened to be walking past the factory where Lilly worked. I saw what she did. She'll never say, and I'll never tell her secret."

Jack fell back onto the floor, crying for the first time in his life. He stared up into the old man's eyes.

"I've hurt Lilly big time. I'll be surprised if she ever takes me back or love me like she used to."

“You would be surprised what she is capable of doing.” Mr. Hutchins swiped Jack’s walking stick from off the floor, handing it over. “Come on Jack, let’s walk home together. What do you say?”

Jack took hold of his walking stick. Using his free hand, he grabbed Hutchins’ hand. Jack allowed the old man to lead the way out of the pub. The bright sunshine made Jack’s face sting from the growing bruise.

Five minutes from the pub Jack stopped for a breather. He stood half bent looking at the back of Hutchins. When he turned around Jack spoke.

“Hutchins, is the story you told me about the sand true?”

“It is. The next time you’re at the beach take a walk. Listen to the noise the sand makes. You’ll be amazed at how loud it is.”

“I want to go home.”

“Good for you. If it takes until dusk to get there, I reckon the walk will do us both the world of good,” said Hutchins.

“To pass the time do you want to tell another story about what you went through?”

“I tell you what we can do. Seeing how it’ll probably take us longer than thirty minutes to get home we’ll take it in turns. Jack, you do realize if you want someone to talk to I live in the house next to yours.”

“Thanks, I’ll keep you to your promise,” Jack responded.

Slowly the two men made it home. Lilly saw Jack coming. She stood, straightening her clothes and drying her eyes. She ran her fingers through her long hair in an attempt to make it look tidy. When Jack got to the front wire fence, he pushed his hand into his pocket. He took out the money Lilly gave him, thrusting it at her.

“I never used your money. I had a couple of pounds in my pocket they gave me when I disembarked the ship. I had no right taking your money.”

“That money is ours,” corrected Lilly smoothly.

Jack leaned against the fence looking directly into her eyes. “Please, I need you to forgive me. I promise never to raise my hand to you again.”

Lilly glanced at Mr. Hutchins. He nodded and continued his walk back to his house.

Stepping up to Jack, Lilly took hold of his hand. “How did you get a bruised cheek?”

“Mr. Hutchins is a strong man. He helped me to see reason.”

Jack stopped Lilly from patting his red swollen cheek. “I’ve felt worse. Please, Lilly, kiss me.”

They both leaned into each other at the same time. The only thing between them, happened to be the low rusty chicken wire fence.

Lilly could feel Jack’s warm, soft lips pushing against hers. She couldn’t decide who might be crying the harder; her or Jack. She felt his arms wrap around her waist. Even though Jack relied on a walking stick, he certainly hadn’t lost his strength. He picked her up. Standing firm, he held Lilly in his arms, kissing her.

Eventually, Jack allowed Lilly to stand on her own two feet. He lovingly stroked her long hair. “If you’ll have me back I want to come home.”

“What about the pub?” Lilly questioned.

"I never want to see the inside of the place again. How can I ever begin to apologize for raising my hand to hit you? I vow it will never happen again." Using his index finger Jack gently touched Lilly's lips. "Before you say anything, I want to say, I love you."

"I love you too, Jack," replied Lilly. "Welcome home."

Once again Jack and Lilly cemented their lips together.

Mr. Hutchins watched the scene from his chair on the verandah of his house. Painting a grin on his face, he hobbled back inside his home and quietly shut the door. He walked into the kitchen, wrapping his arms around his wife.

"Darling, thanks for saving my life from the bottle. I love you," he said.

"I love you too. Where did you go? I was getting worried."

"I went for a walk."

"Where exactly did you go?"

"I guess I must to be honest."

"Yes, you do."

"I went to the pub."

"Didn't you promise me something when you came home from the First World War?"

Mr. Hutchins glanced at the unopened bottle of beer on the top shelf of the cupboard. A thick layer of dust still covered the neck of the bottle. It hadn't been moved in years. He focused on his wife's blue eyes and smiled lovingly.

"Yes, I did promise you something."

"Did you go to have a drink? Did you go mingle with the soldiers who have just now arrived back from their fight?"

"I saw the soldiers. There was a lot of noise. I also saw Jack."

"He's home."

"Yes, he's home to stay."

"Did he ask you to have a drink?"

"Yes. There's no need to be concerned. I told Jack, no."

"How did he take the news?"

Mr. Hutchins clenched his fist, lifting it to eye level. "I'm happy he saw reason in my words. My badly bruised knuckle couldn't take another pounding. I've lived up to what I promised you all those years ago. I will keep the promise until the day I inhale my last breath."

The old man reeled his wife in closer and kissed her.

Eventually, Jack and Lilly stopped for a breather.

"I believe you have something to show me?" questioned Jack.

Lilly reached out, taking hold of his hand. Patiently she helped him to walk along the narrow path and into the backyard. When they turned the corner Jack's amazed expression was priceless. He stood leaning heavily on his walking stick gawking at the Old Clunker.

"How did you manage to get that machine here?"

"Where there's a will there's a way."

"You are an amazing woman. I'm lucky to be married to you."

"I'd say it's a blessing we're both still here," mumbled Lilly.

An inquisitive expression creased the lines on Jack's forehead.

“Come sit. I’ll explain how I obtained the bullet making machine.” Lilly pushed her hand into her skirt pocket, pulling out the bag of sweets. “I saved you one.”

Jack tasted the lolly. His face displayed total enthusiasm. “Have you thought up a name for your business?”

“Our business,” corrected Lilly. “Jack, we’re in this together.” She was about to say a name when she decided on another idea. “I thought I’d leave the naming of our business to you.”

“Can I sleep on it and tell you tomorrow?”

“Yes, you may.”

Jack ran his hands slowly across the surface of machine’s dome. “You will have to teach me how to use it and how to fix the machine if it ever breaks down,” he croaked, choking on his words.

CHAPTER TWELVE

March 5th 2013

ELOISE MOVED away from the window. She looked at James. His eyes were red-rimmed.

“Are you on the verge of crying?” she asked.

“I have to admit, yes I am.”

“It’s only a story,” said Eloise.

“I know, but the way you’ve told the tale you make it sound so realistic.”

“Authenticity is an author’s greatest challenge. To have something sound real is the best way to sell books.”

“It’s contained in the suspense,” added James, wiping the water from his eyes.

“Suspense is just one aspect of the story. The delivery is the other. If you have your readers sitting on the edge of their seat the whole time and they feel satisfied the ending left them wanting more, you’ve done a good job.”

James watched Eloise walking across the room. At the door, she looked over her shoulder.

“I feel a little tired. I think I’ll go for a walk along the beach. Care to join me?”

James jumped to his feet. The chair he sat on toppled over.

“Yes, I’d love for us to take a walk. Comparing myself to you, I feel like an amateur writer.”

James held open the main door to the hotel allowing Eloise to step out into the sunshine. They walked across the road and down the steps to the sand. Eloise walked close to the water’s edge while James marched along on her right side.

“James, you have the talent to become a great author. You and Mia have the same ability. Have you talked to her about maybe writing together?”

“We did start to plot a novel. I have to admit sitting Mia down to have a serious discussion about teaming up to write novels has never eventuated,” James confided.

“Why not?”

“I’ve been waiting for the right time.”

“If I were you James, I’d come out and say. Don’t wait for the right time. If you do, you might miss your chance.”

“I’m a little nervous about discussing the idea at length.”

“James, stop doubting yourself. It’s time for you to step up to the batter’s plate and start swinging. You’ll be more than surprised at how easy it is to hit a home run.”

“What if Mia rejects the idea? What if she decides she never wants to see me again?”

Eloise stopped walking to look out across the bay. James heard her sigh.

“You say lots of what ‘IF’ words,” said Eloise eventually. “Let me say this. What if she accepts your offer? What if she sees a future with you? What if she says yes to be your wife?”

“How did you know I’ve been thinking along the line of marriage?”

“It’s easy to tell you two are a match made in heaven.”

“How can you believe we’re a perfect match? You’ve never seen us together except when Mia was asleep on the couch.”

“Haven’t I.”

“No.”

“I thought you introduced me to her.”

“Never,” said James firmly, studying Eloise’s facial features.

“Is there something wrong?”

“You look a lot younger than yesterday.”

“Those are nice compliments. A woman likes hearing them,” said Eloise.

“In fact, you look years younger than the first day we met.”

“How old do I look?”

“This morning I’d say you looked fifty not eighty.”

“What about now?”

“No more than thirty.”

Eloise continued the walk along the beach. In silence, James walked next to her. A few minutes had ticked off before they stepped up to the next flight of stairs. At the top, they strolled across the road to a small white picket gate.

“Is this where you live?” asked James.

“This is my place. Do you like it?” asked Eloise.

“Like it, I love it. The white two storey mansion has a balcony outside the bedroom window. You have an uninterrupted view of the ocean and sunset each night. Red rose bushes line both sides of the path from the gate to the front door. There’s a settee on the verandah where you can sit and enjoy the morning sun. The big old gum tree at the side shades the two storey house in the summer. The green grass that covers the land has been perfectly manicured. I can’t see a single weed. This looks like a heavenly home to live at.”

“Yes, this is a peaceful place. The sunrise and the sunsets are the best times of the day.” Eloise turned to face James. “I recommend you ask Mia today about writing novels together. Convince her you’re a nice bloke. Ask her to marry you. I don’t want to hear any more doubting words that start with ‘what if.’ James, it’s time for me to go.”

“You sound like we’ll never see each other again.”

“We will, but not for a while.”

“What about the last part of the novel? We finished the whole thing except for the last chapter.”

“I recommend you and Mia ought to sit down and write it together.”

“Won’t you at least disclose the name of the company Lilly started?”

“James, you should know the answer by now. Take a look around. Do you know where we are?” asked Eloise.

James glanced at the manicured grounds, the tall green trees, the flower beds and the surrounding white picket fence that encompassed the entire area.

“How did we get here? We were at a small white picket gate a few seconds ago.”

Eloise stepped next to a gravestone. James looked shocked at the realization.

“Now you know,” said Eloise.

“You can’t be!” shrieked James.

“How else could I have known all about you and Mia or happened to be in the hotel at the same time? The lift door was closing yet I walked through. I entered your room when you told me the door was locked. Ask yourself why I never drank or ate anything? Why I never wanted to be walked home? Why do I look out across the bay as if I’m waiting for someone to come home? How did I look younger every time you saw me? James, it is okay. Love Mia. Convince her you are the man she’s been praying to meet. It’ll be hard at the start, but you’re a talented bloke. Show her this place. Tell her everything.”

James gazed at Eloise. “There’s an aura around you.”

“Heaven is wonderful,” advised Eloise. “You’re free to express yourself. James, it’s time for me to go. My husband has come for me.” Eloise stepped onto the grave. She waved goodbye.

“Wait. I don’t know the name of the lolly company?”

Eloise displayed a heavenly smile. “It’s Mia’s middle name. Tell her. She’ll believe.”

James saw the image of a man materialize. He looked handsome standing straight and tall next to Eloise.

“Lilly it’s time to go,” he said gently.

“Jack thanks for loving me.”

“I had the easy part. Before we go I have a message for James. I also have a present.” He floated over and stood in front of James. “Love Mia all of your life, she’ll love you for it.” An old walking stick appeared in his hand. “I won’t need this stick again. On the handle, there are four initials. Show Mia. It will also help her to believe.”

Jack floated back to Lilly. He held out his hand. Just as they started to vanish, both waved at James.

Then they were gone.

For a long time, James stared at the exact place where he saw Eloise and Jack disappear. Eventually he looked around the cemetery. He felt the wind brush his cheeks. The warm breeze took his breath away. James was about to start walking back to his hotel room to finish the novel when he noticed a few leaves on the marble plate where Eloise and Jack were laid to rest. He squatted, brushing them off. James read the names on the gravestone.

‘Eloise Lilliana Barrett.’ Underneath her name, he read another. ‘Jack Mathew Barrett.’

James walked along the path towards the main gate carrying the walking stick Jack had given him. Standing under a giant gum tree at the main entrance, he paused to read the four initials on the handle of the walking stick.

‘JB loves LB’

Using his index finger, James traced the shape of the hand engraved heart around the letters. Tears formed in his eyes.

“I should have known Eloise was a ghost. After all, I am an author.”

James walked under the stone arch and stepped off the property. He closed the cast iron gate and walked back to the hotel. He shouldered the door to his room. He found Mia sitting in front of his laptop reading. Her cheeks were red and stained with her tears.

She stood slowly. When James stepped up to the table, Mia lashed out, slapping him across the face. For only the briefest of moments, she glanced at his startled expression. With a burning anger on the inside, she sprinted out of the room.

James finally caught up to Mia at the door to her room.

“You, horrid man,” she spat, slapping him again. “How could you?”

“How could I do what?”

“Make my Grandmother out to be a monster. She could never murder anyone. So much for your romance novel. You used her story to write a crime novel.”

“Please, let me explain.”

“There’s nothing to explain. I’ll tell you something, Mister. When my Grandmother was alive, she started to outline the same story you have been busy typing. I never want to see you again. I’m leaving in five minutes.”

James stood at the threshold to the bedroom watching Mia dump clothes into her large suitcase. He saw her zip it closed and felt the push as she marched towards the lift.

“Your Grandmother, Eloise relayed to me the whole story,” said James.

Mia whirled around to face him. Her tears were flowing faster than a river. Her chin and lips were quivering.

“You somehow got the information. Not only did you set out to shatter me, but my entire family as well. James or who the hell you really are, there is one piece of information you don’t know and that is the name of the company. Eloise sold the lolly company twenty years after starting the business. They made an enormous profit. The undisclosed amount was never revealed to anyone and nobody outside the family knows the name of the company. That makes you, the worst kind of fraud to ever have lived. Get out of my life. I’ve been thinking of late you could have been a great husband. Someone I could love forever. For me to have a man in my life, he would need to be an honest, caring

individual in the highest degree. I won't settle for anyone less. You will never fit the description. I never want to see you again."

Mia thumped the lift call button on the wall. Cursing the lift for not arriving, she marched towards the stairs. When she was gone, Eloise appeared.

"James, go after her. Tell her the name of the company."

"I don't know Mia's middle name."

"Lilliana," said Eloise. "The company name was Lilliana Sweets."

James ran for the stairs. He sprinted down to the ground floor three steps at a time. At the main hotel door, he came up behind Mia, stepping into her path.

"Get out of my way," she spat.

"Lilliana. The name of the company was Lilliana Sweets. Your middle name is the same," blurted James.

Mia stared at him. She raised her trembling hand to move hair from her eyes. "How did you find out?"

"Eloise told me."

"Impossible. Nobody knows my middle name. I demand you tell me how you found out?"

"I'm not lying to you. I spoke to Eloise."

"I've already stated my Grandmother died when I was twelve."

"The photo of your Grandmother in the locket you wear around your neck, I believe is the Eloise I've been seeing. I'd like to prove it."

"I told you I only open the locket once a year."

"Please open it for me."

Mia stared directly into James' eyes. She spoke in a matter of fact voice.

"I'll say this. There are three faces in the photo. If you can tell me who they are, I will listen to what you have to say. If you can't then it is goodbye." She reached down, opening the locket.

James studied the three faces in turn. "You're the little girl in the middle. Your mother is on the left; your Grandmother, Eloise, is on the right."

Mia closed the locket. Her eyes revealed she wanted to believe what James told her. She started shaking her head.

"I'm almost correct. In fact, your Grandmother's name was Lilliana Eloise Barrett. She never liked the name Lilliana. She told everyone to call her Lilly. She was married to Jack. He went to war as a sailor. He was on the Waterhen when it sank. He came back to Lilly, a broken, wounded man. They started up the lolly business using the bullet making machine nicknamed the Old Clunker. You would have read those words in the novel. There's something I have to show you." James thrust the old walking stick Jack gave him at Mia. He pointed to the four letters on the handle.

Mia groped for the wall. James pushed his arm around her waist scooping her up into his arms. Displaying a puzzled expression, Mia wrapped her arms around his neck while James walked towards the open lift door.

"Excuse me, Sir, is the young lady okay? Does she need a doctor?"

Staring through glazed eyes, James looked at the face of the young woman receptionist. Instead of answering her he refocused on Mia. Slowly he lowered his head and kissed her lovingly on the lips. Mia moved her arms tighter around his neck helping the kiss to be firmer.

"I guess my question was answered," mumbled the receptionist, turning her back.

James easily carried Mia into the lift car. As he placed her in a vertical position the door closed.

"If my Grandmother told you the story of her life she would have to be a ghost. I don't believe in ghosts," protested Mia.

Before James could say a word, a dull light appeared in the corner. At its brightest the light quickly faded, leaving a woman standing exactly where the light had been.

"Eloise!" exclaimed James.

"Grandma?" sobbed Mia.

"You're both correct. I've been watching over you two for a long time," admitted Eloise.

"Why?" asked James.

Eloise raised her eyebrows. "What have I told you about suspense?"

"I have to wait."

She chuckled then switched her attention to Mia. "He's a good bloke. He's a stayer. You two have a lot in common."

"Grandma, why are you here?"

"I've come to finally tell my secret."

Mia frowned, her voice deepened. "Grandma, how could you tell a stranger the full story you tried to tell me?"

"Mia, please don't be too upset. When I was alive, I plucked up enough courage to at least begin to tell you the story. I was hoping one day you would write it in a novel. You refused. What was I supposed to do, except find someone else. Who could be better than James?"

"I don't want the whole world to know your secret," sobbed Mia.

"It's okay. When I vowed, I'd take my secret to the grave, I did. I lived up to my end of the vow. When I met up with Suzie in heaven, she gave me permission to tell our story in its entirety. I wanted it told by you two. Besides, I have one more secret to share."

James interrupted. "Tell us what it is?"

"All in due time," protested Eloise.

"Grandma I miss you terribly," sobbed Mia.

"I miss you too. Mia, those beautiful eyes of yours, shouldn't be crying. You and James have a great future ahead. Promise me you'll be happy."

Mia nodded slowly.

"I have a few questions," said James. "The time Mia and I were having lunch on the balcony, and the wind suddenly felt cold is my first one?"

"I blew cold air on you," admitted Eloise. "I wanted you to start walking back to the hotel for a swim."

“What about the time we stepped out of the elevator and an old lady was grinning as she walked into the lift?”

“I changed my appearance, but it was me. I also pushed you two together using all the uncanny hints I could think of.”

“What about the time we were at the Ritz? The table in the rear corner with the red rose in the crystal vase? The breeze brushing our cheeks?” asked James.

“Guilty as charged. The romantic music; I hinted the band. I also spoke to the girl who scooted across the dance floor towards you two. I advised her on how she should set up the red rose on the table. I thought it might help to move the night along nicely. I was correct.”

Mia blushed at hearing the confession.

“Dear, don’t worry, I didn’t watch the love between you two. There are some things that should be kept private.”

“I’m happy you weren’t in the corner watching,” gushed James. “It was bad enough you saw me naked.”

Mia looked shocked.

“Take my advice, explain that one later,” quipped Eloise. “By the way, the music coming from the jukebox with the broken song queue list; I’ve met the one who is in charge of heaven. He kept the music playing, not me. I only asked.”

“At a guess, it must have been you who pushed the lift call button when we came home?” questioned Mia.

“I didn’t want the night to be delayed.”

“The person who walked into my room, the boiling kettle, the opening of the curtains, happened to be you and not room service?” quizzed James.

“Don’t look too surprised. How else could I get you two together? You have a lot in common which you have yet to discover,” said Eloise.

Mia folded her arms. “I’m having a stab in the dark here; is my writer’s block of your doing?”

“Please don’t be too angry with me. I did place a temporary stop on it because I love you,” chirped Eloise, her outline beginning to fade.

“Tell us the last secret before you go?” urged James.

“Suspense,” said Eloise. “It’s all about suspense. Take my advice; write what I have yet to say in the revised edition.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

MS. AMANDA Daltry placed the book on her desk, volleying her gaze between Mia and James. The sparkle in her eyes said a thousand words.

“This novel will go global. As a duo, how do you feel about book signings? Will it be a problem?”

"None I can think of," answered Mia, grabbing hold of James' hand.

"What about you James?"

"Same here," he answered.

"Good." Amanda picked up the phone and pressed a number on the phone pad. Almost immediately a young woman wearing a grey mini skirt and white shirt entered the room.

"Tell production to print another two million books."

"Certainly," said the woman. She walked out of the office, closing the door behind her.

"When's the next novel going to be started?" questioned Amanda.

"Already underway," admitted James.

"What's the plot?"

"Romance in the Greek islands," chorused Mia and James in unison.

"Nice place for a honeymoon."

"Second honeymoon," corrected James.

"I suppose you'll need some money?" Amanda opened the top drawer of her desk, picking up a cheque. She flapped it under Mia and James' nose. "If the next book is half as brilliant as this one you will be pushed up into the elite category. Well done. Now go, get out of here. Enjoy your time off. It's been twelve months to the day since you finished the best seller, 'Don't tell my secret.' Go celebrate."

"It's our third month anniversary since we were married," said James.

"Good. Go write me another romance novel."

James opened the office door. He and Mia walked out and marched to the lift. The narrow metal door opened just as they got there. Stepping into the lift, they watched the door close.

Halfway to the ground, the lift stopped. The lights went out plunging the lift car into darkness. James snatched up the emergency phone. The voice at the other end of the line sounded calm.

"Bring Mia to my gravesite."

The lights in the lift car flickered then brightened. The lift resumed its descent to the ground floor.

Mia's question on who James talked to on the phone went unanswered. James and Mia motored down the coast to where Lilly Eloise Barrett was laid to rest. When they arrived, they saw Eloise waiting for them under the big old gum tree.

"Thanks for coming so quickly."

"Grandma, what's happened?" questioned Mia.

"I have yet to finish telling my secret."

James spoke softly. "I've been wondering of late when you'd say the remainder. Twelve months is a long time to keep us in suspense."

"I feel a little nervous at revealing the last part of my story. I've been talking to Suzie. She has reassured me it is okay."

"Just tell us," James suggested.

Eloise began to pace the ground. Mia stepped into her path. Eloise walked through her. At a short distance, she floated back.

"Whatever is making you nervous you have to say," urged Mia.

“Yes, you’re right. When I decided to tell my secret, it sounded easy. Now I have come to the final part I’ve realized it’s not going to be so easy.”

“Just say it,” demanded James.

“When I said you two have a lot in common I meant it,” said Eloise.

“Is this suspense or are you serious about feeling nervous?” asked James.

“The suspense part has been dealt with. Every second I delay I’m more nervous,” admitted Eloise. “Mia, I watched you walk down the aisle at your wedding. You looked lovely in my silk and lace wedding dress. I want to thank you for wearing it.”

“I sensed I felt someone watching,” said Mia.

“I thought I saw you,” added James. “You were standing at the rear of the church?”

“Yes. It was a lovely day,” said Eloise.

“Enough stalling,” moaned James.

“You’re correct, the remainder of the story must be told.”

“The remainder?” questioned Mia.

“Yes dear. It is of a somewhat delicate nature. I planned to tell you at the church on your wedding day, but I decided against the idea. My visitations are over. This will be the last time we talk. Don’t worry; it’s a good thing. I’ve spent time with you both. Heaven is marvelous. I look forward to showing you around. It takes years.”

“You’re stalling,” growled James.

Eloise’s smile vanished leaving a serious expression on her face. She sighed heavily. “There’s no other way to say my news. You have a right to know your side of the grave. James, do you remember the part in the story when I mentioned Suzie?”

“Of course, she had been your friend. You shared a common problem.”

“Yes, the secret about the murder of Mr. Carlisle. Suzie wasn’t just a good friend, she was my best friend.” Eloise looked directly at James. “Suzie, who fell pregnant, was your Grandmother. Mr. Carlisle was your real Grandfather. You are a product of her rape. It’s why you two are together. It’s the common denominator in my story. I’m Mia’s Grandmother. You are Suzie’s Grandson. Her husband never came home from the war. She met a nice man. They married. You know him as your Grandfather. I’m sorry James; I thought you should know the reason behind the title. ‘Don’t tell my secret.’”

“So, it wasn’t about the murder?” questioned James.

“Partly, yes, the main part is about you.”

Quickly deciding not to fall apart after hearing the news, James said with a sigh.

“Thanks for telling me your story. Say thanks to Suzie for me.”

“Why don’t you tell her yourself?”

Mia and James watched a second light the size and shape a person start to form on the other side of the tree. A young woman appeared. When the bright light vanished, she slowly walked over. James thought she looked a little nervous. Her timid steps were short. Instead of rushing to stand next to Eloise she stopped a few feet behind her.

James beckoned her over. She seemed reluctant to come closer.

“Grandma Suzie it is okay,” whispered James.

“I prefer to stay back here,” she called.

The trio walked over to Suzie and stood in front of her under the shade of the giant gum tree. The filtered light went straight through Eloise and Suzie.

"I guess you want an answer to why I never told anyone my story?" whispered Suzie.

The voice of the new arrival sounded beautiful. James and Mia studied her face. The aura around her reeked of love and kindness. Peace engulfed the area. Even if James wanted to be angry, he couldn't. He felt a prisoner to the peace. It flowed around him and through him.

"I would have understood," reassured James.

"Thank you," whispered Suzie. "Lilly and I vowed we'd never speak a word of what happened. We expected to live up to our promise. On heaven's side of the pearly gates we discussed our vow at length. We were given permission to sort it out. When the time came to say, I couldn't bring myself to tell our secret. Lilly said she would do it. I watched the whole proceedings. I feel disappointed in myself for not helping to explain it."

"I'm happy the story was told. I am shocked. However, at least I know," said James. "I understand why the act needed to stay a secret. I admire you and Eloise for not saying."

Suzie looked at Lilly. "Our job is done."

"Yes, it is."

"Not quite!" exclaimed James. "Suzie, what happened to Robert, your brother?"

"There's no mystery there. He enlisted in the army to keep from getting into trouble from the police. He died six months after graduating. Shot by the enemy."

"I'm sorry I asked."

"He was a good bloke. I'm positive you and Robert would have gotten along. He was a lot like you," said Suzie.

Mia and James watched Lilly and Suzie start to vanish. They were three feet off the ground when they were almost completely transparent.

"Any last words?" asked Mia.

"Have a nice long life together," answered Lilly.

"James, look after your wife using all the love you can muster," added Suzie.

Mia and James waved at the two ladies. They waved back.

In a flash of light, they vanished.

Hugging each other for a long time, Mia studied her husband's eyes.

"How do you feel about knowing the truth?" she finally asked.

"After I get over the shock, I'll be fine. I'm glad Eloise didn't tell us on our wedding day."

"It's uncanny how Lilliana knew exactly the right time to say," hinted Mia.

"Yes. Come on; we have a second honeymoon to enjoy."

Mia nodded. "Then it's back to work. My writing block has gone for good. My brain has been flooded with stories as we speak."

"I feel the same," echoed James. "How uncanny!"

Dear reader,

Thank you for reading my novel 'Don't tell my secret.' I do hope you enjoyed it. Any feedback is gratefully accepted. The information you, the reader give, helps me to become a more professional author.

I'd like to dedicate this novel to the old gentlemen who walked up to me and out of the blue asked me do I know how much noise sand makes. He went on to explain he was a soldier in the 2nd world war and it was his job to plant bombs on the beach. When the enemy soldier, on guard duty stopped, he stopped.

When the soldier walked he walked.

After the bloke shared a snippet of his story I never saw him again.

Mark Stewart

In this series

Don't tell my secret

201 May Street

The Girl From Emerald Hill.

The Painting

Between the wickets

My novels are based on the Australian culture. Some of the spelling is Australian. Thanks for your understanding.

Again, thank you for your support, for without you, the reader, I wouldn't have anyone to read my work.

Mark Stewart

Other novels I have written in the way of romance are: Kiss on the bridge. The perfect gift: Legendary blue diamond. Don't tell my secret.

A vampire adventure is The Blood Red Rose: Blood Red Rose Two:

Crime novels: The Kendal Chronicles.

Fire Games: Heart of a spider: I know your secret.

Children: A Troglia knows and Luke's cubby house: Malcolm's cubby house.

Smashwords has various short stories.

Below is the opening page of my novels in order that I have listed them:

Synopsis: Kiss on the bridge. Adventure romance. Free on Obooko

How would you react if a tall handsome stranger came up to you on new-years-eve and asked for a kiss?

Kiss on the bridge is set in the year 1974. Cyclone Tracy made land fall in Darwin on 25th December 1974 at 9:55am desecrating Darwin. After Tracy had swept the state there was nothing left except this story? Out of the ruins love sparked and mushroomed between Anneli and Wade. They were destined to meet and tell their story for decades to come.

Kiss on the bridge two: Set in Australia in 1977. Meredith wakes in a coffin. She has no idea her hero is on the way. They meet and fall in love, but will the emotion be strong enough to keep them together?

The Perfect Gift. Adventure romance. **Free on Obooko.**

Naomi is twenty-six and doesn't like the way all men mistreat her. She decides a change is needed and applies to be a jillaroo on a cattle station named the Oasis. Its location is in outback Australia. She meets a cowboy, Trent, who is a rodeo champion. They agree on a bet. Eventually both want out, but neither wants to be first.

Through a series of adventures that stretch from the city, to a fast-flowing river in the outback where Trent must save Naomi from drowning, love germinates in the middle of a storm.

In her heart, Naomi is a woman who adores the city's nightlife, but as the sun sets on each day, the Australian outback is enticing and the excitement of the city fades. Then she inadvertently saves the Oasis.

Love is growing, then Brandt; Naomi's obsessive ex-boyfriend tracks her down. Can Trent save her one last time?

Synopsis: Legendary Blue Diamond. Adventure romance. Available April 10th 2012

HISTORIANS AND researchers say the birth of the legendary blue diamond originated when the Earth was being born. Some say the legend commenced at the union between a man who had skin, the colour of the night sky and a woman who had skin the colour of the sun. Rumour has it that the diamond was no larger than a single carrot. Lately there have been whispers that the deep blue coloured diamond was reported to be in excess of nine carrots possibly even ten or higher. What I believe isn't important, though I assume it lays somewhere in between. There's been bush talk from the Australian Kimberley's to Melbourne; whosoever touches the blue stone will die, for it is cursed by God. I believe it is due to man's greed and the blood that drips from his hands is the truth behind the cursed stone.

I have extensively researched a great number of books on the subject looking for a start date to the authenticity of the legend. I think I may have uncovered the actual events, but I

have no way of proving if the facts are correct. I have been able to ascertain the legend was born around the mid 1800's AD when the State bank of Victoria was in its infancy. A gold prospector unearthed the diamond. In days he had sold it. The buyer was a man in charge of the bank. The diamond was indeed dark blue in colour, but definitely a one off, stroke of luck find. One cold dark night a bushranger, his brother and a third man came into a small town searching for the blue diamond. They never found it. The banker was tortured for the information of the stone's whereabouts. He took the knowledge of its existence to his grave. Of late a possible theory has been circulating that the man's wife has it in her possession. How she escaped from being murdered was any one's guess.

If you ask me, do I believe in the story, I'll answer you truthfully. I know it only to be a legend.

Synopsis: Blood Red Rose. Vampire adventure romance. Free on Obooko.

"You can't force me to drink that, I'm innocent," yelled Haleton. "Rose-a-lee what have you done?"

There was no reply.

William Haleton is a normal man looking for love and the good life then the council of four modifies his DNA and uses him as a guinea pig. They transform him into a vampire. Pleading his innocence falls on deaf ears.

Haleton is hungry for the next evil soul, but deep down he has a burning desire for the love of a girl. Her blood is sweet and hypnotic. Her genetic makeup is his perfect match.

Being transported again through time is not an option.

The clock is ticking.

Haleton will do anything to stay by Amber's side, but is it possible for her to love him? Can Craig Benyon, Amber's close friend, be trusted? After all he loves her as much as William Haleton.

If an antidote to the vampire's curse is found in time, will it be successful, or is everything Haleton going through part of the vampire curse?

Synopsis: Fire Games. Crime. First book in the series. **Free on Obooko**

Detective Alan Kendal puts his life on the line to outplay the psychotic arsonist known as Patrick.

Detective Kendal is ordered to team up with Detective Claire Ambroso, whom he's known since school, but she carries a secret and he has a grey past. Which one will come forward to haunt first? Kendal grows suspicious of his new partner when she aims her gun directly at him and pulls the trigger. What's her motive? Is she Patrick's accomplice? If not, who is?

How can Patrick always be one step ahead? Does Kendal have enough time to rescue his kidnapped twelve-year-old daughter, Tegan, before Patrick's fiery finale?

Synopsis: Heart of a spider. Crime. Second book in the series. Free on Obooko.

Detective Kendal is on the trail of a patient who has escaped the mental institution and wants to sever Kendal's life line. The chase is complicated by the visitation of a ghost and the appearance of a supposed vigilante.

Kendal doesn't believe in ghosts, but finds himself having a conversation as he stares at one. His partner, Claire Ambroso has to fight for her life when Kendal is told to meet GP at the wharf when the moon is at the highest point in the night sky.

Confusion sets in at a local supermarket when a robbery goes wrong and someone in Kendal's family is shot.

The trap is set for the person who masterminded the escape and a final shoot out at the hospital reveals amazing results that astounds even Kendal.

Synopsis: I know your secret. Crime. Third book in the series. **Free on Obooko.**

Everyone has a secret. Some people take theirs to the grave. Some hold their desires inside for a lifetime. Some stew on their secret all their life, and then they get revenge.

I know your secret is a suspenseful crime novel. Melbourne homicide detective Alan James Kendal and his partner Detective Claire Ambroso have to locate a missing teenage girl. The case hots up when he is introduced to a medium. She seems to hold all the knowledge of the case except a few minor details, like, why did Kendal find an empty bullet shell that had a note inside that read, 'I was paid to miss.'



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