

1

Rough hands grabbed her. Clamped across her waist, his powerful arm squeezed the breath from her lungs. He hauled her backwards, her thrashing arms and legs no more an inconvenience to him than if she had been a pinned fly.

She coughed, her eyes watering as the hot, acrid air seared the inside of her throat. With both hands, she tried in desperation to prize the immovable weight from her stomach. “Let me go! Get...”

Her chest convulsed against the heavy, grit-laden smoke. The man’s hold on her eased. She seized her chance and wrenched herself from his grip. She stumbled forward, shielding her face with her arms, but the fire’s intensity drove her back.

Back into the arms of the firefighter.

“What do you think you’re doing? You can’t go in there!” shouted the hulking black and yellow protective-clad figure. “You’ll get yourself killed.”

Desley James scarcely heard him over the din of the fire trucks, pumps and roar of the blaze. Her only concern was for Laura. Where was she? Had she been at home? Had she escaped the inferno? What about Ryan?

She opened her mouth to speak, inhaling a mouthful of burnt air instead. Spluttering, she bent her head forward and drew the thin cotton T-shirt she wore over her mouth and nose.

“Have you got everyone out?”

The firefighter leaned down, his ear almost touching her face. “Sorry, what was that?”

She repeated her question, watching his face as her words, muffled by the fine weave of her makeshift filter, sunk in. He averted his gaze, but not before she had her answer.

“Oh dear God, no. Please tell me it isn’t true. It’s not possible,” she added in a whisper only audible to herself.

This time when he lifted her off her feet she didn’t resist; all the fight had left her. A female police officer joined them, draping a blanket around Desley’s shoulders as the firefighter set her down beside the open back door of a police car.

She shivered, pulling the blanket in tighter as she sunk onto the backseat, the wool fibers bristly against her hot skin. The vehicle’s interior light cast a ghostly pall over the two faces staring down at her.

2

Like limp party streamers the night after, blue and white police tape fluttered in the breeze. In the stark morning light, the suburban Melbourne bungalow's blackened skeleton seemed to mock Desley: *You're too late...*

The nearer she went, the more overpowering the reek of water-sodden ashes and burnt timber became. Her stomach churned against, not only the sickening smell, but also the sheer awfulness of it all. And no one could or would tell her what had happened. All she knew was that at ten o'clock the night before, when she'd stood on her doorstep and bade her friend goodnight, Laura Noble had been alive and well.

Tired and more than a little tipsy, Desley had gone back inside, bypassing the dirty glasses, plates and two empty wine bottles littering the oversized black-and-white dice that served as a coffee table, and climbed straight into bed. Seconds later she was deep in dreamless sleep.

She woke with a start, sitting bolt upright, her eyes wide. Disorientated by the red and blue lights strobing her bedroom, she wondered for one absurd moment if a UFO had landed outside her window. The high-pitched wail of sirens soon brought her back to her senses.

Her heart hammering, she jumped out of bed, crossed the room and opened the door that led out onto the bedroom's narrow balcony. The night chill cut through her long-sleeved but

lightweight T-shirt and cotton pajama bottoms. She smelled smoke, heard shouts and the rumble of engines. But all she could see from her upstairs vantage point was an orangey-red glow above the rooftops towards the end of the street. Near where Laura lived with her partner Ryan Moore.

Trying hard not to panic, she raced back inside and down the stairs to the front door. Halfway out the door, she realized she was still wearing her pajamas. She faltered, but only for a split-second, too concerned about her friend to worry about the cold or what she looked like.

She hadn't had to go far to confirm her worst fears. The blaze from Laura and Ryan's rented home lit up the street. Would she have plunged into the burning house if the firefighter hadn't stopped her? Could she have saved her friend? Why hadn't she insisted Laura stay with her while Ryan was in Sydney? She shook her head, the only answers to the mounting questions, more questions.

Oh, God, she suddenly thought, does Ryan know? Had the police tracked him down yet, broken the heartbreaking news to him? According to Laura, Ryan was due back from his business trip that morning; a homecoming he would never forget.

"I thought I might find you here," said an instantly recognizable voice from behind her.

She started, sidestepping as she glanced over her shoulder. "What do you want, Trent?"

"That's a nice way to greet your husband."

"Ex," she reminded him, although technically she was still married to him. In her mind, he had ceased being her husband the minute he walked out the door of their home three years ago to live with his young mistress.

"Don't be like that." He stepped in front of her, tilting her chin up with his fingers. "Hey, you've been crying—"

Her head snapped back, her hand slapping his away. “Jesus Christ, Trent, what did you expect? Do you really think I’m that much of a cold-blooded bitch I wouldn’t grieve for my best friend?”

Trent blinked, confusion clouding his tanned face. “I don’t think we’re on the same page here, Des.”

Page? What did pages have to do with anything? Numb with grief she couldn’t think straight. “For goodness sake, Trent, just for once can’t you speak English?” She wasn’t in the mood to play his word games; she’d had enough of it during their seven-year marriage to last a lifetime.

His pale grey eyes peered at her from under long, blond, almost transparent eyelashes. She felt a small tug somewhere deep inside her and immediately felt angry with herself. He meant nothing to her.

Attack her best defense, she stood hands on hips, scowling at him, her chest thrust out like a puffed-up bantam rooster. “Well? Out with it.”

Cocking his head, he gave her a disarming grin. “You’re beautiful when you’re mad.”

Again, that familiar tug. She shook her head, dismissing it as stupid. He could save his corny lines and impish smiles for someone who cared. “And you’re bloody unbelievable!”

Trent sighed, his expression solemn as he looked past her at the burnt out shell of what had once been a house. “Perhaps we should start again.”

She gave a quick nod, her eyes following his gaze. She didn’t trust herself to speak.

“So,” he said, “do you know if they’ve unearthed Laura yet? It’ll take her a while to recover from this.”

Desley’s mouth dropped, her eyes brimming with tears as she turned on him. “You sick bastard!”

“What?” His hands came up, palms out in defense. “What have I done now?”

“Have some compassion. I know you and Laura never got on, but joking about her resurrecting is just too much, even for you.”

His face paled under his tan. “I didn’t know.”

“Didn’t know what? That they pulled what was left of my best friend’s body out of the fire last night? Or that she’s not going to miraculously rise from the ashes?”

She watched his lips moving soundlessly, and imagined his thoughts racing for the words to undo what he had said.

“No, you’ve got it all wrong, Des. Believe me.” He rubbed his hand back and forth across his chin. “God, I could do with a drink about now.”

She suspected it wouldn’t be the first for the day, but made no comment, waiting for him to go on. His drinking problems were none of her business.

“Unearthed; it was a poor word choice...”

What’s new, thought Desley irritably.

“I should have said located...”

She frowned at Trent as he snatched up her hands and squeezed them. His fingers felt hot and intimate against her cold skin.

“Look,” he said, meeting her gaze head-on, “I don’t know if Laura is dead or alive, but one thing’s for sure, it wasn’t her corpse they pulled out of the fire.”

She gasped, every muscle in her body tensing. Torn between disbelief and overwhelming relief, she searched his face for clues. Truth or sick joke? No smirk tickled the corners of his mouth. He held her gaze without blinking, his expression unchanged.

“Say that again,” she said, the hope cartwheeling through her head making her feel uneasy. What if he was wrong? What if she had misheard him?

“It’s simple: the body in the house was male. So unless Laura was a man in drag, it couldn’t possibly be her.”

“I don’t understand. How can that be? Laura was the one at home, not Ryan. He was supposed to be in Sydney.”

Trent shrugged. “I’m only telling you what I heard.”

Her heart sank. “Heard from who?” she asked, half-expecting to hear that it was Mrs So-and-so who heard it from Mr So-and-so who heard it from his mate who overheard a conversation somewhere that he probably wasn’t supposed to be privy to.

“The police. The bastards woke me at some ungodly hour this morning, dragging me out of bed to answer their ridiculous questions,” he said, his voice taut with indignation. “Why the fuck they thought I might know anything, I don’t know!” He let out a loud huff.

The resulting blast of minty Listerine breath hit Desley square in the face. She blinked, her eyes watering. She wrested her hands from his grip and stepped backwards. She knew him well enough to know the overdose of mouth freshener was a cover for his drinking: either a heavy session the night before or a tipples or two that morning. She also knew him well enough to keep her mouth shut about it.

Although curious to the reason for Trent’s visit from the police, Laura’s welfare and whereabouts remained uppermost in Desley’s mind. “You’re telling me Laura got out in time, right? Is she okay? Where is she? Do they know who the man was?” She paused, took a deep breath and touched the back of her ex-husband’s hand with her fingertips. “Please, Trent, I need to know

everything you know. Straight-up...” She hesitated and then added, “None of your usual bullshit.”

His barely-there eyebrows arched, his bottom lip pushed out in a pout as he looked down at her. “Steady on, Des.” He hid his hands in his trouser pockets, dancing from foot to foot. From the biting wind chill or something else, she wasn’t sure. “How about we discuss it over a coffee back at your place?” he suggested.

She groaned inwardly. Anxious as she was for immediate answers, she knew demanding he tell her there and then could only be counter-productive. And besides, they were starting to draw the attentions of the blue-overalled forensic investigators methodically sifting through the charcoal and ashes.

“Not my place.” That would be too cozy, too much like how it used to be. Or rather, used to be before he decided he could do better with the floozy from the office. “Nina’s should be open,” she said, referring to the café and bar three blocks away.

The corners of his mouth twitched in the beginnings of a self-satisfied grin. “It’s a date, then,” he said, angling his elbow in her direction. When she didn’t take it, he simply shrugged his shoulders as if to say “your loss” and walked off in the direction of Nina’s.

Keeping up with his long-legged strides took two of hers to his every one. By the time they reached the narrow, glass-fronted café, she was breathing hard and despite the chilly morning, sweating under her layers of clothing.

Unwinding her scarf, she followed Trent through Nina’s arched doorway. A large Aboriginal Dreamtime painting in yellow and red ochres dominated one wall, providing the cozy café’s color scheme. The superheated air inside felt like an oven after the cold outdoors. She took a deep breath, filling her nostrils with the

tantalizing scent of freshly roasted coffee, and looked around for a vacant table.

Nina's was surprisingly busy with only a couple of tables unoccupied. Desley spotted one for four near the window looking out to the street. She had begun to wend her way toward it when she realized Trent was making a beeline for a table she hadn't seen, tucked away in a low-lit recess at the rear of the café. With a little sigh, she backtracked and followed him.

Even dressed casually in olive-green corduroy trousers and a faded khaki canvas jacket, Trent drew gazes from almost every woman in the place. No doubt about it, her broad-shouldered, surfie-blond ex-husband was a good-looking man. And he knew it.

She peeled off her heavy wool jacket and slung it across the back of the chair closest to her, all the while ignoring Trent's attempts to get her to sit beside him on the bench behind the glass-topped table.

Trent picked up the menu. "Have you eaten?"

Closing her eyes, Desley mentally counted to ten and opened them again. "Trent, this is not a social outing. Please don't play games with me. Not today. Order whatever you want, but the only reason I'm here is so you can fill me in on what you know."

"Not for my company, then?"

"Trent!"

"You can't blame a man for trying," he said, his attention wandering back to the menu.

She glared at him, wishing just for once, he would take her seriously. Didn't he realize how grave the situation was? Her best friend's home had burnt to the ground, she was missing, her husband was en route somewhere between Sydney and Melbourne, and an unknown male had been all but cremated.

Fortunately for Trent, a gangly teenage waiter, dressed from head to toe in black, arrived at their table. Desley ordered a

double-esspresso. She then had to bite her tongue, holding her impatience in check while Trent gave the waiter the runaround.

“Hot chocolate, please. With marshmallows. On second thoughts, make it a mocha – a mug, if you have it.” He clasped his hands together on the table in front of him and smiled. Then just as the waiter turned to walk away, he raised his index finger. “And a bowl of marshmallows.”

Caffeine, chocolate and more sugar. Standard fare for Trent perhaps, but she felt queasy at the mere thought of it. She leaned forward, hung her fingers over the top of the menu Trent had picked up again and pushed it down. “Okay, mister, no more delaying tactics. Are you going to tell me what’s going on, or not?”

He looked at her, but said nothing.

She pushed back in her chair.

He held up his hands in mock surrender. “I’ll talk. Just don’t hurt me. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

She stood up.

He stood up. “Sorry, Des. You know me...”

Only too well, she thought, unhooking her jacket from the chair. Once upon a time, she had found it beguiling, but she was so over it. *And him*, she reminded herself.

“Please don’t go. No more joking around, I promise,” he said, looking suitably contrite.

She looked toward the door, then at Trent and then back at the door again. Although she wanted him to think she was ready to walk, in reality she had no choice but to stay. Who else was going to tell her what she needed to know? The firefighters, police officers and anyone else who stopped long enough for her to grab their attention the night before had been less than forthcoming, patronizing her as if she were a distraught psychiatric patient in need of calming.

They sat down in unison, he mirroring her movements. Perched on the edge of her seat, her jacket draped across her knees, she waited for him to speak.

With his palms pressed together, his fingers pointing in her direction, he looked as if he were preparing to dive across the table and into her lap. Instead, propped on his elbows, he leaned forward, crossing the invisible centerline and intruding on her space.

“The police...” In an added touch of the dramatic, he raised his head and scanned the room, his exaggerated actions almost comical. More meerkat than secret agent.

Resisting the urge to scream, she clenched her teeth together and gave him her don’t-mess-with-me look. If she could’ve reached down his throat and wrenched out the words, she would have.

He disregarded her stern no-nonsense face, hunching even closer to her and dropping his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “The police are treating it as a suspicious death. They’re pretty sure it was arson. Evidence of accelerant, apparently.”

Her jaw dropped, his words ringing in her head. What conceivable reason could anyone have to torch the home of two decent law-abiding citizens? Who would want to harm them? Could it have been a case of mistaken identity or even the wrong address? Had the man’s death been intentional? Perhaps the arsonist had left it too late to flee the scene of his crime...

“But whose death?” she finally managed, her voice little more than a strangled squeak. “They must know who it is.”

Trent shook his head. “Not yet as far as I know. From what they told me, identification isn’t going to be easy. The body is badly charred.”

Desley shuddered, squeezing her eyes shut, desperate to block the unbidden image of a blackened, contorted corpse from

her mind. “But what I don’t understand is why the police would be talking to you about it. How did they even know you knew Laura and Ryan?”

Before he could reply, the waiter arrived with their order, including a dessert dish piled high with fluffy pink and white marshmallows. Trent offered them to her first, only popping two in his own mouth when she shook her head. Her double-espreso remained untouched in front of her.

“You were about to say?” she prompted.

He wiped icing sugar from his fingers and picked up his steaming mug. “The guys at the office must have told them.” He sipped his mocha.

“Told them what, Trent?” She was getting nowhere fast. Her interrogation techniques obviously needed work. “I’m not a mind-reader.”

For a long moment he said nothing, more intent on loading his mug with as many marshmallows as he could fit. She cleared her throat. His gaze flicked to her face and away again.

“Ryan had me fired, Des.”

“Say that again.”

“It’s true. I didn’t want to believe it either, but Ryan somehow convinced the directors I had become a liability. Sure, I had been having a couple of hard months, but I would’ve come good.” He paused, adding under his breath, “Smarmy bastard.”

That explained the casual dress and why he wasn’t at work, but not why his colleagues at Geary and Associates, the advertising agency he worked for – or rather had worked for – would have pointed the police in his direction. “So what aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing much. You know how it is; we all say things in the heat of the moment that we don’t mean. It’s only because all

this has happened that some people now think I might have been serious. Honestly, can you see me harming another person?"

That depends if you're talking physically or psychologically, she thought, remembering the mental pain his deceit had inflicted on her. "Forget about Ryan for a minute. What about Laura? What's happened with her? Where is she?"

Trent started to shrug, saw her expression and stopped. "Sorry, Des, I'm as much in the dark as you are. The police weren't exactly confiding in me." He cocked his head to the side, his attempt at an apologetic smile falling flat.

"That's it? That's all you can tell me?" She jumped to her feet, wrapping her scarf around her neck in a tight knot, almost strangling herself. "Laura and Ryan are missing, could be in trouble or worse, and you want to play happy families over coffee," she shouted down at him, heedless to the curious stares she was drawing from the café's other patrons. "You haven't changed one iota. It's always been about you."

He cringed, red blotches flaring on his cheeks as if she had physically slapped him.

She struggled with her jacket, cursing when she couldn't get her left arm into the sleeve. "I can't believe you got me here under false pretences. Damn you, Trent James. Damn you—"

"Wait. Don't go." He shuffled awkwardly along the bench, leaning to his left as his right hand fumbled in his trouser pocket. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. It wasn't my intention. Here," he said, presenting her with the business card he had fished from his pocket. "Talk to this guy. He's the detective in charge of the investigation. If anyone knows anything, he will."

She snatched the buckled card from his fingers and without a backward glance stormed off.

"Does this mean I'm forgiven?" he called after her.