

Amelia

Chapter 1

Amelia

The kid with the rats was at the library again. I'd noticed him the last couple of times I'd been there. Or rather, I'd noticed the rats. They were in a small metal cage outside in the foyer, next to a skateboard and a school backpack. There were three rats and I stopped to look. Two were asleep, curled up with their brown and black markings showing. The other, a larger white one, was frantically treading the small wheel. As I watched, it stopped and leapt out. It ran over to nibble at a seed and drink from a small container. Then it raced back to the treadmill. I wondered just how intelligent they were.

Inside the library, the kid, skinny and scruffy and maybe fourteen or fifteen, sat over near the wall. He had several books scattered on the desk and appeared to be making notes in a folder. While I sat reading the newspaper, he crossed a couple of times to check on the rats and the second time he came back with a cotton carry bag.

I had finished with the papers and was browsing the shelves when he replaced one of the books he'd been using. I wondered why he didn't take it out, and watched as he made another trip to the shelves, ending up with only the folder he'd been writing in and a collection of biros and markers. At the check out desk, he stopped and spoke with the librarian. She consulted her computer and whatever she said couldn't have pleased him much because he snatched up his carry bag and stalked out. I reflected if our library had a swinging door instead of an automatic sliding one, he would have slammed it behind him.

She sighed and met my gaze. Well, yes, I was curious. He had been using such a pile of books – non-fiction and obviously for study – but had taken none out. I wandered over with the two I'd chosen; one fiction and one not.

“How are you, Joan?”

“Well. At least I think I am.” She glanced after the boy and shook her head. “Most of the time anyway. Just thinking how glad I am I decided on this job and not being a teacher.”

I chuckled. “Ah, teaching wasn't that bad. There are times I'm glad I'm retired. He – ah – didn't look very happy.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Sad situation actually.” Of course, she shouldn't have spoken with me about him, but she knew I didn't gossip and I suspect she needed to vent. “He borrowed some books a couple of weeks back and they were badly damaged. We can't let him take any more out until he's paid for the replacements. I think it might take him a while.”

“Hmm. Yeah.” My opinion of him dropped several degrees. I value books and despise people who ill-treat them. “Ah well, his problem, I suppose.”

I was surprised to see the kid outside; slumped on one of the benches in the park. The rat cage lay on the grass by his feet and he was scowling into space – probably thinking unkind thoughts about librarians in general, I thought. I glanced at him as I walked past and realised there were tears on his face. When he noticed me he wiped at them abruptly and stood up. He grabbed up the cage, slung the backpack over his shoulder and pushed off on the skateboard along the pathway. I watched him go and wondered.

Next day, a Friday, he was at the library again. This time he spoke to one of the librarians before he settled at a desk. From one pocket he produced some money and watched as she made a record in the computer. Paying his debt off gradually, I thought. Fair enough. I wondered where he'd got the money. I took my books, went out into the sunshine and settled on the bench where he had sat the previous day. An hour later he came out, still looking unhappy. His expressions seemed to be limited to sullen scowls and frowns; but there had been those tears yesterday. He dumped the backpack on the grass nearby and set the cage down, more carefully.

“Aren't you taking any books out?” I asked.

He stared at me, and I could almost see his response forming. This was the generation that had had 'stranger danger' pounded into them. It was also the generation not famed for its politeness to elders. However, I am harmless looking. No teenage boy would need to be afraid of a middle-aged – well, let's be honest here – slightly past middle-aged woman. He sighed and shook his head, obviously deciding a snarl would not be an acceptable response to a polite query.

“No. I'm not allowed.”

I looked at him in silence and he shrugged.

“I owe for some that got damaged. I gotta go home now.”

“No wheels today?” I asked. He didn't have his skateboard.

“Nah.”

“You sold it, didn't you?” My words were out before I could consider.

This time he snapped back at me, but I could see the tears weren't far away again.

“None o' your bloody business, is it?”

“To pay towards the books. Am I right?” When he didn't answer I stood up. “How much do you owe them?”

He mumbled something incoherent, but at least it wasn't abuse. Without looking at me, he reached down to pick up the cage and his backpack and then stalked off along the path. I shook my head and walked away in the opposite

direction. After half a dozen steps I stopped and, on an impulse I've never been able to understand, I made my way back inside the library.

I didn't realise it at the time, but that action changed my life. Several other lives as well.

Chapter 2

Joan wasn't there, but Melanie, her superior, was. I had no business asking the questions I asked, but she knew me well and was happy to talk. People *do* talk to me. The boy's name was Davy. Three weeks earlier, he took out four non-fiction books and when he brought them back they were torn and stained with something indescribable. There were profanities scrawled inside one and several pages had been ripped out of another. There were also indications some pages had been burnt. The ruined books stank of cigarette smoke and other less identifiable – and probably less legal – substances.

Davy claimed to be innocent but there it was. Rules dictated he had to pay for the replacements. It came to a total of just under a hundred dollars. Until the money was paid – oh, plus a fee – he was not permitted to take any more books out.

Considering the amount and the severity of the damage, Melanie told me, he was lucky they even let him back inside the building. Obviously, the damage had been deliberate and malicious.

Today he had come in with ten dollars; combined with the amount he had previously paid it left sixty-five dollars before he could borrow books again.

"What about his parents?" I asked. "Won't they pay for the damage?"

Melanie laughed, but there was no humour in her tone.

"He told us his parents were the ones who were responsible. We did send a letter to the address he registered under, but haven't heard anything at all. Seems like they don't have a phone; we rang the number on Davy's membership application, but it was, as the message says, 'no longer available'." She mimicked the singsong Telstra message and I smiled. "They have no mobile number; or if they do, we don't know it. As far as we know, we cannot make contact with Mandy and Ryan. Not members of the library, never have been." She shrugged. "Short of one of us going around to ask – and no one likes *that* idea – we have to wait until he finishes paying for the damage."

I nodded, thanked her and assured her the story – and the family details she really shouldn't have shared with me – wouldn't go any further. I was depressed as I left the library. *I* knew, if she didn't, where the latest ten dollars had come from. For some odd reason, I felt sorry for him. I don't like feeling for other people. People are a complication. Animals now, they're a different matter. I put young Davy and his problems from my mind and drove home to where *my* animal waited for me.

Lennie is a Rag Doll cat. When he's not eating or using his sand tray, he's sleeping. He makes a nice cushion but if I ever had mice they could frolic under his nose and he wouldn't even wake. On the occasions I need to go away, I can leave him overnight, even for two nights. For any longer period I prefer to send him to a cattery. I set out a saucer of food and one of milk for him, poured a glass of wine for myself and sat outside on the verandah to drink it and have a cigarette.

Unwanted, the memory of Davy's face, sullen and miserable, came to me. I had another drink, cooked a piece of steak for my dinner, and took a slice of cheesecake from the freezer. By the time I went to bed I had decided what I'd do.

About half past three on Monday afternoon, I was at the library, hoping he would make his usual after school appearance. He did. I also hoped he wouldn't have sold the rats before then. I had the feeling those animals meant more to him than a skateboard. He must have noticed me as he was studying; he had the good grace to blush. I was fingering through the fiction section when I heard a slight throat clearing behind me.

Chapter 3

"I'm sorry," he mumbled towards the floor. "I shouldn't have sworn at you the other day."

I nodded. "Apology accepted. I feel like swearing at people sometimes, too."

He smiled and the expression lit up his face. I watched as he returned to his study. He gave the librarian another five dollars, but the rat cage still had three occupants so he hadn't resorted to selling them yet.

I settled on one of the benches outside in a shady spot, smoked and waited. When Davy came out of the library, I ground the butt under my sandals and got up.

"It's going to take you a while to pay off those books. Maybe I can help."

He stopped and looked at me suspiciously. I pointed. "There's a coffee shop over there. Come and sit down and listen to me. I don't bite. And I'm not about to kidnap you, all right." I never have gone in for kidnapping. Not my sort of thing at all.

He stared back, still wary, shrugged, and picked up his school bag. He was slight and his back bent under the load. I held out my hand.

"I'll carry the rat cage if you like. We'll have to sit outside with it." It suited me just fine; inside the coffee shop I would be unable to smoke and I find one of life's pleasures as I get older is a cigarette with my coffee. When we stopped I sat and put the cage carefully on the ground. He dropped his backpack gratefully. I dug in my handbag and pulled out money.

"You go inside and order. I want black coffee and a cake of some kind. Doesn't matter what. But not a lamington." I hate lamingtons. "Get yourself something to drink and to eat. A hamburger or a steak sandwich if you want. They

make a great toasted sandwich here. I think twenty's enough but if you need more come out and tell me, okay."

He frowned as he took the note. Then he nodded at me and smiled.

"Thanks."

I sat back, lit a cigarette and regarded the rats' cage, considering. Very few people I knew had ever kept rats as pets; the mere idea turned many off. They were clean, the cage was well kept and they smelled less than some dogs I've encountered. Davy came back and handed me three dollars and forty-five cents change. I smiled and tucked it away. I looked at the cage.

"What are their names?"

"The females are Mildred and Beatrice." Old-fashioned names; I wondered where they had come from. "And the male, the white one, he's called Algernon."

"Algernon. Of course!" I said dryly. "What else would you call a white rat? And does he have a maze to run through?"

"Hey, you know how come he's called that? Cool."

"Oh yes, *Flowers for Algernon* was one of my favourites. Just don't tell me your name is Charlie Gordon."

"Nah." He grinned. "It's Davy. Davy ... Gordon."

I looked at him sideways. "Are you kidding me?"

"No. True." He shook his head, pulled out his student ID, and waved it at me.

"Why Mildred and Beatrice?"

He shrugged.

"Ah ... two o' my teachers."

Two he didn't care for, I gathered, from his expression. I couldn't help it; I laughed aloud. Later on I wondered if somewhere there was a kid with a rat – or something worse – named after me. That amused me. I have an odd sense of humour sometimes.

"My name's Amelia. I suppose you should call me Mrs Ross, but I'd prefer you didn't. I had enough years of schoolkids calling me that. Call me Amelia, okay."

"How come?"

"I used to be a teacher."

He grunted. "Is that how come you knew about *Flowers for Algernon*?"

"Ah, bless you, no. I loved the book. I read a lot."

“Mmm. So do I. But Mum and Dad hate it when I read.” He looked downcast. “Huh. They hate it whatever I do.”

“Your mum and dad are the ones who damaged the library books, aren’t they? It wasn’t you at all.”

Chapter 4

He wouldn’t look at me for a moment, stared at the ground and shrugged. I went on, forgetting for the moment I had no right to probe in this manner. “And the rats – why do you have them with you all the time? Are there any problems at home? With your mum and dad?”

“No!” He almost yelled at me. “They ... just ...” This time he couldn’t prevent the tears. His little face puckered up and he rubbed at his eyes. “I can manage. Honest. They never ever hurt me. But I’m scared to leave the rats at home. I don’t know what they might do to them.”

“Hmm.” I dug in my bag and found tissues for him, then studiously looked the other way. By the time our food arrived he looked a lot better. I think he’d been holding those tears in for a long time. In spite of his distress he made short work of his toasted sandwich and the Coke he drank with it. When we’d finished I looked hard at him.

“Are you all right now?”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. Thanks for the food. I owe you.”

“You’re welcome. You *did* sell your skateboard to pay at the library, didn’t you?”

“Yeah. It wasn’t anywhere near enough. I still owe them heaps.”

“Your *parents* owe them heaps. Can’t they pay?” I think I’m becoming a busybody as I get older; this was none of my business and I knew it, but I couldn’t help myself. Sometimes I should know better.

He made a rude sound. “Shit, no. They don’t even remember what they did. They were stoned outta their minds at the time. They wouldn’t a done it otherwise. They never mean to do anything wrong. It just ... happened.”

“Davy, you need to be able to take books *out* from the library, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “I can use them there. But ... yeah, sometimes it’d be easier if I had them at home. Won’t happen. They won’t let me. They still think I trashed the books.”

“If I pay the library, you can. And you can pay me back.”

He stared at me and shook his head.

“You’d do that? You don’t know me, Mrs Ross. I coulda been feeding you a whole lotta bullshit.”

“But you weren’t. I know when someone’s not telling me the truth. I really do.” I held my hand up, finger pointing at him. “I will pay the library what you owe, and you can repay me. It’ll be a loan, that’s all. No selling the rats or anything else you value, either. It doesn’t matter how long you take. Ah, well –” I considered. “Shall we say six months?”

“Really? You mean it?” He gave a big grin and it transformed his face. “Mrs Ross – Amelia – that’s brilliant. Thank you.”

“Take care of yourself, Davy. Look after the rats, too. When you go to the library tomorrow, they’ll let you take books out. Ah... keep them away from your family.”

“Oh yes! I will. Thank you, for everything. G’bye.” Off he went, cage in one hand and bag slung over his back.

Over the following weeks, Davy and I got into the habit of having coffee once a week after our visits to the library. Well, I had coffee; he usually polished off a hamburger and a Coke, which he insisted on paying for himself. The first time, I offered to pay but he shook his head.

“Thanks, Amelia. I managed t’get a job at the supermarket at weekends collecting trolleys.” He was polite but firm and I agreed, impressed.

He was smart although in some ways immature; he picked up and absorbed all sorts of facts and figures like the proverbial sponge. Although nearly fifteen, he didn’t yet have much interest in girls. Like most of his generation, he was a technophile although he seemed to lack many things other kids took for granted – owning neither a computer nor a mobile phone. He wasn’t a geek, either. I’ve taught some geeky kids. Timothy Miles was one whom I remembered well. I saw him occasionally, when I visited either the restaurant or club run by Toby Kendall.

Toby Kendall – now he was another matter entirely.

Back to Davy, I think – much better topic!

He paid me the money back, a bit at a time for a month, and then the balance all in one lot. I looked at him inquiringly when he handed it over and he smiled.

“My grandad gave me some money for my birthday.” I started to speak but he continued. “I bought a new skateboard.”

I laughed. “I’m glad to see you got your priorities right.”

“He gave me a hundred dollars. I bought the skateboard, paid you off and stuck the rest in the bank. I’m still doin’ the trolley-collecting job. That helps.”

“Good.”

“Amelia, you gotta meet my grandad one day.” He seemed almost embarrassed. “I mentioned your name once and he wanted to know if you were my girlfriend.”

“I do hope you set him right over that.” I laughed, in spite of myself. Davy chortled.

“Oh, yeah. I told him I was sussing out a date for *him*.”

“Cheeky little bugger!”

“That’s what *he* said, too.”

Chapter 5

Toby Kendall

He should have been satisfied with himself and his life. In his mid forties, he estimated his worth to be several millions, counting his home, restaurant and nightclub. The latter two had taken time to establish but were showing healthy profits. He and his glamorous, but not overly bright wife owned a swish house overlooking the river in a prestigious neighbourhood. They had three children; two boys and a girl. All attended exclusive schools, where they attained good grades and made many acquaintances. Toby drove a red BMW and his wife a red Volvo. The Kendalls entertained frequently and gave generously – and ostentatiously – to selected charities.

As well as the legal businesses, Toby Kendall also had a thriving income from the distribution of illegal substances like marijuana, cocaine, amphetamines and heroin. He managed to evade both the law and the anger of bigger crime bosses. This he did by a mixture of bribes and obsequiousness, and thus prospered.

None of the drugs passed through the restaurant; it was legitimate, but the same did not hold true of his nightclub. There, anyone in the know and with the necessary dollars could acquire whatever was available. Marijuana was cheaper and a number of smaller dealers received their stashes from Kendall, keeping some and passing small quantities on to buyers. Kendall preferred to employ suckers and deadbeats; they didn’t have the brains to try to cheat him, and they were easily addicted to harder stuff as time went by. Among these smaller dealers were Mandy and Ryan Gordon. Kendall had also cultivated contacts within the police force; a worthwhile investment, he decided. Nothing like having up to date information about the law and its activities.

In spite of this success, Kendall felt dissatisfied. Within the past six months or so, things had started to go wrong, not so much for him, as some of his underlings. It was normal, over the course of time, for people to have accidents, even to die, but there were too many such events in too short a time. Maybe they were not quite the accidents they seemed.

His geeky young off sider Miles also had noticed something was wrong. Miles's position in Kendall's organisation was undefined; he was the son of a distant relative but had skills Kendall could use. Socially inept, he was nonetheless borderline genius and enthusiastic about using his knowledge, regardless of whether the outcomes were good or bad. Such trivia never concerned him.

It was fortunate, Kendall sometimes thought, he had taken Miles under his protection. The young man was the kind who would think nothing of starting an experiment with no idea how it could end, purely 'to see what would happen'.

"Hey, boss ... how many men you lost over the past year or so?" Miles sat in his favourite position, in front of the computer. He went on. "You know ... not quit or moved or something. How many 've got themselves bumped off?"

Toby Kendall scowled and Miles realised he had touched a sore point. "Or... maybe died ... accidentally?" After all, he didn't fancy adding to their numbers personally.

"Four. In the past seven months." Kendall gritted his teeth. "And I still haven't got a fucking clue who did them. The cops reckon they haven't, either. But they're not exactly busting a gut trying. Even reckon some of them might have been accidents. Accidents, bullshit!" He regarded the younger man. "You're a geek, Miles, you reckon you might be able to use that bloody computer of yours and do some detective work? There'd be a bonus in it for you if you could find something out they didn't. A big bonus."

Miles shrugged. "Yeah, why not? It's worth a try. So ... give me the info on each one of them, what happened and where, and so on, and I'll get onto it." He gave a lopsided grin. "That killer – assuming there *is* a killer – is as good as dead, boss. I guarantee it."

"I hope you're right. This is getting worrying." Kendall frowned and lit a cigar. "We keep outta the way of the big boys on the other side of the country. Pay 'em their dues, talk to them nicely and they can all fucking well bump each other off as far as I'm concerned." He rubbed his chin. "There's plenty of CCTV footage, y'know."

"Is there now?" Miles grinned. "Didn't tell the cops that, did ya, boss?"

"No. I didn't." Kendall was sour. "The sorta thing I wanna keep quiet. It's a matter of someone with dedication and lots of patience – someone like you – t'go through it all. There has to be a clue somewhere."

Miles smiled maliciously. "I'll find whoever it was, boss. Promise."

"Good onya, Miles. It'd be bloody helpful if you managed it before I lost anyone else."

Chapter 6

Zookie stopped as the stranger seated on the park bench hailed him. He grunted, then relaxed. A friendly face; or at least not a threatening one. One he'd seen earlier in the nightclub. Zookie didn't view many people as threats. Well over six foot tall and close to eighteen stone, he fitted the position of informal bouncer very well. He'd had a long day and a busy night. The thought of getting home and falling into bed was appealing. His fatigue, and the more than several drinks he'd had before leaving the club made him less wary than usual.

"Uh ... You were at Kendall's place. Whaddaya want?"

"G'day." The word was accompanied by a smile and a gesture. "Just having a smoke. You want one?"

"Yeah. Why not?" He accepted the cigarette and light and slumped on the seat.

"Tough night?"

"Always is."

"Wanna drink?" A hand proffered a flask and he took a hefty slug. The voice became warning. "That's good Scotch. Don't waste it."

Zookie grinned as he handed the flask back. "You'd better keep the rest of it then." He was surprised when his companion spoke again, this time the voice hard.

"The faces get younger, don't they? All wanting the same thing?"

"Huh?"

"Something you can provide for them."

"Oh." Realisation, as he thought, dawned on him. His companion was older than the norm, but in the end they all wanted the same thing. What was more, he could provide it. Course he could. Easily. Kendall would be pleased if he could hook another sucker. "Hey, you after a hit? I've got some. For a price."

"I bet."

He could hear the sarcasm, but the voice was fuzzy and he felt himself dropping into a black abyss. His voice slurred.

"The Scotch ... what was in it?"

The darkness welcomed him and he didn't hear the response.

"Moron."

He opened his eyes and blinked. Darkness all round. Kendall was gonna kill him if he'd been mugged and lost the stash. His head ached and he was cold, still slumped on the park bench. He was not alone. There was sufficient light from the distant street lamp to show the other person seated beside him.

"Huh?" He tried to focus. The expression on his companion's face was not reassuring.

"You fainted."

"I ... don't faint." He reached into his pocket and found it empty. Groggily, he reached under his arm but the gun he normally carried there was gone. "You ... robbed me."

"I shouldn't be too worried if I were you. That was minor. The worst is to come."

"What the fuck –?" He saw the pistol – his own small Glock. "Shit!"

"No kidding." The voice was almost amused. "Here, I've got something for you." One gloved hand held the pistol aimed at him and the other produced several small plastic bags. The bags that should have been in his pocket.

"Huh? What the bloody hell's going on?" He had regained the use of his voice and the world had ceased spinning, but he wasn't yet prepared to move against the gun.

"Are you hungry? I hope so." The voice was cold now and edged. "Here – eat this."

He stared blankly at the plastic packets. "That's outta my pocket? Nah, it's cocaine ... I'm not messing with that crap."

"No? You were ready to sell it. Now you can bloody well eat it. Start now!"

"What? No! I'll die."

"Exactly. You do have a choice. That –" And the pistol was raised to point at him. "Or this? Make up your mind. But make it up bloody fast."

Zookie was appalled and disbelieving.

"This is a joke, yeah? Kendall's got a foul sense of humour. I bet that smarmy bastard Miles suggested it. Slimy little shit!"

"No. No joke. Now get on with it. Eat!"

"No! I'll die! That fuckin' stuff'll burn my guts out!" His face was white with terror, but the other remained unmoved.

"Burn your guts out or die this way with a bullet. Your choice." There was no compassion in the voice. "If I shoot you, you're dead. Eat this – wash it down with some Scotch. Here. This isn't the same stuff that was drugged, by the way. It's just cheap booze. All you're worth. Someone might find you in time to get you to hospital

and pump your stomach. I don't have any more time to waste on you. Make up your mind and make it up bloody fast."

"No! Please! What do you want? Anything!"

The voice was implacable. "I *want* you to eat that crap. *Now!*"

Whimpering, tears of terror running down his face, he opened the plastic bag and slipped the deadly powder into his mouth. It burnt, and even the generous slug of Scotch did not help.

"Another. And another."

He was blubbering now, nauseous and in agony. After the third package had gone down his throat he was convulsing, twitching and vomiting. He slid from the bench, unable to break his fall. Blood joined the disgusting taste already in his mouth. It was an effort to speak.

"You said ... someone ... might find me ... in time ..."

"I lied."

His tormentor rose to stand over him and through the agony Zookie felt shock and shame at how he'd been tricked ... if he'd had his gun ... It wasn't fair, not fair at all ...

When Zookie stopped convulsing and lay still, a gloved hand checked for a pulse. Finding none, the killer nodded in satisfaction, replaced the dead man's gun and departed into the darkness.

Chapter 7

Amelia

Maybe a woman of my age ought to know better, but I *like* to go out alone, dining, to the theatre and even occasionally nightclubbing. I like Kendall's places, both the nightclub and the restaurant. I don't like *him*, but I like his places. For a number of reasons.

I limit myself to one glass of wine and then soft stuff. People are interesting when they've been drinking. They often say things then that they'd never consider telling anyone, especially a stranger, if they were sober. I don't talk much, but I listen a lot.

It was after 2 a.m. when I drove past the new shopping complex and the headlights caught movement; three boys ran across the road, the last so close I had to slam on the brakes. In the glare I recognised the first boy and not only that, I noticed the terror on his face and the vicious expressions of the two pursuing him.

Davy! What the hell was he doing out at this hour? I could see the backpack over his shoulder and the rat cage swinging from one hand as he ran.

They pelted across the grassy area and on to the bitumen. Swinging the car round and into the car park, I caught all three in my headlights. Even as I stopped the car I could see them laying into him, as he tried ineffectively to protect himself with the backpack. One hit him and the rat cage went flying. Davy let out a cry and grabbed at it, tripped and fell. The other two laughed. Like hyenas. Disgusting creatures. One kicked at a small light coloured blur on the ground and Davy wailed as if the kick had struck him.

I reached into the bag I keep in the car, left the car lights on and ran towards the boys.

“Let him alone, you little bastards!”

They paused in their occupation of beating Davy, but one aimed a final kick at him as he curled on the ground, whimpering. Disbelief on their faces, they turned to look at me.

“Leave him alone! Go away.”

They sniggered and opened their mouths to abuse me, preparatory to getting down to the fun of beating *me* up too. I should have realised that would be their reaction.

Call me old fashioned if you like, but there are a few words I really dislike. I particularly dislike having them directed at me. This boy used three of them. Several times. He wasn't at all imaginative, and what he suggested was physically impossible.

I didn't lose my temper; I've practised reining it in for so many years not to lose control.

He didn't know that. I suppose, when I reached into my pocket, he thought I was fumbling for a mobile phone. His eyes widened when I pulled out a pistol and pointed it at him.

Out of the corner of my eye, I could see Davy scabbling at the fallen rat cage. His two attackers stopped in their tracks.

“Ah – chill out, lady.” The boy dropped his knife and put out his hands defensively. “We didn't mean nothin', really.”

“Hmm.” I wasn't impressed. His companion blinked at me.

“Uh ... a gun! Shit, lady –”

I suppose Clint Eastwood would have said something along the lines of ‘Go on, punks. Make muh day.’ However I was tired and irritable and all I wanted was to go home. These two were a most unwelcome complication. Irrationally, I was angry with Davy for having got himself into a situation like this. What was he doing out

alone at two in the morning? I needed to pay his parents a visit and have a word with them. Preferably armed. I shook my head.

“Get out of here. Don’t ever let me see either of you again.” I raised the pistol and gestured towards the laneway behind them. “Wait. Before you go, take those hoodies off and empty all the pockets. Then take your shoes and jeans off.”

“Huh?”

“Whah?”

“You heard me. *Now.*” I watched in fascination as they produced an interesting collection from their hooded jumpers; knives, a knuckle-duster, several mobile phones, a couple of wallets and three MP3 players. Not to mention an assortment of coins, notes and credit cards. I rolled my eyes. “Been busy little buggers, haven’t you? Any of this stuff actually belong to *you?*”

One was sullen and silent; the other pointed at a wallet. “That’s mine. ‘N’ one of the MP3 players. And I gotta mobile phone in my pocket.”

“I see.” I addressed Davy. “Give the young man back *his* belongings. Now, empty the jeans pockets –” This produced said mobile, a few coins, a couple of hankies and a dirty comb. “Okay.” I returned my attention to the two boys. “Take your shoes and jeans and your belongings, you two, and piss off. Goodbye.”

“Uh, lady? You a cop?”

“What do you think?” I waved the gun and pointed down the laneway with my hand. “Go on, bummer off, before I change my mind and arrest you both.”

They didn’t waste any time, but grabbed their gear and ran. One cast a frightened glance backwards. He stumbled and tripped but managed to avoid falling. As their footsteps faded into the distance I smothered an inane giggle.

“No, Davy, don’t touch anything.” I tucked the gun away and went to my car. I dug in my bag and fished out a pair of gloves, which I wore to collect all their loot.

“Hey, Amelia,” he started, “but there’s a lotta money and stuff there –”

“And none of it is ours.” I stuffed the collection into a plastic bag and looked around. A charity collection bin stood in the corner of the car park and I dumped the bag into it. Let the Salvos sort it out.

“But –” Davy protested.

“Davy, I’m not a thief. And neither are you.”

“I suppose not.” He hung his head and I realised he was trying not to cry. “They stomped Algernon.”

“Did they now? Little bastards. I *should* have shot them.”

“Um ... how come you’ve got a gun? You’re not really a cop, are you?”

“Listen here. You have to stop this habit of starting your questions with *how come?* Try *Why?*”

“Okay.” He was not abashed. “Why have you got a gun? Is it real? Are you a cop? What else have you got in that bag of yours? It’s like a bloody Tardis.”

I had to laugh at the comparison. Well, a small lady-like handbag was all right for going out, but this one was satisfyingly heavy. I could probably have brained the young louts with it if I’d felt inclined, earlier. Threatening them with the gun was quicker and more effective. I was tired. Apart from the ‘normal’ contents, it held, of course the gun, plastic bags and disposable gloves, a first aid kit, a small torch, my mobile phone, a bag of glucose sweets and half a dozen other items I’d forgotten about. Mind you, I carried a small bag with innocent contents when I visited the nightclub. That was one place I would never have considered taking a gun. This larger bag generally lived in my car. One good reason I always locked it.

“Of course. What’s the point of having a gun if it’s not real?” I shook my head. “Long story. I’ll tell you one day. And no, I’m not a cop. Now, what are we going to do with you? Where were you off to, anyway, in the middle of the night?”

“Mum ‘n’ Dad kicked me out.”

Chapter 8

“What?”

He sniffled and wiped his nose on his sleeve. I realised he was shivering; shock probably. I picked up the backpack and looked sadly at the rat cage. Two twitching balls of fur huddled in one corner; in spite of the fact the unlatched cage door, they weren’t going anywhere. Davy cradled Algernon in his hands, staring down at the small, bloodied corpse. I put my arm around his shoulders and relieved him of it. There were tissues and a couple of clean handkerchiefs in my bag, so I wrapped Algernon in those. Davy picked up the rats’ cage.

“Come on, let’s go.” I thought aloud. “*Where* can I take you?”

“Uh, to my grandad’s place, I reckon. That’s where I usually go when this happens.”

“Oh, Davy.” Poor kid. “This has happened before? Often?”

“Uh. Yeah. They’ll sober up and come off whatever they’ve been taking and cool down in a day or two. I can go to Grandad’s for the night. I was gonna walk but those two picked on me.” He stopped and regarded me seriously. “Uh, Amelia, thank you. If you hadn’t turned up, I reckon I mighta ended up like Algernon. They were really gonna lay into me. My grandfather lives up there a bit and around a few corners.” He pointed and I helped him into the car. Poor Algernon went into the boot but the backpack and cage were safe on the back seat, with my bag.

Looked like his grandfather and I were practically neighbours. Well, maybe not that close; Davy’s idea of ‘up there a bit and around a few corners’ was a couple

of kilometres. He'd been going to walk there, alone and in the middle of the night. Ten minutes later I pulled up in front of an old style house in well-established suburb. His grandad was clearly well off.

He was also not home. Davy's face fell at the sight of the empty carport and he opened a side gate.

"I s'pose I can sleep in the shed. The house is locked. I dunno where he is."

I sighed. It was unlikely he was simply *out* somewhere; more like he was *away* somewhere. It was to be hoped no over-zealous neighbour was ringing the police to report suspicious movement. It was that sort of neighbourhood; full of retirees and busybodies who watched out for each other twenty-four hours a day.

"Ah – I have a spare room. If that's all right with you. Or I can take you to a hostel. Unless you want me to take you back home."

"Home?" he echoed. "No. No way. I don't ever want to go back there."

"All right." I made a mental note of his grandfather's address and drove to my house. It wasn't far, only a couple of kilometres and in a slightly less affluent suburb. As I drove I sniffed. The atmosphere in my car was definitely on the nose. I wound the window down.

"Davy ...why did your parents kick you out?" I hesitated. "I can smell marijuana on your clothes – are you on anything?"

"No!" His voice was horrified, even angry. "Not me – *them!* Truly. I hate drugs. I won't ever use them, or drink, or smoke. Never!" There was no doubting his sincerity and I winced.

"Sorry."

"Um, Amelia ... you smell of pot, too, y'know."

"Ah ... yes." I grimaced. "I've been to a nightclub."

"You're kidding? Hey, that's cool. My grandad sometimes hangs out at the pub, but he doesn't go night-clubbing."

"I do *not* go night-clubbing," I said, a trifle primly. "I had to meet someone there."

He gave a sound between a sniff and a laugh. I was glad he was amused; I could see nothing funny in the situation. At least I'd managed to distract him. I did need to pay his parents a visit. Definitely armed. Probably his grandfather as well. I'd known Davy for several months now; it was about time. In spite of his teasing suggestion after his birthday, he hadn't yet got round to introducing us.

"So, is your grandfather your mother's father or your dad's?" I was being a busybody; I'm like that. I knew he was a widower.

“He’s Mum’s dad. My dad’s parents live over in the Eastern States somewhere. Queensland, I think. I don’t know them.”

“And ... what does *he* think when your parents throw you out and you go to his place?” I turned to him as I pulled up in my garage. “Has this happened a *lot* of times?”

He put his head down and mumbled. “Yeah, lotsa times. Grandad wants me to go ‘n’ live with him. But Mum says if I do – well, she’ll –” He broke off and I decided not to persist; he seemed close to tears again.

Chapter 9

Inside my house, Davy looked horrified.

“You have a *cat!*”

I shrugged. From his tone, I decided, he might have been less shocked to discover I trafficked in the white slave trade or was madam at a brothel.

“If you can call it that.” I crossed and picked up the fluffy creature from the chair.

“What about the rats?”

“Relax. This is Lennie. He’s a Rag Doll and probably more scared of them than they need to be of him.”

“A Rag Doll? What the hell’s that? What does it do?”

I grinned. “Absolutely bugger all. He sleeps nearly all day. Your rats would be perfectly safe right next to him.”

“Hmm.” Davy looked unconvinced. “I’m not going to try it. You got a nice house, Amelia.”

“Yep. You want a cool drink or something hot?”

“Coke?”

“In the fridge.” I pointed. “Are you hungry?”

“Um ... yes. Starving.”

“Hmm.” I considered. “When was the last time you had a meal? I mean a proper meal, not take-away crap like all young people seem to think is food nowadays.”

He shook his head. “Lunchtime, I think.” On cue, his stomach rumbled and I raised my eyebrows.

“At least. See what else is in the fridge.” I’m a reasonable cook; there’s generally something there, even if it’s only leftovers. Hovering between amusement and concern, I watched as he found ham and cheese and bread.

“Can I make toasted sandwiches? You got a sandwich maker?”

“In the cupboard. Help yourself. I’m going to feed the cat.” Half way to the door, I swung around. “Put the kettle on and I’ll have a coffee when I come back.”

I lured Lennie out to the laundry by waving food in front of his face, whereupon he came awake for a short time. He polished off a saucer of milk, stretched, sauntered to his sand tray and turned to me as if to say ‘Well, you going to watch me do *this*, too?’ I took the hint and went back to see how Davy was coping.

He stood by the kitchen bench, devouring a toasted sandwich. There weren’t even crumbs left on the plate. He made me a cup of coffee, too, bless him! I blinked and tasted it. Black and three sugars. Perfect. Just the way I liked it. He’d obviously been watching at the coffee shop.

“Thank you.” I smiled. He shrugged.

“I make coffee for Mum all the time. When she –” His face puckered and he rubbed dismissively at it. “Well, when she’s sober. And not on anything.”

“Tomorrow, you’ll need to get in touch with your grandfather. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“I’m not sure. He usually lets me know if he’s going out to the farm, but he could be there. He might be home tomorrow. I dunno.”

“Farm? Your grandad’s a farmer?” That didn’t fit with the posh house in the prosperous suburb. Or did it?

Davy shook his head. “Nah. Not exactly. My nana’s family owned a big farm. Way out Woop Woop. Grandad and her brothers inherited it. *They* all still run it. Grandad never was a farmer. But every now and then, he goes off over there for the weekend.” His voice dropped. “My grandmother lived out there till after they got married. I think he likes being close to where she was born.”

I put my head on one side and regarded him speculatively.

“That’s very ... interesting.” Intuitive of him, I thought. “Um, if you get on so badly with your parents –” *And, I thought, if they’re druggies, like they sound.* “– why don’t you go live with him, all the time? That might be a good idea, don’t you think?”

Davy nodded sadly. “I’d like that. He would, too, I know. We talked about it once or twice. But Mum says if Grandad ever tries to take me away from her, she’ll go to the police and swear he... you know... when she was little.” He blushed.

I stared. Poor kid... what a family background.

“*Did* he?”

Davy was shocked at my question. “Oh god, no! Never. He wouldn’t. He *didn’t*. But she reckons she’d say it. So I couldn’t live with him.” He looked cynical. “She gets Centrelink payments for me. ‘Cos I’m a student and living at home.”

“All right.” None of my business, I told myself. I shouldn’t be such a busybody. “Come and I’ll show you where you can sleep.” I frowned. “Y’know, you ought to give your mum a call. She might have... reconsidered matters. She could be worried about you.” I remembered what the librarian had told me. “Ah, there *is* a phone at your place, isn’t there?”

“Yeah.” He pulled a face. “The phone got cut off, but, ah, some – friends of theirs lent them money t’get a mobile. She won’t be worried about me. She won’t *care*.”

I persisted. “No. if you were at your grandad’s place it might be different. But she doesn’t know me or anything about me.” I pointed to the phone in the corner. “Ring her up and let her know you’re okay.”

Clearly, he didn’t want to, but I stood over him as he dialled. Of course, all he got was an answering service. He rolled his eyes at me and left a quick message.

“I’m okay, Mum.” *As if you care*, his expression indicated. “Grandad wasn’t home and I’m at Mrs Ross’s place. I’ll ring you up tomorrow.” He hung up and gave me a pained look. “All right?”

The spare room was clean, if bare. I have no relatives and few friends I’d invite to stay overnight. Predictably, there were cat hairs on the bedspread but Davy didn’t seem fazed by them. I pointed to a door. “You have your own bathroom. Good night.” I hesitated. “Um, there’s a key. Just in case you want to lock yourself in.”

“A key?” he blinked. “Whatever for?”

“For all you know, I could be a paedophile or an axe murderer. You don’t know me, okay. If you’d feel safer with the door locked on your side, it’s fine by me.”

He laughed. “Hey, that’s funny.” He tilted his head at me. “So *are* you?”

I pretended to consider. “Nah, I certainly don’t have a taste for young boys. And being an axe murderer would be messy.” I chuckled as I left him there with his bag and the rats’ cage.

The rats! Damn, I’d forgotten about Algernon. The sad little corpse was still wrapped in a handkerchief and in my car. I went outside and rescued it, wondering how the hell to dispose of it. My first inclination was to dump it in the rubbish bin, but I had a feeling Davy would balk at that.

I compromised by putting it into a cardboard box on the back verandah. We could decide in the morning. As I was about to come back inside Davy came to the door of his room and called me.

“Amelia? Um ... I – think we left Algernon in your car. I’d better –“

“It’s all right,” I said. “I brought it – him – in and – um, on the back verandah.”

He chewed on a thumbnail. "I'd better ... in the morning, when I go to Grandad's place... He'll let me bury Algernon in his backyard." He forced a smile. "He liked my rats. He's read *Flowers for Algernon*, too."

Oh, maybe I would like his grandfather after all.

Unbidden and unwelcome, the thought came to me; if things had been different, by this time I also could have had a grandchild, maybe a boy like Davy. I would have liked that. It wasn't the way my life had gone. Too late now.

"Goodnight then. We'll take care of things in the morning." I sighed. "You can bury Algernon in my garden if you want. There's plenty of room."

"Yeah. G'night, Amelia. And – thank you."

I nodded and headed for my room. In the bathroom, I stripped off my clothes and wrinkled my nose as I did. Definitely for the laundry basket. I stepped under the shower and relaxed under the hot spray. It washed away an infinity of things.

Lennie wandered in and settled himself comfortably on my bed. I don't think he'd even noticed either Davy or the rats. He was a pretty cat, but not over-endowed with brains, until it came to the matters of food and comfort. In those areas, his genius shone brightly.

I was surprised I couldn't sleep when I got to bed. In spite of Lennie, warm and comfortable, at my feet, and my fatigue, I tossed and turned.

Eventually, I gave up. Having Davy in the house had triggered off old and painful memories. I chose seldom to visit them, but this time I didn't fight. Instead, I lay back and let myself remember...

Chapter 10

It hurt, oh dear god, it *hurt!* No one had told me having a baby would be so painful. My body was being ripped apart and I felt like I was drowning in my own blood and urine and shit. How could anyone willingly go through this experience more than once?

I screamed and cried and swore. Every foul word I could remember ... I'm damn sure I extended the education of the nun who was holding my hand. She didn't seem shocked, never reprimanded me as I endured the torture of giving birth.

And for what? In the end, nothing. Pale and weak and exhausted, I lay there and listened to the doctor's words. I could make no sense of them. What he was saying was unbelievable.

Stillborn? What did he mean? How could he say something like that? After the agony I had endured. How *dared* he tell me that? My child was going to be strong and handsome. With Hermann and me as parents, how could our baby be any different?

Oh, yeah? Murmured a nasty voice from deep inside me. *What about the drugs? The pot, the pills, the heroin? Did you really think they wouldn't affect the poor helpless little human inside you?*

I wept. No, please, no! My baby must be all right. It's got to be someone else's baby who died. Not mine. No!

But it was so. My baby was dead. Dead before she was even able to take one breath of life.

I had killed her. I, and Hermann.

But *he* was dead.

I might as well be dead, too. I had nothing to live for. I had stuffed my life up. Might as well let go ...

"No." The voice was female, calm, and definite. "You will not die. You will *not*. You hear me, you will live."

"What *for*?" I demanded. "What *is* there for me to live for?"

"For a second chance." The voice was low and calm and reassuring. "You might well have stuffed things up, child, but it doesn't mean your future is stuffed up. *Live*, and do great things to recompense for what you've done wrong so far."

I turned my head and stared at her, this black and white robed nun who sat beside me, her eyes fixed on my face. There was compassion without condemnation in her face. I laughed derisively. What the hell would she know?

"Great things? You're joking."

"Not at all. You have a life to live. Get well, and then go and live it." Her voice softened. "I am sorry about the baby. I will pray for her soul." She stood and looked down at me, her gaze direct and steady. "Would you like to hold her? Before she is taken away?"

I couldn't find the words. Tears streamed down my face, but I nodded and she went away. When she returned, she carried a small, still bundle wrapped in a soft pink shawl.

I stroked my dead daughter's cold face and swore the bastards who had caused this would pay. And they did. Believe me, they *paid*.

Chapter 11

When I awoke it was light and the house was silent, except for Lennie mrow-ing in my ear to tell me he was starving. I got up and fed him, and noted as I passed Davy's room it wasn't as silent as I'd thought. That boy snored something awful. He'd left the door ajar.

I dressed and went out, after leaving a note where he'd be sure to find it, stuck on the front of the fridge. A couple of hours later I got home to find him sprawled on the living room floor, the TV playing *Rage* at full volume and Lennie washing his whiskers after having obviously shared Davy's breakfast bacon. Both looked up at me. I was impressed I didn't have to ask him to turn the TV off; he did it almost automatically. Maybe his parents had their many faults, but for a teenage boy he seemed well housetrained.

"Hi, Amelia! Shall I make you a cup of coffee?"

"Oh, yes, please." I sank into my favourite armchair and kicked my shoes across the room.

"I found the note, thanks. I made some brekkie, hope you don't mind. Um ... where have you been? Lennie was hungry, so I gave him a bit of bacon –"

"He conned you. That cat might look brainless, but he's smarter than any other cat I've ever owned. When it comes to food, anyway."

"Oh, right. Anyway, he won't starve now. Neither will I. D'you want me to make you toast or anything else?"

I looked at him and smiled. "Hmm. You know, I could get used to having a servant. Thanks, coffee will be fine. I had something to eat earlier on. "

"So, where have you been?" he asked again.

"To church."

"Huh?"

"Church. You know –" I mimed praying, placing my hands together and looking skywards.

"Go on. Seriously?"

"I've been to church. I always go to church on Sundays."

"You believe in God and all that stuff? Really? No kidding?"

"Some of it." Truth be told, my religious beliefs are selective. I go to the church I do for two reasons; it's the closest to my house, and people don't hassle me to join anything. I don't think they even know my name there. Suits me.

"Okay." He handed me the coffee and returned to the floor, where Lennie was busy cleaning the plate for him. "You didn't take the car."

"I walk. It's a kilometre or so down the road, and it's a beautiful morning. Speaking of which – you'd better see if you can get in touch with your mum again, and maybe your grandad."

For the first time, Davy appeared sullen. "I don't wanna go home. I've had enough of them kicking me out all the time. I'll ring Grandad first and see if I can move in with him."

“There’s the phone. But you ring home first.” I put on my best schoolteacher voice and fixed him with a cold stare. “Whether you think so or not, that’s the right thing to do. Let her know you’re okay before you do anything else.” I pointed and he shrugged and complied, without enthusiasm.

His mother was in a foul mood. I could hear her shrill voice from the other side of the room.

“You, you little bastard! Come round and get your stuff! It’ll all be waitin’ for you. Go and fucking well stay with your grandad if that’s what you want. I don’t want you back here. Now piss off!”

He dropped the phone. His mouth quivered and I shook my head.

“I’m sorry. But you had to do that first. Calm down, and ring your grandfather.”

I hope *he’s* more family minded, I thought as I drained the coffee and went outside for a cigarette. Not to mention to hide my rage at Mandy Gordon’s words. Bitch! Poor Davy. Which reminded me; we’d better do something about Algernon’s stiff little body, and soon, before it started getting on the nose. I finished the cigarette, looked around my garden for a convenient spot and fetched a trowel from the shed.

When I came back inside, Davy was standing at the phone, frowning.

“He’s not home yet. I got the answering machine again and I left him a message this time. I asked him to ring here when he got home. It was okay, wasn’t it, to use your number?” he asked me.

“Yes, for sure. Doesn’t he have a mobile?”

He shrugged. “Costs more to ring a mobile, y’know.”

I laughed. “Your mum’s got a mobile, too, hasn’t she? You rang her. I can afford it, you know. Go on, try his mobile number. After that, we’ll go round and collect your belongings from your place.”

“And – Algernon?”

I nodded. “If you want, we can bury him here in my garden. Unless you want to take him somewhere else.”

Davy nodded. “Thank you. I’ll pay you for the phone calls.” Before I could do or say anything else, he came forwards and hugged me, his head against my shoulder.

It wasn’t exactly the first time in my life I’d been hugged, but it stirred up again the emotions I’d experienced the previous night, remembering events of many years ago. Again, I thought; if my life had been vastly different, I might have even been on the receiving end of a hug from a grandchild of my own. That however was never to be. The sensation of tears pricking behind my eyes was something I refused to acknowledge. I don’t cry. Ever.

I smiled and shook my head. "Go and ring him up. Now. And you don't need to pay for the calls."

"Kay."

That was a wasted effort; the mobile was turned off. We gave up. Outside, I gave Davy the trowel, imagining he'd prefer to do the job himself, and showed him a quiet spot under a lemon tree. I left him to it. Burying bodies, even small ones, is not my thing at all.

Chapter 12

It was after midday before we got to his parents' place. After Davy buried Algernon he had a shower while I sat outside and smoked and drank coffee. I reflected ruefully, if I'd taken a different route home the previous night I'd now be enjoying a leisurely Sunday and feeling satisfied with myself and life in general.

I hadn't, and that was that. We had lunch and fed the rats. I declined to feed Lennie, who looked miffed but wandered off for his afternoon nap. Lucky him. We had a visit to pay. I didn't anticipate it being pleasant, and I was right.

The house was a dump. It had no front fence, rusty car bodies littered the yard and the garden resembled a jungle.

At the kerb stood a shiny red BMW. Obviously it didn't belong to Davy's parents. He caught his breath at the sight of the car. I parked carefully on the opposite side of the road.

"Damn! I hate that bloody man."

"Who?" I asked but he shook his head, all sullen and tight-lipped. Then he saw the stuff on the verge.

Right at the front, almost on the roadway, were several green garbage bags and a cardboard box. White-faced, he leapt out of the car and rushed across to the bags. I followed more slowly and he swung round to me with tears in his eyes. His new skateboard, paid for by the birthday money from his grandfather, had been smashed – with an axe, by the look of it – and dumped on top of the box. Clothes and books spilled from the bags onto the pavement.

"Go and put all this in the car." I headed for the front door. At my none-too-gentle knocking it opened and an unshaven face stared out at me blearily.

"Yeah? Whaddaya want?"

I had to step backwards. The stench from within was overwhelming. Decaying food, body odour, marijuana and cigarette smoke, alcohol and god alone knows what else. Oh yes, I'm a smoker, but I can still smell the stink of filthy unemptied ashtrays.

"Where's Mandy Gordon?"

“Who wants to know?” A second man came to the door. He was taller, better dressed and didn’t stink. I distrusted him on sight. Slimy, I think, is the word. I’d seen him somewhere else before.

“Where – is – she?” I snarled.

“She’s out. You brought the brat around, didya, to get his gear? Good, take it an’ piss off.” This came from Davy’s father, boosted by his back up. Some male role model, I thought sourly. However his grandfather turned out, I was becoming more certain Davy would be better off with him. I looked past them into the room, where another man stood at his ease near the opposite door. He was puffing on a cigar and seemed to be unaffected by the general disorder. Toby Kendall.

I wasn’t sure whether Kendall had looked in my direction. I was in both his restaurant and nightclub often enough for him to recognise me and to wonder what connection I might have with the Gordon family. I also wondered what connection *he* might have with them. Nothing good came to mind. For the moment, getting out of there, preferably unnoticed by him, seemed like my best tactic.

I swung around and caught Davy as he came up the path. He protested as I grabbed his arm and started back towards the car.

“Let’s go. Now.”

“Ouch!” He yelped and tried to pull free but I tightened my grip. “Hey, you’re hurting me.” We reached the car and I opened his door and pushed him in. When I got in I slammed my door and sat for a moment, simmering.

“Amelia, what *is* it?” Davy rubbed his arm and I shook my head.

“Just... let’s get out of here. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

“O-kay,” he said slowly. “Um, d’you know that man, too?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t prepared to say any more and we drove back to my house in silence. When I pulled up in the driveway I stopped the car and turned to him. When I put my hand out to touch his shoulder he flinched. That hurt. “Davy – there are lots of not very nice people in this world. He’s one, and I’m afraid I’m another. But –” I shook my head. “I don’t do the sort of things he does. I couldn’t.”

“You’re a bad person? You? Nah. No way.”

I sighed. “One day, I will have to tell you all about me.” Well, certainly not all, but maybe some. Strictly edited. “And you can make up your own mind. Now, let’s go ring up your grandfather. I hope he’ll answer this time.”

I sat outside with Lennie on my lap and a cup of coffee by my hand. This time the call was successful, and I could hear his side of the conversation. Sitting by the open window as I was, I could hardly avoid it.

“Grandad? ... Yes... Um, no... they threw me out... no... Amelia Ross, I told you about her. She’s... yeah, okay...” He gave my address, hung up and came outside to me.

“He’s been down south for the weekend. Still there, actually. Went to stay with friends and they all went to a concert. He’s gonna leave soon. I gave him your address and he’ll come and pick me up after he gets home, should be about six or seven o’clock, he said. Is that okay with you?” He tipped his head at me and I nodded.

“Yeah, that’s fine. Can you stay with him – permanently now?”

“He said he’s gonna go see my Mum and Dad and get everything sorted out with them. I don’t want to go back there. No way.”

Deciding activity would be good for us, I stood up.

“Good. Now, if you want to bring in those bags of clothes and things, I’m sure we can get them washed and sorted out and maybe repacked, if you want. I’ve got some better bags and boxes.” Inwardly I damned Mandy Gordon for her attitude and carelessness. I would be buying a new skateboard for Davy. I owed him. There was a bruise on his arm and *I* had put it there. Not a good feeling at all.

Sometimes I don’t like myself and this was one of those times. I considered all the responses I could have – *should have* – made to Ryan Gordon and to Kendall’s off-sider. Instead I had scuttled off like a frightened rabbit. Huh! Even worse, I had hurt Davy. Really, I wasn’t always the person I’d like to be. I suppose I never had been. This introspection wasn’t going to help things.

“Thanks, Amelia. I – oh, shit! Thank you!” He hurried towards the car, brushing at his face as he did, and I headed for the laundry.

I wondered about his grandfather. Down south, for a concert? Well, maybe. I would have to find out more about this man.

We spent the rest of the afternoon doing several loads of washing, a small amount of mending and packing. Davy transferred his pitifully few belongings into the cardboard cartons I managed to find in my shed. He rubbed his face as he hefted the wrecked skateboard. Then he walked across and threw it into my wheelie bin.

It was dark by the time his grandfather arrived. The day had been stressful enough already, so we said brief hellos and they carried the boxes out to his car. Davy gave me a quick hug and they left.

Suddenly my house seemed empty and quiet. I put on a music CD; some soothing Mozart was what I needed. I poured a strong drink, settled down with a cigarette and tried to relax. It was no longer my problem. I had no doubt his life would improve with his mother’s father; I hadn’t looked at him closely but his manner was one of quiet efficiency. Davy had been confident and comfortable going off with him.

I frowned as I remembered Toby Kendall had been at the Gordons' house and I wondered why. As I had said, he was not a nice person at all. I knew enough about him to be concerned; only Davy's reaction when he saw the car reassured me he would be on his guard.

Toby Kendall, as I knew, was up to his eyeballs in the drug trade. I wondered if there was any connection also between Kendall and Davy's grandfather. I hoped not. I also wondered where exactly he had been; his explanation of being 'down south for a concert and staying with friends' was nebulous enough to tickle my curiosity.

I'd find out, soon enough. And then ...

Chapter 13

"Who the hell was that?" Kendall demanded of Ryan Gordon, as he smirked and threw himself onto a sofa.

"What?"

"That woman? And the kid?"

"Ah, shit, that was m'son. Davy. We got fed up with him last night and told him t'piss off. He stayed with the old bird. Reckons he's gonna go and stay with his grandad. Good riddance, I say. Mandy don't care."

"Hmm." Kendall frowned. "Seen her before, but I can't remember where. What about you, Ray?"

The other man shrugged. "Coulda been at the club ... yeah, maybe... I dunno."

"Bloody lotta use you are, mate. Don't s'pose you even remember who was around there at the club, last night, before Zookie went off home."

Zookie had never reached home. The fuzz had been around to see Kendall early, when the stiffening body was found. He hadn't died easily, either. Whoever did that, was gonna pay. Just needed that geek Miles to start earning his keep and track the murderer down. *No one* killed off Toby Kendall's mates and lived to talk of it. He gritted his teeth.

"Useless, the lotta ya. You and your dipso wife had better come up with some money soon, mate. You owe me, and I'm keepin' count."

"Yeah. Right." Ryan squirmed. "We'll get it, somehow, Toby –"

"Don't you bloody 'Toby' me, you bastard!" Kendall stepped forward and jerked Ryan from his seat and shook him. "You owe me – and I want it. Soon!" He glared. "I'll be back. You get my money or –" He drew his finger across his throat and Ryan shuddered.

“Okay, okay, okay. We’ll pay ya. Just –”

“Don’t slip up.” Kendall stalked out and his off-sider scuttled after him. At the BMW he held out his hand. “Gimme the keys, Ray. I’ll drive.”

Chapter 14

Amelia

Davy rang me during the week. He sounded happy and relaxed. Things were going well, he told me. His grandfather had visited Mandy and Ryan and they had all come to an agreement. He could stay with his grandfather for as long as he wanted. It would be unofficial; they could continue to receive the Centrelink payments for him and remain technically his guardians.

I could hear the satisfaction in his voice as he told me his grandfather had also warned them at the first sign of trouble from them he would take steps to acquire full and legal custody of Davy.

And – would I please come along and have dinner with them one night during the week? It would, he assured me, be more than a takeaway meal; his grandfather could cook. I was pleased to accept the invitation.

Davy was grinning from ear to ear. Like a puppy, I decided. He was clearly devoted to his grandfather and delighted at finally bringing the two of us together, the circumstances notwithstanding. He was an incurable romantic.

On a closer observation of Joshua Taylor, I felt a sudden prickle of misgiving. Our evening encounter the previous week had been brief. His attention was more devoted to his grandson than to me at that time. If I had two heads he might have noticed. Maybe. We’d exchanged names, shook hands and that was that.

He wasn’t a tall man; nevertheless, he topped me by several inches. His hair was dark blond and shaggy; probably overdue for a haircut. It was clean, and touched with grey. Like my own would be, if I didn’t colour it meticulously, I decided. He smiled back at me, and his pale eyes flicked from me to Davy and back.

“Pleased to meet you, Amelia. Well, to meet you properly. Davy’s talked a lot about you.” He tilted his head at me, considering. “Y’know, I get this feeling we’ve met, but I can’t remember where or when. Have we? Apart from the other night, when I picked him up. That hardly counts as a meeting.”

“I don’t think so. He said you used to be a teacher, too. We could have been at some inter school function one time. But no, I don’t remember your face, sorry.”

“Hmm.” He tugged at his ear. “I’ll remember, later. Come and have a drink anyway, and something to eat.”

“Thank you.” I frowned as I accompanied them into the other room.

Over the meal, I asked him about his weekend trip.

“Ah, nothing exciting, I’m afraid.” He shrugged. “I’ve got friends who have a winery down past Margaret River, and sometimes I go stay with them.”

“Nice area, that,” I observed. “Davy said something about you going to a concert down there?”

“Yeah. It was pretty good.” He offered me another glass of wine and changed the subject. I wondered about the truth of his story. Not any of my business but I was always curious about other people. One of my failings.

Davy and I met a couple of days later at the library and over coffee afterwards, I grilled him. He had settled in well with Joshua and they had been shopping for a computer. He would need to teach his grandfather how to use it, he told me. Oldies often found such high tech stuff daunting and Josh was a prime example of this. He barely knew how to use his mobile phone.

(I have a computer and have used one for years. I doubted my ability equalled Davy’s, but I was certain it would exceed Joshua’s.)

Davy told me a lot about his grandfather; one of his favourite topics, I discovered. I was shameless at asking, digging and probing. Besides, I was sure the more I knew about Joshua Taylor, the sooner I’d remember where and when we’d met. We *had* met; I was sure of that. I also suspected the memory wasn’t a good one.

“He’s negotiating to sell his share in the old farm,” Davy told me, making no attempt to conceal his delight. With the proceeds, it seemed, Joshua planned to invest in a south-west winery. Davy relished the idea; down south attracted him more than way out in the middle of nowhere, as he viewed the wheat belt area where his grandmother and her family had lived.

He had vague memories of a plump grey haired woman who smelt of soap and flowers, and who laughed a lot.

Before Davy started primary school she died suddenly. I got the impression from him that Joshua was more distressed at the time than Mandy.

“I don’t like it much out there. It’s bloody freezing in winter, and all they talk about is the weather, and the price of wheat. Bo-oring!” He brightened. “Growing grapes and making wine sounds heaps more interesting.”

“It does indeed.” I’m partial to a nice red myself.

I was pleased and relieved to get this information. The connection between Davy’s parents and Toby Kendall had been niggling at me. I didn’t like the possibility of a similar connection between Joshua Taylor and Kendall. His mysterious absence the night Davy had been thrown out had worried me; my mind was set at ease by this information.

Josh Taylor still remained familiar.

Somewhere, sometime – probably a very long time ago – I had heard his name and seen his face. It niggled at me for several days, as I tried to remember. I'm over sixty and have such a lot of memories tucked away inside my skull. I knew it wasn't anything good, but I also knew there was nothing to be done except to wait until it came to me. During the days I did nothing out of the ordinary, and at nights I decided to let my subconscious sift through it all.

For three nights, I slept and dreamed much the same as I always did; mildly adventurous dreams peopled with characters from the books I read and the films I saw. Nothing exciting or dramatic or even – sadly – erotic. The fourth night I patted the bed and Lennie curled up beside me, as usual.

At 3 a.m., I woke and sat bolt upright in the bed.

“Oh, shit!”

Oh yes, I remembered him now, knew where and when we had met. I had been right; it was *not* a good memory. For both our sakes I hoped his memory was not as good as mine. I let my mind go back, over thirty-five years. More than that. I mentally calculated. Forty-two years. Back to 1963. We had been much younger. The world had been a different place. We had been different people.

I sat and shook my head gravely, as I recalled a city in Germany.

Night, and a killing in a dark alley.

And a witness.

Chapter 15

I didn't sleep for the rest of the night. I sat with my memories ... and my unwanted fears. By morning I had considered and rejected a number of actions.

Flight. For everyone's sake. It would be comparatively simple; I kept a current passport and plenty of available cash. I could sell my house and be on the other side of the world before anything or anyone caught up with me.

Running away, a small voice inside taunted me. I didn't like the idea I was being a coward.

Do nothing. Deny everything if he tackled me.

Maybe a long holiday, far away. Yes, *that* sounded like a good idea.

With luck, Josh's memory wouldn't be as strong as mine. After all, it hadn't been a pleasant encounter for him, either. It had been a long time ago; we had changed over the years. Maybe he wouldn't remember anything. No, I had seen the determination in his face. He would work hard at dredging up the memory.

What would happen then, I wondered.

Several days passed. I made no plans and did nothing out of the ordinary. Time would tell. Of course, it did.

I was in the garden; it always needed attention to prevent it from deteriorating totally into a jungle. I'm a terrible gardener. I like it to look good and I don't mind the physical effort needed. It's the *time* I resent spending. Often I wish I had a clone to do the gardening – and oh yes, the housework, definitely – so I could read and relax. I could have quite happily become a research worker. Sitting with books, documents or computers all day would be just my cup of tea. Maybe a wealthy wife. Or widow.

Instead of what I was. That would have been better for a lot of people.

I was attacking the weeds when I heard the gate open and close.

“Hello, Amelia.” He wasn't smiling. *Oh, oh.*

“Joshua.” I stood up slowly and rubbed the dirt from my gloves, pulled them off and nodded towards the garden seat. “Sit down?”

“Maybe inside?” he suggested but I shook my head.

“No. I like it out here.”

He remained standing until I pointed to the other end of the seat.

“I will get a crick in my neck if I have to look up at you. Sit down, for heaven's sake.”

“Davy knows I've come to see you. He doesn't know why.”

Davy was a safe topic, I decided. He hadn't yet said why he had come; it could be anything. Just because I had remembered him, I had no reason to assume he also had remembered. Maybe, he never would. Or, at least, I would be long gone before that happened.

Oh, hell, who did I think I was I deceiving? I knew why he was there, the minute he came in my gate.

“He's a credit to – well, I suppose to you more than to his parents. They don't seem to have had much idea how to handle a kid. He thinks you're wonderful.”

“Yes.” He sighed and regarded me thoughtfully. “He thinks *you*'re wonderful, too, Amelia.”

I laughed, but felt more like crying. “We – became good friends. I'm not sure how he sees me. Maybe as a surrogate grandmother. Or an aunt.” I shrugged. “I'm going to miss him.”

“Miss him? Why?” Joshua raised an eyebrow. “Are you thinking of going somewhere, perhaps? Running away?”

Oh, damn, he *had* remembered. Unfortunate, for us both. I shook my head.

“I’m thinking of going travelling.”

“I don’t think so. *I* think you’re running away.”

“Why do you say that?”

“I remember you now. I know who and what you are and what happened when we last met.”

“Are you sure?”

“Oh, yes.”

“I wish you hadn’t.”

“Yeah, me too. I liked you – my grandson likes you.” He made a disparaging sound. “At least, I like you now. Not what you were when we met.”

“I’m not that person anymore.”

“I bloody well hope not,” he said. “I don’t think I could have come here if I thought you were.” He looked around. “I said you’d be running away if you left now, even if it was just for a holiday. Funny, really, when you think of it. *I*’m the one who should be running.”

Chapter 16

1963 Joshua

Waking up sick and hung over was bad enough, Josh Taylor decided. Waking up that way and knowing he’d been mugged because of his condition was worse. Knowing it was his own fault made the situation even worse. Nothing, he imagined, would make it better.

Damnit, he hadn’t even been *enjoying* the drinking. It had been a wake; certainly no kind of celebration. The previous day and on the other side of the world an American President had been assassinated; shot as he sat beside his wife in an open car in his own country.

Kennedy had deserved better than that, Josh thought. The *world* had deserved better than that. He and his friends had drunk to the memory of the man in every hotel and bar in the city – or so it had felt – but he carelessly allowed himself to become separated from them.

He staggered off in what he thought was the direction of his shabby hotel. Somewhere along the way he took not one but a whole series of wrong turns and ended up slumped against an alley wall trying to clear his head. Even better, to find a place to lay his head.

Matters did not improve when the gang of street youths jumped him. He wasn't expecting the attack and was far from capable of defending himself. Again, he realised, his own fault for allowing himself to get into such a situation.

They were frustrated more than vicious. Their victim carried little money, no valuables and no identification. His passport and collection of traveller's cheques lay in a bank deposit box where he had left them. That, he decided, was his only smart move since his arrival in the city on the last leg of his holiday on the continent.

He'd been in England, working on and off and generally bumming his way around, intending to return home soon. He had left university with a degree in science and was planning to take the course to enable him to teach at high school. The trip across to Europe had been enjoyable and uneventful until that night.

Now he lay slumped in the alleyway in what was turning out to be a most unfriendly city.

As he considered attempting to rise to his feet, he heard the sounds of a couple entering the alleyway. Assuming their intent to be romantic, he slumped against the wall and remained quiet, intending to wait for them to leave or pass. Half way down the alley and not ten feet from his position, the couple stopped. Their voices were low and unintelligible to him. His school-learnt German had proved inadequate for more than the most basic purposes.

He blinked, realising something else about the voices. One was frightened, almost pleading, and the other was full of threat. Josh assumed the male to be the aggressor and was about to make his presence known and rush – or more likely stagger – to the defence of the woman when he discovered he was wrong.

Very wrong, as he realised, when she, snapping out a final word, stepped away from the other and he saw metal glinting in the moonlight. There was a low, unidentifiable sound and the man staggered and collapsed. Josh let out an instinctive cry of shock and froze in horror at the woman's sudden sharp voice.

“Wer ist es? Kommen Sie aus, schnell, schnell!”

He half scrambled to his feet, holding his hands out in front of him placatingly while he searched for words, at the same time afraid they could well be his last.

“Ah...ich...ich bin...ah...oh damn! How the hell d'you say – harmless?”

“Englander!” Her voice was slightly accented, and sounded angry as she switched to English. “Who are you? What are you doing here?” She stepped forwards and he stared, mesmerised, as she raised a small gun, ugly with the bulk of a silencer attached to it and pointed it at him. “And how long have you been there?”

“Ah – too long, I think.” He put his hands to his head and leaned back against the wall. He felt weak at the knees and terrified and at the same time was derisive of himself for being frightened of a woman. A woman with a gun. That made all the difference. “I was – sick –”

She sniffed. “Drunk, I think, is more like it.” There was a tone of asperity in her voice and he winced at both it and the pain in his head.

“I – suppose so. I took a wrong turn and ended up here. And then some street kids mugged me.” He shrugged deprecatingly. At least she hadn’t shot him out of hand. Yet. Maybe if he could keep talking and get her talking and distracted he could get close enough to her to snatch the weapon. “I didn’t have as much money as they thought, so they just hit me a couple of times and left me here. I was – about to leave when you two arrived. Then –”

“So you saw and heard it all.” She gave a tight little smile. “You do not speak German, do you?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not enough anyway to understand what you were both going on about.” He attempted a weak smile. “It sounded like an argument.”

“Well. I cannot leave you here, that is obvious. You are a stupid tourist who has blundered into something none of his business, but I do not wish to have to kill you because of that, do you understand?”

“What –”

“You will come with me. Now.” She gestured with the gun. “Quietly, and properly, as if we were friends, because there are many people on the streets where we will be walking. You will not attempt to attract attention in any way. Is that clear?”

“Yes, but –”

“But what?” she demanded. “Is it not enough for you; that you will live?”

“What about – him?” he asked weakly, pointing to the body sprawled at their feet and she shrugged.

“He is not going anywhere, is he now? Shut up and come with me. And remember to act normally.”

He cast a final glance at the dead man before she took his arm and hurried him away.

She walked rapidly along the streets, swearing under her breath and in German every time he paused or faltered. At least Josh presumed the vicious snarl was German. Its tone gave it away as cursing. Inside, and in spite of the situation, he almost admired her proficiency. He couldn’t have gone on as long in English. She had hooked her arm around his, and he had not forgotten the gun she carried in her pocket.

Once, she tensed at the sight of a police car crawling along the street towards them. She pulled him against her beside the wall, her arms around him. As she pressed herself against him he could feel the pistol in the small of his back, concealed from any passers-by or sharp-eyed cops. With her free hand she pulled his head down to hers and smiled at him.

“Put your arms around me and kiss me, and make it look convincing. Or else...” She let the threat lie unspoken and he sighed and pulled her to him. Another time, he thought, it might have been somewhat of a pleasure. She was comfortable in his arms, if he discounted the circumstances and her motivation for the embrace. Her mouth was warm but by no means soft and compliant. Afterwards she pulled away, her face twisting in distaste.

“Your mouth tastes disgusting.”

He was almost apologetic. “I – ah – was sick before you – arrived in that alley way.”

“Charming.” She scowled at him. “Too much to drink, of course. I *said* you were a stupid tourist.”

He didn’t have any reply to this and they walked on in silence. Finally she hustled him up the steps into a decrepit tenement block. Oddly enough, the floors inside were tidy and clean. The woman kept close behind him as they climbed several flights of wooden stairs. The place looked and felt like a firetrap, but he kept his silence, wishing to antagonise her no further.

“Here.” She held out a key to him and indicated the door where they had stopped. “Open it for me.” She caught his glance. “There is no danger. But it would be stupid for me to turn my back on you, don’t you agree? Now open it.”

Inside, he took half a dozen steps into the centre of the room and turned to her. She pushed the door shut, leaned against it and pointed.

“Through there is the bathroom. Go and tidy yourself up. You may find a clean toothbrush in the cabinet. A wash will be a great improvement. There is blood on your face. So.” Unsmilingly, she touched her own cheek.

As he started for the door, her voice caught him. “You cannot get out of there, and don’t even think of trying anything stupid when you come out. You are a foreigner and I do not wish to kill you, but if you cause me any more trouble than you have already ... well ...” She shrugged eloquently and he pulled a face and nodded. “Don’t be long about it, either. I have things to do.”

Chapter 17

When Josh put his head cautiously back into the room, she was waiting for him. She pointed to the wooden chair in the middle of the floor with one hand. The other hand held the pistol pointed at him. She wore gloves, he noticed dully. Thin ones to prevent incriminating fingerprints being left anywhere.

“Sit down.” He shrugged and obeyed, then put his hands behind him as she instructed. She caught them together with a piece of cord and tied them securely, then passed the cord around the chair back and his body a couple of times.

When she had pinioned his ankles together as well, she stepped backwards and surveyed him, as if admiring her handiwork.

“You are not going to get free from that before I leave here. Afterwards, it doesn’t matter.”

“And – where *are* you going?”

She laughed at him scornfully. “Far away from here.” She shrugged. “It doesn’t matter if you do know. Australia.”

“Australia? Why there?” There was a catch in his voice and she looked at him thoughtfully before she replied.

“It is big and empty, and there are not many people there. I am not over fond of people.”

“I would never have guessed,” he muttered under his breath and she scowled.

“You are just a stupid tourist. A silly English fool who gets drunk and blunders in where he has no business being. You are fortunate to be still alive.”

“Yeah. Well, why am I? Still alive, I mean,” he asked, lifting his gaze to hers. She shrugged.

“It is untidy to leave dead witnesses. Far better not to have any witnesses in the first place. It was just bad luck, I suppose.”

“Untidy? Yes, I suppose.” He grimaced. “Not something I know much about, anyway.”

She gave a short sound of something like amusement, sat down and lit a cigarette. “Well now, English tourist, you certainly will have something to tell your friends about when you get back home.” She paused. “So, where is home? Where do you live?”

“Uh, London. Chelsea.” He wasn’t going to enlighten her as to his nationality. If she knew he was an Aussie, she probably *would* kill him, he thought.

She grinned in derision. “Maybe I shall look you up one day.”

“Not if you are going to Australia. That’s a hell of a long way from London.”

“True.” She sat and smoked in silence, then looked at him. “Do you want a cigarette?”

He shook his head. “No. Thanks. I don’t smoke.” She nodded, almost in approval.

“Ja, it is a filthy habit. I shall give it up when I leave here.”

“Just like that?”

“But yes. Not difficult to do. I have done harder things. What’s your name?” she asked.

“Josh. Josh Taylor. What’s yours?”

She laughed, and the expression softened her face. "I really don't think that's a good idea."

"I suppose not. Tell me, um ...why did you kill him?"

"Why do you ask? Do you care?"

"Aah ...curiosity. I... just... wondered. When I heard your voices in the first place, I thought *you* might have been the one in trouble. I was about to pick myself up and come to your rescue."

"Some rescuer you would have been," she observed.

"Well, why did you do it?"

"What?"

"Why did you kill him?"

"For money. It pays well."

Josh looked horrified but she did not react. "Money?" He stared. "You do that – for money?"

"I *did* do that for money, and a great deal of it."

"Oh my god."

She didn't look much; if he had met her on the street he would not have noticed her. The fact she had held a gun pointed at him made a big difference. No more than average height, and plainly dressed, with no aim of attracting unwelcome attention, he decided. She was probably about the same age as he was, in her early twenties.

Her eyes however betrayed her as being no ordinary harmless citizen. They were a clear brown, but cold and unfriendly. She looked at him with undisguised hostility.

She stubbed the cigarette out and stood up, to walk restlessly around the room. As she walked, she fiddled with the pins in her hair. It was long and an uninteresting shade of pale brown. Mousy, he thought, was the word he'd heard used to describe the colour. She'd had it pinned in an untidy pile atop her head. She pulled one pin out, scowled at it and shoved it back almost viciously. When she caught his eyes on her she shook her head.

"I shall get it cut," she said. "Maybe I shall change the colour. Even if you ever see me again you will not recognise me."

Josh swallowed. He didn't *want* to ever see her again, but he did want to be alive. Wisely, he said nothing.

She seemed almost amused. "I shall be leaving here in a short time." He had not failed to notice the case and bag by the door, and the fact the small room was bare of personal items. She had tossed a smaller bag down onto the bed, and now

she took the gun over and put it down. He was certain however if he had been able to get free and had made the slightest of moves towards her, she would have snatched it up again in an instant. "I have a plane ticket out of here. I have a great deal of money, and shall make myself a new life entirely. I shall be a new person."

Chapter 18

Amelia 1963

"You are lucky to be still alive," I said tartly. "I shall be leaving soon, but I have to ensure my safety. I do not want you causing any sort of a commotion and setting the police on my track before I have had a chance to get out of the country. So ..." I walked about the room, crossed to the bed behind him and took up the gun again. He did not see as I unloaded it and hefted it in my hand. My voice wasn't much more than a whisper. "I am sorry about this." Before he could move, I brought it down hard on the back of his head and he slumped in the chair. Bending to him, I checked his pulse. He was still breathing, Just as well. It really would have been a big mistake to kill a stupid English tourist just because he happened by at the wrong time. If he *was* English. His accent hadn't sounded all that English, although he certainly wasn't American. That accent was familiar to me. I crossed to the bed and ripped up the pillowcase then used it to gag him.

At the door I paused to check I had left nothing behind. I had gone through the room earlier, before leaving to complete this last assignment, and had cleaned every surface in the room that would take a fingerprint. Besides, I had lived in this room for only a week. Removing all trace of my occupation was relatively easy. He, not I, had touched the doorknobs and the bathroom was bare of my prints. Finally, I wiped the gun clean and dropped it under the bed, pushing it further under with my foot. The police would find it, of course, but I had no more need of a weapon.

I looked again at Josh Taylor, slumped unconscious in the chair. About the drug pushers I had killed, I felt nothing except maybe satisfaction, but this stupid tourist was another matter. Most unwillingly, and against my will, I found myself almost liking him. It would be pleasant, I thought, to be able to sit down and talk with a man like this one. One close to my age, although I had clearly had a harder time reaching it than he. I was glad it had not been necessary to kill him.

I shook my head again, almost in regret. We would never set eyes on each other again; when he recovered he would go home to England and I would be far away in Australia. Starting a new life, wealthy and independent. I left, closing the door quietly.

I still had Marc Stahlmann to face.

"You're frowning, Amelia. What's wrong?"

I put my case down and went to the elderly man in the wheelchair.

“A witness, I’m afraid, Marc. I didn’t realise until too late. Madden’s dead, but a stupid English tourist saw what happened. He said he was English, but I do not think that was the truth. In any case –”

“You didn’t kill him?” There was a note of concern in his voice and I shook my head.

“Of course not. I left him back at the room I had. He’s all right. He will have a headache when he wakes up, though. Can you send someone to look after him –” I checked my watch. “– in, oh, about six hours? He’s probably going to need medical attention. Give him something to compensate for what happened to him. Five thousand dollars. Take it out of my payment. Can you see to that?”

Stahlmann nodded. “I’ll take care of it. You’d better go. You have a plane to catch.” His stare was intent. “Five thousand dollars is a lot of money, you know.”

“True. I think I would have liked him if we’d met some other way. I suppose I feel guilty about what happened. With him,” I added sharply. “Not Madden. *He* got what he deserved.” I bent down and put my arms around his neck. “I’ll never forget you, Marc. Thank you – for everything.”

He smiled. “Thank you. We were a good team. Now go and have a good life. You’ve earned it.”

“I – owe you. I truly do. Without your help I would be the one who was dead.” There weren’t tears in my eyes. Not really. I blinked hard.

“Amelia, one day someone might contact you about doing this sort of thing again.”

“Hmm. I’d have to think about it.” I tilted my head at him. “You’d be able to find me if you wanted me, I presume?”

“Oh yes. I have a long reach ... and a lot of money. If and when that ever happens, however, I’ll be long dead. I don’t have many years left to me. There will be others to carry on.”

The thought of his death saddened me. He had been a good friend.

“Right. How will I know whoever comes looking for me *is* from you?”

“There’ll be a word. He – or she – will use the word *renaissance*. It’ll be up to you to decide what you want to do.”

“Indeed. Goodbye.”

I walked out of his apartment and hailed a taxi.

In spite of the quarter of a million dollars in the Swiss bank account, I was determined to live an ordinary life. Marc Stahlmann’s world was behind me; I was clean and young and had a future, which, five years ago, had been unthinkable and unlikely.

I got on a plane and flew off to Australia. There I settled in well, assisted by the money in the Swiss bank account. I became another person, trained to become a teacher and lived comfortably and happily in relative obscurity. Until 1980, when I came home one afternoon to uninvited guests.

Chapter 19

Amelia 1980

They were efficient; give them that. Maybe I had simply become complacent and careless. I didn't realise I had visitors until I had come inside and shut the door behind me.

"Ms Roschka, I believe? Or do you prefer Fraulein Roschka?"

I blinked, to collect my thoughts. The older of the two men was sitting at his ease in my favourite armchair and my cat Fingers – traitorous beast! – was curled up on his lap. As I glared, he absently stroked the cat and I could hear its purr. Oddly, I felt reassured; someone who liked cats couldn't be entirely bad.

"My name," I said clearly, "is Amelia Ross."

"Oh yes, *now* it is. But it wasn't always, was it?"

I looked hard at him and across at his companion. *He* hadn't moved since I'd entered the room, but I didn't underestimate him. Careful to keep my hands in clear view and away from my body, I looked back at the man holding my cat.

"And you are?"

"Smith. Arthur Charles Smith." He held out a small card towards me. "Do sit down, Ms Ross. You and I have a lot to talk about."

"I don't think so. Not until you tell me who you are and what you want here." I was suddenly angry. "And get your gorilla to sit down or to get out of my house."

Smith chuckled but his companion's expression didn't alter. He was watching me, and for the first time in many years I felt discomfort under a man's eyes.

"Take my card, Ms Ross. Sit down and look at it."

I shrugged and took the card but I didn't sit down. "Go on. Say what you've come here to say. Then get out."

"That's not very welcoming." Smith looked at me blandly. "Speaking of friends, do you remember Marc Stahlmann?"

"What?" I blinked and looked at the card. It was a plain green business card, but plastic, not pasteboard. On the front, in black lettering, was the name Arthur C.

Smith. The only other words on the card read: 'Department 42S, Australian Government'.

"Department 42S?" I queried. "And what does Marc Stahlmann have to do with this?"

"The S is for Security," Smith explained. That, however, was all he explained. "Now, Ms Ross, we know all about you."

"Oh, I don't think so. Besides, there's nothing much to know. I am a very ordinary person." I smiled and sat down. *No one* knew all about me.

"Hmm." He leaned back and started to tick off points on his fingers. "Born Annerlika Roschka, in Germany, in 1943. No siblings, schooled at a primary school in Munich. Lost contact with family in 1957, arrested for shoplifting – um, how many times? Once for soliciting, three times for possession of illegal drugs. Hospitalised in 1960 ... and then you disappeared from the system. Am I correct so far?" He regarded me, eyebrows raised in polite query and I scowled.

"What do you want?" I knew what I wanted, apart from him and his thuggish companion out of my house and out of my life. I opened my handbag and suddenly the thug was there beside me, a pistol in his hand. I glared. "I'm getting a cigarette."

He tipped the bag upside down, spilling all its contents onto the carpet. I lost my temper, swung my foot and kicked him in the shin. He grunted in shock, dropped the bag and lifted his hand as if to strike me. I hit him with my fist, a low blow that made him grunt again, this time in pain. Unfortunately he didn't drop the weapon. Smith's voice was sharp.

"Enough, Barnes! You too, Amelia!" He jerked his head and Barnes backed off. I pointed to the clutter on the floor.

"Cigarettes. And matches." I hope my smile was as unpleasant as I intended it to be. "That's all."

Smith shrugged and waved his hand, then pointed.

"Right. Pick it all up, Barnes. Give Ms Ross her cigarettes and put your gun away. I do believe we've managed to get off on the wrong foot here."

"Speak for yourself," I muttered and snatched the packet from Barnes. He seemed to have recovered quickly; my estimation of him went up. Maybe he wasn't just a thug after all. When I lit my cigarette I offered him one. He shook his head and as his eyes met mine, he jerked his head in Smith's direction and gave a slight, regretful nod.

Smith sighed. "Smoking's bad for you, Ms Ross."

"Yeah. Well, my lungs, not yours. And my house." I resisted the petty inclination to blow smoke in his direction. After all, Fingers didn't care for the smell of cigarette smoke either. "So let's have another try, shall we?"

“Fair enough.” He nodded at me; Barnes sat down and we all relaxed a little. “By the way, Ms Ross, you’ll find the weapon in the linen closet hasn’t been tampered with at all. You keep it in good condition, I’m pleased to see.” He paused. “Used it recently?”

I didn’t answer his question and he continued.

“Ms Ross – Amelia – I am not here to arrest you. I am, in fact, highly impressed with you and your activities. And on behalf of the Australian Government, I wish to offer you employment.”

I raised my eyebrows in polite disbelief. “My activities? You’re joking. In any case, I already have a job,” I said coldly and he sniggered.

“Ah, yes. You’re a schoolteacher. In your position, I’d want to be able to go to work armed.” He steepled his finger and seemed to be considering. “Perhaps with an assault rifle. Or a cattle prod.”

I couldn’t avoid the twitch I felt at my mouth. “I teach thirty-two nine year olds, Mr Smith. I hardly need a weapon for that.”

“Rather you than me,” he commented. “It’s a good cover. But a waste of your talents.”

“No.” I shook my head. He didn’t know. He couldn’t know. *Could* he?

“You have a science degree.” He consulted a small folder by his hand. “From UWA, in the late 60s. Well done, too. You became a teacher. A *primary* school teacher. I notice you call yourself *Mrs* Ross. There wasn’t ever a Mr Ross. I suppose that was for convenience? It sounds better.”

“You do know a lot about me.” The more I heard from this man, the less I liked it. I fingered the wedding ring I wore. He was right there. The fiction of a husband who had died tragically in Europe had simplified matters considerably.

“Oh yes. We’ve had an eye on you for a long time. Since you arrived in this country, as a matter of fact.” He lowered his voice. “Ms Ross – Marc Stahlmann was a friend of mine.”

Where, I wondered, were we going? I had a suspicion, but I needed more.

“I would like more proof than simply your word.”

“Yes. He gave you a code word, the last time you saw him. *Renaissance*.”

It could be a trap. “That is supposed to mean something to me?”

“It is and you know it is. It’s the word he gave you, the day you said goodbye and came to Australia to live.”

I didn’t like Smith and didn’t think I ever would, but this made a difference. I trusted Marc, always had, right from the first day we’d met. I’d been crouched beside the body of the drug dealer I’d killed when Marc Stahlmann calmly wheeled his chair

up to me, looked at what I had done, and smiled. Nothing would have made him betray me. Smith could have got *Renaissance* only from him, and only voluntarily.

“What do you want me to do?”

“What you’re good at. Kill people.”

I grimaced. “I didn’t think the Australian government countenanced such – drastic measures.”

“They don’t,” Smith said abruptly. “Not officially. Certainly not for someone working as you would be, under your present cover. If you ever blundered, made a mistake or got caught, we’d disown you. We’d be able to prove we’d never even heard of you.” That wasn’t a threat either, I knew. He could do it.

“Fair enough,” I agreed. “But I won’t get caught. Marc was the only one who ever caught me. And he was on my side.”

“Fortunately,” Smith said dryly.

“Is he still alive?”

“No. He died about eight years ago.”

“I’m sorry to hear so. He was a good friend. One of the best.”

“He paid you well, too, didn’t he?” There was an edge to Smith’s voice and I stared back at him.

“Yes. I was worth every cent of it. It wasn’t just for the money. You know that, and he knew it. It was personal.”

Smith’s expression was calculating. “You look so harmless. Like butter wouldn’t melt in your mouth. How many people did you kill for Marc?”

I shrugged. There didn’t seem to be any point in prevarication.

“Ten.” All drug pushers and dealers.

“And – for yourself?”

I didn’t answer that one.

I continued as a teacher but on the side I worked for Smith. Not entirely of my own will, in spite of the money. Barnes and I got on well together, after our inauspicious first meeting. He wasn’t a thug after all. I was amazed to discover he was a married man with a wife and two young daughters who adored him, and he read voraciously, mostly history but also science fiction – and bodice-rippers. We all have our oddities, and those were his.

Eventually, I freed myself from Smith’s department, and we parted on moderately good terms. By then I’d decided I’d had enough of teaching as well. I resigned and spent the next few years travelling, although I always came home to my quiet house in a quiet suburb in the city. 2001 made overseas travel less

attractive and more difficult and I developed a taste for the quiet life. Poor Fingers had long since died of old age and I acquired another cat.

I cultivated the habit of dining at good – and not so good – restaurants, became acquainted with many people, made friends with a few and generally enjoyed my life. I became a regular at the local library, read a lot and went to the movies or the theatre regularly. Most of the time, my life was comfortable but not particularly challenging.

Then I met young Davy Gordon and things became more interesting.

Chapter 20

Amelia 2005

Now my past had caught up with me again. I wasn't sure what to think or feel.

Josh Taylor's voice was sad. "I – always found it difficult to get my head around why you did what you did. For money. That was – just so far out of my experience. Still is."

"The money was a part of it. But not all." I dug in my pocket for my cigarettes and lit one. "You were never a drug addict, were you?"

"No." His eyes widened. "Is *that* why you did it – for money to – ah, buy drugs?"

"No! Certainly not. I – had a friend. Three years before I – met you." I shook my head sombrely, regarding my hands but looking far into the past. "We were – going to be married, but he became addicted to heroin. Bad stuff." I let out my breath in a long sigh. "He got me started on it, but he used it far more often than I did. Then he ... died. I was going to have a baby. The baby died too. She was stillborn. Because of everything I'd been on when I was pregnant. Not just heroin, lots of other stuff. Pills, cocaine – you name it. I realised what he and I had become. I stopped –" I waved my arm in a definite gesture. "– just like that. It was very difficult. Painful. You have no idea."

"I'm sorry."

I scarcely heard his words.

"All the time, I held the memory of his dead face before me. I was not going to end up like that. *Never*." I clenched my fists. "Afterwards, I went after his supplier. I killed him. I nearly got caught. The second time, I *did* get caught."

"What? The *second* time? My god, what did you –"

"The person who caught me," I continued as if he had not interrupted, "was a wealthy man whose daughter had also been an addict. He was with her when she

died – from the heroin, you understand – and he wanted revenge.” I shook my head. “He became my friend. One of the best friends I have ever had. We talked a lot together, and decided something had to be done about that foul trade. But although he was wealthy and had contacts, he was unable actually to *do* what had to be done.”

From the first time I had met him, Marc Stahlmann had been in a wheelchair. “We came to an agreement. He paid me to go on doing it. He tracked down the dealers and suppliers, and he helped me. He supplied me with a weapon, and he paid me. Twenty five thousand American dollars each time. We agreed when I had done ten I would quit.” I smiled at Josh, but I was damn sure he didn’t share my amusement. “I enjoyed it, y’know. I felt I was doing something that should have been done long ago. Something worthwhile.”

“You and he took the law into your own hands,” he pointed out.

“Oh, yes. The law would not have punished them as we did.”

“You – and he had no right to do that – to set yourselves up as judge, jury and executioner –”

“They were filth. They didn’t deserve to live.”

He stood up and shook his head. “I – don’t understand how you could have done that.”

“No. Well, I don’t suppose you’ve ever gone through anything like that.” I considered. “Or have you? I know about Davy’s parents – he told me. Wouldn’t you like to see the people who got them hooked punished? Really?”

“You can’t take the law into your own hands,” he protested and I shook my head.

“Oh, Joshua, you are so naïve. Of course I can. I have done.” I shrugged. “In the past, and in another country. It was all a long time ago. I changed and made myself a new life here. A better life than I would have had.”

“What did Davy tell you?”

“Don’t blame him. He knows about his parents. I know where they get it from. Surely, you are aware of what’s going on there? He’s much better off with you. But his parents –”

“Enough!” He stood over me. “What goes on with my family is none of your bloody business, Amelia. And you can’t point a finger at them, with your past!”

“That’s true.” I shook my head. “I am sorry, Josh. It really is none of my business.” I wasn’t going to say it to him, but it was my business. “As you say, I am in no position to point out other people’s failings.”

“Okay.” He sat down again. “I’ve had a bugger of a time recently. I’ve been worried about Mandy. That bastard of a husband of hers – I’ve got no time for him. But she *is* my daughter. My only daughter. I’m not sure what’s going to happen

there. Having Davy with me is probably a damned good idea. She might come to her senses and maybe something can be done. I don't know."

"Davy is a great kid. You and he will get on just fine." I paused. "You really don't know where they get their stuff, do you?" I knew.

Josh shook his head. "No. but when I find out –"

"Be careful. There is an incredible profit in drugs. Enough to get people killed. I wouldn't like for you to be one of them."

He gave a sour laugh. "That's almost funny. Coming from someone who once nearly killed me."

I shook my head. "I never really considered it, you know."

"You fractured my skull for me."

"I'm sorry." I think I might have been a trifle abashed. "I didn't intend you any harm. You happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

He grunted. "That's a lot of compensation."

"You survived it, didn't you?" My voice was tart. "Think yourself lucky. And you made yourself a good life anyway." I couldn't conceal my wry amusement. "And not in Chelsea, either."

He seemed mildly embarrassed. "I suppose."

"And it was over forty years ago. A long time. What are you going to do about it now?" I had the feeling distracting him from considering the Gordons' suppliers was a good idea. Josh struck me as a good man – the type who gets killed trying to set the world straight. Kendall would squash him like a worm and think nothing of it. The pleasure of squashing Toby Kendall was going to be all *mine*.

"I never got anywhere, even back then. I woke up in a private clinic, with people who didn't want to know anything about the circumstances except where it concerned my injury. I was warned, if I went to the police, I'd be killed." A tinge of shame coloured his face. "Your friend Marc Stahlmann visited me. I was scared shitless. There's nothing I can do, is there? Not now, not here. I'd be wasting my breath."

"True. It would just be your word against mine." I grinned suddenly. "And as far as most people know, I've been a model citizen for years."

"*As far as most people know.*" He shook his head. "Oh, no, I don't want to go there. I really don't."

"Idiot! I was just making fun of you. Josh, I was a teacher for years and after I retired I spent a lot of time travelling. Now I'm just enjoying my life. Trying to, anyway. That's all. Cross my heart and hope to die, if you want that." Yes, I was a good liar. Always had been.

“Hmm. Okay.” He started towards the gate. “I have to go now. I have things to think about. Amelia – I *think* I’m glad you’re not running away.”

I watched him go, wondering whether I’d ever see him again.

I still had the nagging feeling running away might have been a good idea, for everyone concerned. But I did have unfinished business elsewhere. Unlike Joshua Taylor, I did know the source of the drugs Mandy and Ryan used and dealt in. That holiday would have to wait; I had no idea for how long.

Confronting Amelia Ross had been more difficult than he had imagined. It was almost impossible to reconcile his grandson’s mild mannered middle-aged benefactor with the young killer he remembered from 1963. Until Davy told him about her scaring off the young thugs. She pulled a gun on them, he said, chortling as he recalled the scene and their shocked expressions.

Then it had all come back to him with a rush.

Chapter 21

Joshua 1963

His head hurt.

Everything hurt.

He opened his eyes to a bright white ceiling. When he turned his head, through a window he could see snow falling outside. He was in a high and comfortable bed.

He could not remember how he came to be there. When a woman dressed in a starched white uniform walked into the room he stared.

“Hospital? Am I in hospital? What happened?”

She smiled, but did not speak as she took his pulse and pushed a thermometer into his mouth. She wrote something on a chart, clipped it to the other end of the bed and walked out. Joshua called after her.

“Hey! Come back! What’s going on?”

Silence. He sank back on the pillows and shut his eyes. What had happened? What was he doing here? He pondered, and drifted off to sleep again. When he next opened his eyes it was night. A dim light shone beside the bed and through the window he could see city lights.

There was a man sitting in a wheelchair and regarding him.

“Good evening.” The man spoke English with an American accent, and Joshua stared.

“Are you going to tell me what happened?”

“You can’t remember?” There was something in the man’s voice – concern? Or relief? Joshua shrugged. His head still hurt and when he reached up his fingers encountered a bandage. “You’ve been injured in an accident. Can you remember your name?”

“An accident? No, it wasn’t an accident. She –” He stopped. “She – a woman. There was a woman. I – ” He decided against shaking his head again and frowned. He rubbed at his face while the older man sat placidly and watched him.

“My name is Marc Stahlmann. And yours is Joshua Taylor,” his visitor announced. “You are an English tourist, yes?”

“No, mate. I’m not English. I’m an Aussie. I remember what happened now. Are you with the police? I witnessed a murder. This woman – she shot someone, a man, in an alley. And she bloody well kidnapped me.”

“No. I am not with the Polizei.” The man used the German word and continued, his voice low and calm, but with an implacable note in it. “You are a fortunate young man, Herr Taylor. You will be wise, when you are released from this clinic, to take yourself home and forget what you saw and heard. Do you understand me?”

“Huh? What are you saying?”

“Go home. Say nothing to anyone, and you will live.” The man’s eyes were chilly. “Or you can stay here and cause trouble. If that happens – you will die. I promise it.”

Appalled, Josh stared back. His visitor reached into a pocket and took out a plain white envelope, which he placed on the bed.

“You are a guest here. There will be no charge for your treatment. And tomorrow or the next day, when you are feeling better you will leave. The X-rays showed a minor skull fracture, but it is nothing and soon you will forget what happened. And this –” He indicated the envelope, “– this is compensation paid to you for your injury. Take it and go home. That is my advice to you.” He wheeled himself to the door and turned. “I only ever give advice once, young man. Take it. And live.”

Joshua stared after him. This harmless looking old man in a wheelchair terrified him even more than the ordinary appearing young woman who pointed a gun at him. He left the envelope where it was, lay back and closed his eyes.

Three days later he left the clinic. Marc Stahlmann did not visit him again. Josh did not open the envelope until he was home in Australia. When he did, he discovered it was a cheque drawn on the Bank of New South Wales for five thousand dollars in United States currency. The man had known then, that he was Australian. He wondered if the woman had known, or if she had cared.

In spite of his feelings of shame and inadequacy, he deposited the cheque and used the funds for his teacher training course and a car. Blood money, he thought. He'd never see either Stahlmann or the woman again, so he might as well use the money. *Yes, he remembered Amelia Ross. Not immediately, but soon enough.*

Chapter 22

Miles stretched and yawned.

He was lucky, he thought, that Toby Kendall had taken him under his protection. He had no connection with the more ... physical ... of Kendall's activities, but could spend his waking hours working with numbers and data. Some of the stuff he'd been looking at recently, had resulted in a fascinating, albeit mind boggling, possibility.

Kendall, he realised, had lost not four, but *six* of his men within the past year. That included the unfortunate Zookie, found in the local park between the nightclub and his flat, several weeks before.

"Making any progress there, geeky boy?" Ray's voice jarred Miles back to reality. Of all Kendall's employees, this man rubbed him the wrong way most. Ray despised Miles for his lack of physicality, taking every opportunity to imply the young man was inept, stupid or gay. Being none of those, Miles resented him but was helpless. What a shame, he thought, Ray's death wasn't one of those he'd been researching. It relieved him to be rescued by his boss.

"Ah, shut up, Ray. Miles is gonna find someone for you to beat up, or better. Give him a break." Kendall jerked his head. "Go on, piss off for a while." He sat down. "So, Miles, what've you got for me?"

Miles scratched at his nose and pointed to the screen.

"Look here, boss. Here's Keller leaving the restaurant that night, okay. 11.20 pm, right?"

"Yeah. So?" Kendall was unimpressed. All Miles had done so far, in his view, was to rehash the deaths without finding a common factor.

"He was found, the next morning, down the end of that laneway, between the two wheelie bins. Had been dead for five or six hours, right? It must have happened within ten or fifteen minutes of his leaving the restaurant. It's possible the killer was even in the restaurant. Probably on the CCTV."

"Go on." Kendall was impatient and angry; he had known Keller all his life and so far the cops had failed to find a solitary lead to his murderer. Or so they said. He suspected that their knowledge about Keller's drug trafficking activities affected their enthusiasm and diligence. At least Miles was keen, although the young man's manner sometimes gave him the creeps.

Miles raised a finger. "He'd been stabbed, from the front, and straight through the heart." He paused for effect. "With a metal kitchen skewer. I mean, for god's sake, who murders someone with a weapon like that? Whoever it was, had to get right up close to Keller. How many people d'you think he would have let get near enough to stab him?"

Kendall's eyes narrowed. "What you getting at?"

"Someone he knew. Someone he trusted and wasn't afraid of." Miles tilted his head. "Maybe a woman?"

Kendall snorted. "You reckon a *woman* did him in? Get real, Miles!" He reconsidered. "You gotta suspect, yeah?"

Miles sighed. "Yeah, boss. But first –" He flicked keys and brought up a series of images on the screen. "Here are the others you mentioned. I looked at them, too. Where they'd been, who they'd been with, all that sorta stuff."

"You have been busy."

Miles shrugged. "Yeah, well ... this is interesting."

"Okay ... tell me what you've found."

"Six men. Six deaths."

"Six?"

"Zookie, a few weeks back. He makes six. You told me four, but I found a fifth. Then Zookie. Six."

Kendall let out a sigh. "Yeah. Shitty way t'die." They shuddered, imagining the combined effect of cocaine taken orally and washed down with Scotch. Zookie's face was distorted in agony when his stiffened body was found.

Miles went on, almost dispassionately. Damnit, Kendall thought; the bloody idiot was *impressed* with the murderer's activity.

Kendall stared at the computer screen. He found this bizarre, this fascination Miles had with computers, and what he could glean from them. Kendall regarded them as little more than glorified adding machines and avoided the one in his office. He usually brought Miles in to operate it.

"Quentin ... fell in front of a train ... half an hour after leaving the club. I checked the CCTV record to see who'd left just before and just after him. Unfortunately, I can't get at the railway station CCTV. I don't think it showed anything, anyway. This one, this, and this one we can dismiss. But these four –" He pointed and Kendall frowned. "– are all possibles. One was actually a witness, although he reckoned he couldn't remember clearly what had happened."

"Yeah. Witnesses are known to have the most unreliable memories." Kendall grimaced. "You can discard this one." He pointed at the screen. "He's one of mine. In the police department. Miles, why didn't you ever go work for the cops? The crime

rate would have been chopped in half by now.” His nebulous respect for the younger man was growing.

“Yeah.” Miles sniggered. “Or else I would have been. Chopped in half, that is. Next one. This is Bryce, okay. He was murdered; you and I know it and the cops know it. Funny thing is they haven’t been able to find a single clue. Someone shot him at close range with a handgun, presumably silenced. Three quarters of an hour after leaving here alone to drive home.”

“I remember.” Kendall gritted his teeth. “That was one they would have liked to pin on me ... except I had no reason whatsoever to do it, and I was here at the time. He was a good bloke. So was Keller. Someone is going to pay, Miles.”

Miles rubbed his face. “Interesting thing about this one; he was shot through the driver’s window. It was open. He knew the killer – and trusted him. Or her.”

Kendall was scornful. “Look, Miles, you’ve got this thing about it maybe being a woman. Nah. Don’t be so fuckin’ stupid.”

Miles shrugged. “Nonetheless, he knew who it was, opened the window to speak. And then –” He gestured with his fingers, pulling an imaginary trigger. “It seemed like a pro job, or else a cool amateur. Right in his front yard. If he’d installed the security cameras like I’d recommended, the cops would have had a major clue.”

Kendall grunted. “He was scared it’d pick up stuff he didn’t want anyone t’see. Stupid bastard. Go on, Miles. Who’s next?”

“Delaney. This is trickier. He hadn’t been at the club for a few days. He was home, and alone. He wasn’t well, and he’d been drinking.”

“Yeah, I remember. He’d been complaining about headaches. Wussy old man.” Kendall frowned. “The doc figured he’d had a dizzy spell beside his pool. Slipped, fell in, and drowned. Always did sound a bit too convenient for me. That’s why I counted him in the four. But there were no really suspicious circumstances.” He grimaced. “Nothing that’d count as evidence, fuck it.”

“Yeah, that’s true,” Miles agreed. “He wasn’t alone. There was a witness who saw someone come out his back gate.”

“Yeah.” Kendall leaned back and lit a cigarette. “The cops discounted that one. He was a drunk, and couldn’t swear to anything. Wasn’t sure if it was Delaney’s back gate or someone else’s, didn’t remember when, or even whether he’d imagined it. That was worth bugger all, Miles. They didn’t give a shit anyway.”

“Maybe. But I looked at the others, and I paid a visit to that drunk. I had a couple of photos, of several possible suspects.” Miles grinned. “After he identified one, I gave him a flagon of plonk and a few dollars to get more and he staggered off happily.”

“You’re a fuckin’ genius, Miles.”

The younger man shrugged. “Yeah, well. I told you. This is fascinating. Delaney drank. A lot. All it needed was for someone else to be there Maybe a

concerned –” He made quote marks in the air with his fingers. “– visitor. Someone who seemed to be worried about his welfare. Delaney drinks, swims, maybe even with a companion ... gets out of the pool and whoever is there trips him and pushes him into the pool. Anyone could have done it. There’d be no other suspicious bruises or marks on the body. Tragic accident.” He gestured with his hands. “He could even have really had a dizzy spell. Just a matter of making sure he fell into the water. And didn’t get out again.”

“Miles.” Kendall gave him a cold stare. “Don’t ever even consider going to work for anyone else, mate. You’ve got a twisted mind. I’d rather keep you close.”

The younger man gave a weak laugh and indicated the computer. “You want more?”

“There is more?”

“Yeah. One more. One you took t’be an accident. Matthew Rushton.”

“Matt?” Kendall frowned. “He had a heart attack.”

Miles grunted. “Y’know, boss, there are ways of inducing heart attacks...or making a death seem like one. I looked into that. It’s not a hundred percent, but enough t’convince me. There *is* a killer out there who’s targeting your men. You or I or Ray could be next.”

“I hope after all this you’ve got a name and a face?”

Miles grimaced and looked uncomfortable. “Uh. Maybe.” He paused. “I – believe it’s a woman. This one.”

“What?” Toby Kendall looked disbelieving. He regarded the picture Miles brought up on the screen and had him go again through the information he had found. Finally he shook his head in disgust.

“No bloody way. You’re a moron. A blithering idiot! I set you to find a killer – and you come up with a retired bloody schoolteacher. Get real, man! How the fuck could she have done all those killings? Well?”

Miles was unperturbed by Kendall’s anger.

“C’mon, boss, we’ve been through all that. I showed you. She’s the one I picked up on the CCTV footage. Two of them knew her. Delaney and Keller. And check this out –” He pushed several grainy photos across to his boss. “Here she is, with Matt, and later in the same area as Bryce.”

“Proves nothing! Sheer coincidence. A teacher, for god’s sake. And a woman at that.”

“Who happened to have been in the restaurant or the club almost every time a hit was made. You can even see her, leaving the restaurant five minutes after Delaney. And he got done a coupla hundred metres down the street. Listen here, boss, maybe it wasn’t her, but she sure as hell has some connection.” He paused,

shifting uncomfortably in his seat. "I have her name and address. If you're interested in paying her a visit. There's something else. I *know* her."

And *that* was one of the reasons for Miles' confidence.

"Yeah?"

He looked abashed. "She was one of my teachers at primary school."

"Yeah, 'n' I suppose you were scared shitless of her then and you still are. She *has* got your knickers in a knot, hasn't she? Maybe there's something in what you say. Here, let's go through all this shit again. No harm making sure. If it turns out she did have something to do with them getting done ... " He let his voice trail off.

Miles remembered Mrs Ross. Not entirely with affection. But she had taught him well. Had made him *want* to learn. He had been a painfully shy, bright ten-year old and he had left her class with a love of learning for its own sake.

"Hmm." Kendall frowned. "I've seen her too. I know I have. Not just at the club and the restaurant. Somewhere else. Not long ago." He stood up. "I'll remember soon. Find out as much as you can about her, Miles, and we'll pay her a visit ... that's it!" Elated, he snapped his fingers. "She was the old bird who brought the Gordon brat round t' collect his gear when they threw him out. I knew I'd seen her somewhere else."

Chapter 23

Amelia

After Joshua left I pottered around aimlessly in the garden. When I realised the 'weeds' I'd been pulling up so viciously were in fact my prized petunia seedlings, I decided to call it a day.

A hot shower took away the physical aches, but there was pain within me, more than I'd realised before. There were a few ways of alleviating that.

Food. Alcohol. Chocolate. Comfort items, I believe, and all easy to come by. I walked to the local shopping centre where I paid a visit to the Chinese restaurant and returned home laden with several takeaway cartons, two bottles of red from the bottle shop and a chocolate cheesecake.

Lennie met me at the door, swearing as usual he was starving. I filled his dish and poured out the wine for myself. The first glass went down smoothly, as did the rest of the bottle.

And, I am ashamed to admit, most of the second bottle.

Our meeting had certainly rattled me. I wondered how it had affected Josh.

Next morning I found out, when Davy came banging on my front door. Early. Too early.

“What did you do to my grandfather? What did you say to him?” he demanded.

I stared. To be honest, I wasn’t always at my best in the morning. After my indulgences the previous night I was not at all bright and bouncy.

“Uh. Whatever are you on about, Davy?”

”What do you *do* to him?”

“Nothing.” *This time, anyway.* “Calm down and tell me what’s wrong. Has something happened to him? Is he all right?”

“Oh yeah, he’s fine. Apart from the fact he’s going to have one mother of a hangover when he wakes up.”

“What?” I blinked in disbelief. Well, at least he wouldn’t be the only one. I felt decidedly unwell.

“What did you say to him?” Davy repeated. “I saw what he looked like when he left home to come see you yesterday. His face was white as a sheet. When he got home, he grabbed the bottle of Scotch he keeps for visitors, and shut himself in his room for five hours. I had to help him to bed. He was absolutely pissed. It was awful – he hardly ever drinks. Tell me, for god’s sake, what happened?”

“Um, nothing. We talked, that’s all. I don’t understand what’s going on.”

“It’s got something to do with you. You and him. Hey, did you and my grandad meet each other before?”

I turned away and lit a cigarette. The taste burdened my already queasy stomach and I butted it out after one drag.

“What makes you think that? Did he say something to you?”

“Mmm. He didn’t say anything. He wouldn’t.” Davy sat down and put his face in his hands, close to tears. “I honestly don’t understand what’s going on. He just ...he’s never like this, never.” He frowned. “You don’t look very well either. Have you got a hangover, too?”

I grunted sourly and moved over to make a cup of coffee. Surreptitiously, I downed a couple of painkillers. Davy watched me; I’m not sure whether he noticed. I didn’t care.

“Does he know you’ve come here to see me?”

“Hah! No. He’s still out to it. I left him a note. He doesn’t like it if I go off somewhere and he doesn’t know where.”

“Did he talk to you about me?”

“No. Not really. But he kept mumbling about how long it had been, and how he couldn’t believe what you’d done ... ” He shook his head. “Nothing that made any sense, anyway.”

I sighed and sat down. I spoke carefully, considering my words.

“It’s true; we did meet each other, once, a long time ago. But – briefly.”

I’ve never forgotten what happened then either, I thought. His face, and his name, might have slipped my memory, but I had not forgotten the events of that night.

Davy’s mood was brightening. He let his imagination run away with him ... I could practically see his thought processes. The young are so inclined to jump to conclusions, often the wrong ones. Most certainly in this case.

“Yeah? When you were young. Oh, I see ... ” He smiled. “You and he met and fell in love, I s’pose. But it couldn’t work ... maybe a one-night stand, and after that you went your separate ways. You never forgot each other, but you never met again until the other day. Oh, that’s so romantic. You didn’t have a baby, did you? Have I got an aunt or uncle tucked away no one ever knew about –”

“No!” I shook my head. “Oh, dear, no. Davy, you are so far off target it’s almost funny. That is *not* what happened. Believe me!”

“Oh.” He was so let down I had to smile.

“You really are a hopeless romantic, you know.”

“I s’pose it was too much to hope for.” He frowned and looked at me again. “Well, if that’s not it, what *did* happen? What was so bad that you *both* got stuck into the booze?”

“No.” I stood up. “I’m not going to talk to you about it. I won’t. You can ask your grandfather – when he sobers up, that is, and if he wants to tell you, he can. Go home now.”

“Aw –”

“No.” I shook my head. “I won’t tell you. And if he doesn’t, then that’s it. It’s none of your business, anyway. You should keep out of things that don’t concern you.” I let my voice go malicious. “*Adult* things.” I refused to notice the hurt in his face and he turned and left without another word. Maybe better for us all if he realised I’m not a nice person. Maybe if and when I disappeared from his life he wouldn’t care. Maybe better if ...

No, things were what they were. Wishes and regrets changed nothing. What did I regret, anyway? I sat down with my coffee and Lennie mrowed at me until I picked him up. I sat stroking him for a long time.

The next week was empty. Totally. Nothing happened. I visited the library every afternoon, but Davy didn't turn up. I sat out in the garden and watched the traffic pass. Joshua didn't come around. I was alone again.

At least Lennie still sat on my lap and purred. Apart from him, my world was empty. I told myself I was a fool, even to care.

I drank more wine than I should, smoked far too much and ate a great deal of chocolate.

That didn't fill the emptiness within me. Nothing would.

I didn't even go out for a meal at a restaurant or to share a drink in a social surrounding. I just huddled into myself, in misery.

Chapter 24

"Grandad, what're you gonna *do*?"

"What?" Joshua stared at him across the dinner table. Cartons of takeaway food lay between them. There was a glass by Joshua's hand and a bottle beside it.

"Do all adults crawl into a bottle when something goes wrong with their lives?" Davy persisted.

"What are you talking about?" His grandson had no right, none at all, he told himself, to harp on this subject.

"You know what I mean. *Who* I mean."

"You've got no bloody idea what you're talking about. You really haven't."

"So why are you trying to drink yourself to death? Why won't you let me go to the library or contact her? Why don't *you* go see her again?"

Joshua shook his head. "Don't push it. This is adult stuff."

"Yeah. That's what *she* said. But she'd been drinking too, that morning I went to see her. When you were sleeping off the Scotch."

"Davy, you're my grandson and I love you, but shut up. Amelia and I – we –" He looked at the boy curiously. "Did she tell you what happened, all those years ago?"

"No. She said what you did – that it was grown up shit. Stuff," he amended quickly. "She wouldn't tell me. She said you would if you wanted to – and it was none of my business anyway. But it *is*!" He was close to tears. "Grandad – I wanted t'live with you 'cos Mum and Dad couldn't do the right things. Don't you go getting all drunk and nasty to me now, too!"

Josh stared in horror as the boy burst into tears. He'd been so involved in his own introspection he hadn't realised the effect on his grandson. It wasn't a pleasant realisation. But maybe, he admitted, exactly what he had needed.

"Oh, Davy. Davy, I'm so sorry." He stood and hurried around the table, pushing the bottle aside as he did so. It fell to the floor and smashed and they both watched the whisky spread across the floor. For the first time in days, a smile twitched at Josh's mouth. "Just as well," he observed mildly, "that bottle was nearly empty. I shan't need to buy another one." He patted his grandson on the shoulder. "What if we get this place cleaned up and – get ourselves cleaned up too – and go pay a visit to Mrs Ross?"

Davy grinned widely, his eyes lighting up. "Right on, Grandad! Good one!" Under his breath, he muttered, "And about bloody time, too!"

Chapter 25

Amelia

When I heard the knock at the door and opened it – oh, yes, *after* checking the inbuilt spy hole; I am many things but stupid is not one of them – Davy fell into my arms, laughing and crying. Joshua looked awkward. I didn't say anything; I'm not sure I trusted myself. Davy stepped backwards and, with a maturity I hadn't suspected of him, he looked from one of us to the other and spoke clearly.

"Ms Ross – Amelia, I'd like you to meet my grandad, Joshua Taylor. Grandad, this is my friend Amelia. I reckon you two should get on well together."

We looked at each other and smiled over Davy's head.

"You know," Josh said, deadpan, "I think this could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Davy blinked and stared as Josh and I positively cracked up. Well, I don't suppose he'd ever seen Casablanca. We'd have to rectify that.

"Come on in," I said. "Both of you."

We went inside and I shut the door behind us, and the world wasn't empty any more. It was far from perfect, but way better than it had been half an hour before.

We wouldn't hurry things; we had plenty of time.

Chapter 26

Several weeks after that Davy decided to go and stay with a friend for the night, so Josh and I ate take away Chinese and drank wine and sat and relaxed in the living room in his house. It was interesting how many things we had in common; similar likes and dislikes in the food line, wine and books. We loved Chinese, disliked

takeaway chicken, liked red wine and preferred to read historical novels. Neither he nor Davy were churchgoers. Odd, that; I was a murderer but attended church, but they, kind-hearted ordinary harmless citizens, didn't. Josh had trouble reconciling the two.

"Davy said you went to church, that time he stayed at your place, when Mandy threw him out. You always go to church on a Sunday."

I laughed. "Yes. He couldn't figure that out."

"Neither can I. You believe all that stuff?"

"Some of it. I believe in God, and I believe in a soul. I like to do so. It calms me."

"I don't get it. What you did, that's wrong, by the church – by any church – surely?"

I stared at him and frowned. "Oh, I see. You can't get your head round the fact I kill..." Whoops. "... killed people, broke the commandments, and I still go along to church?" I shrugged. "Like the wife in *The Godfather*... she goes along and prays for her husband's soul, for all the sins he's committed?" *Only I'm doing it for myself.*

"Um, yeah, a bit like that."

"I'm not a Catholic." I grinned. "So I certainly don't do confession." *I'd be there for a week.* "And I don't believe in hell and damnation for sinners or non believers. That's crap." I was suddenly serious. "I don't have any problems with what I did, y'know. They deserved to die. When I die – I don't know what'll happen. Nobody ever knows. I don't care what other people do, or believe, as long as they leave me alone. I'm not exactly one of those born-again types who's going to try to convert you, y'know. More of the live and let live." *Well, some of the time.*

Josh didn't say anything to that, just stared at me. A very eloquent expression and I winced. I turned my attention to the photo on the cabinet. Time to change the subject, I decided. I liked Josh; more than liked him, but there were many things between us. We were two totally different people and always would be, in spite of our shared preferences in some areas.

"Your wife? Davy looks like her. More like her than like you, I think. She was very pretty. Was she a teacher?"

"No." Josh grinned. "You know what happens to all the young female teachers in the country – they marry farmers. Well, I married a farmer, a farmer's daughter, anyway."

"I didn't marry a farmer," I pointed out. "I didn't marry anyone at all. I got asked a couple of times, but I reckon one was drunk and the other was desperate." Marrying had never appealed to me, and living on a farm in the middle of nowhere even less. "I always wanted to get back to the city."

He poured us another glass of wine each and I opened my bag. "D'you mind if I smoke? I never did manage to give it up." Never even tried, if truth were told.

“Help yourself. There’s an ashtray over there. My daughter smokes, when she comes here. At least, when she used to come here.” He wasn’t happy, but whether it was the mention of his daughter or something else I wasn’t sure. He hadn’t mentioned Mandy for weeks.

I lit the cigarette and set it down.

“I thought you said you were going to give it up – when we first met.” There was an edge to his voice.

“Josh, if you keep throwing up to me what happened between us, I swear I am going to walk out of your house and never come back again.”

“I – would be very sorry, Amelia, if that happened.” He shrugged and looked almost embarrassed. “I’ve got – used to having you around. Davy has, too,” he added quickly. “Well, you know what he was like before. He – well, both of us, were miserable for that week.”

“Is that all?”

He pulled a face but didn’t answer. We were silent, but the silence was companionable rather than tense. I finished the cigarette and we drank more wine. Josh changed the CD. We liked the same sort of music, mostly. Classical stuff. However, he loved opera, which I heartily loathed.

“Tell me more about the places you lived in, when you were teaching. I suppose you got sucked into joining all the local clubs and organisations. I know I did.”

We’d compared notes earlier; both of us had spent time in country schools, but never in the same locality at the same time. Whereas I returned to the city for several years before quitting, Josh stayed in the town where his wife’s family lived, until after her death, when he moved back to the city and shifted from teaching to an administrative job. He was now retired and independent.

Mandy had married an itinerant, a bank worker named Ryan. Unfortunately, he had been sacked not long after Davy’s birth for attempted embezzlement. From what Josh said, I gathered Ryan was fortunate not to have faced a charge. He had had a succession of temporary or part-time jobs ever since, and Mandy worked from time to time at casual low paid jobs. Josh hurt to see them, but realised any cash help he offered would be wasted. One can do only so much for one’s children, and he realised that.

“Hmm, yes. One town I lived in, out in the wheat belt, they had a pistol club and I was asked to join.”

“I’ll bet you were good at that. Or was it different from shooting at human targets?”

“Let’s not go into all that again.” I pulled myself up and out of the lounge. I took my glass with me and crossed to sit by the table.

“I’m sorry, I really am. But I can’t forget, even if you can, what happened –”

“I will never forget, either. I remember them, you know. Every one of them. And I do not regret any of them.” I drained my glass angrily. He would keep harping on this subject, damn him. As if it were something I should regret. Maybe as if it should keep me awake at night. No chance of that. God alone knew how he’d react if I ever mentioned Arthur Charles Smith to him, and what I had done for him. “You have no right to criticise me, when you do not know what it was like.”

“Okay, okay.” He held his hands out placatingly. “It’s in the past. All right.”

“But it always *will* be there, won’t it? Between us?”

“I suppose, yeah. I – have trouble getting my head around it, even after all these years. You scared the wits out of me, you know.”

It was impossible to remain angry for long with Josh. With a little shock, I realised I loved him. Something I’d never imagined possible. Not since Hermann. It was a scary thought and one I decided to keep to myself for the moment.

“I thought of you occasionally, y’know. Living in Chelsea.” We shared a quick grin, his slightly embarrassed and I went on, glad he had relaxed. “Hmm. I think I might have scared *them* too, you know, at the pistol club. Certainly gave them a big shock. They thought, oh, city girl, never handled guns or anything like that, and were getting ready to watch me make a fool of myself. That’s not what happened, though.”

Looking back, it was probably foolish of me to show off as I had, but their attitudes had so pissed me off that I didn’t care that they might wonder where I’d learned to handle a gun. Fortunately none of them thought too deeply about it; maybe they just decided I was a natural and that was all there was to it. Just as well.

“The pistol club awarded ten trophies the first year I was there. I won seven of them. When I left they were sort of glad and figured someone else might get a look in. A few of those farmers’ noses were out of joint, one way and another.” The memory amused me and he grunted but didn’t smile.

“Hmm, joining a pistol club never attracted me one little bit. I hate guns. Probably came of having one pointed at me.” I grimaced at that and he spoke again. “My wife’s family went roo shooting and after rabbits ‘n’ foxes all the time. Never could talk me into going along.”

I drained my glass and stood up.

“Goodnight, Josh. It really is time for me to go home.” I had walked; it was less than two kilometres from my place to his. “I think we’ve both had too much to drink, so you’d better ring for a taxi for me.”

He moved across to stand in front of me. “Do you *want* to go?” he demanded.

I thought, for all of three seconds.

“No. No, I don’t.”

“Then stay. I don’t want to argue with you, Amelia. I can think of lots of other things I’d much rather do with you.” He took my bag, dropped it onto the floor and

pulled me down onto the lounge beside him. I smiled, but felt close to tears. When we kissed, crying however was the last thing I felt like doing. I pulled away and looked into his face.

“This time, your mouth does most certainly *not* taste disgusting.” As I moved into his embrace again I considered. “Mine might, though. Wine and Chinese food and coffee and cigarettes. Yuck. Give me a minute.” I got up and went along to the bathroom. There’s a small pack in my bag with toothpaste and a brush. After using that, I felt considerably better. I even did a slight giggle as I recalled the words of the old commercial – a ‘ring of confidence’.

Josh smiled at me when I went back into the living room. He held out his arms and when I moved into them it seemed the most natural thing in the world.

Chapter 27

“I want to tell you about my wife.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Honestly, it’s none of my business –”

“Oh, yes, it is. Because of something else I’m going to say to you afterwards.” He stood up and stretched. Then he sat facing me. “Her name was Thelma. She and I were happy together. I thought – I believed – we had the perfect marriage. But all the time, I never really knew her. She didn’t share things with me. Things I wish she had.” He shook his head. “We had two children, y’know.” I didn’t; I had always assumed Mandy was their only child. “A boy. He was three years younger than Mandy, and when he was eight, he drowned in the dam. She was the one who found him. After that –” He swallowed and I could see there were unshed tears glittering in his eyes, but he wouldn’t meet my gaze.

“Joshua –”

“No, don’t stop me. I need to tell you. I was a terrible husband. I drank. A lot. I tried to be a teacher and a farmer and a husband and a father, and I think I failed at them all. She never – talked to me, about how she felt. She tried to, at the beginning, but I never wanted to listen. So she stopped telling me things.” He looked down at the floor. “She stopped telling me anything. She pretended everything was fine and it wasn’t. She knew about the aneurysm, that anything could happen at any time.”

For the first time, there was a note of anger in his tone. I wasn’t sure who he was angry with.

“She didn’t tell me, and one day she just – died. She was getting tea ready, and we were arguing. *I* was arguing. I’d had too much to drink and was tired and irritable and yelled at her. She just looked at me – and smiled – and dropped dead. And it was all my fault. If I’d listened to her, and paid more attention to her, she might have been able to tell me. I –”

“It was not your fault. It could have happened any time, whether she told you or not, and whether you were drinking or not. Maybe she kept it from you to protect

you. I think she must have loved you a lot. Look at that picture –” I pointed to the framed wedding photo. “She loved you and cared for you. She wouldn’t want you to be blaming yourself now. How long ago did this happen?”

He let out his breath in a long sigh. “Ten years ago.”

“Davy was only a little boy at the time.”

“Yes. He remembers her, and he knows that she died suddenly. He doesn’t know, and Mandy doesn’t know, that our last words were an argument. It’s – something I’m deeply ashamed of.”

“Don’t carry it forever. You can’t change the past, you know.” I know that. “You have to accept it, and live with it. You had a good life together. Treasure those good times, Josh. Don’t keep blaming yourself. That’s what you’ve done, isn’t it, all these years? You blamed yourself.”

“I suppose I did, yes.” He looked down at his hands. “You know, from that night on, until I – remembered about you, I hardly ever drank, apart from a glass of wine sometimes. I stopped the hard stuff, spirits. Just like that. I sometimes wonder, if I hadn’t been drinking, whether I might have noticed something was wrong.”

“We all make mistakes. You have to forgive yourself, and get on with living.” I held out my arms to him. When we kissed I felt the wetness of his face. I hope they’d be healing tears.

Later, he became serious. “There was a reason I wanted to tell you about Thelma.” He took a deep breath before he spoke again. “Amelia, will you marry me?”

I wished he hadn’t asked me that. I should have realised, when he told me all about what had happened with her, that he was working up to suggesting marriage. He did seem to have come to that decision in a short period of time. I don’t know; if our situations had been reversed I think I would have run like hell and kept running. Joshua was a nice person; far too nice for someone like me. Truth to tell, I was very fond of him. I just wasn’t sure if what he was suggesting – proposing – was practicable or logical.

I swallowed and sat up.

“Joshua – that’s –” I shut my eyes and rubbed at the back of my neck, blinking away my own tears. I could feel him still watching me, his face starting to register concern.

“Yes? Or no?” He tried to make his voice light.

“I – don’t know.” I got up and walked around the room restlessly; it’s a habit I have sometimes when I’m rattled about something. “I like you very much. And Davy, of course. But I’m used to living and being alone –” I shrugged and sat down again, fumbling for a cigarette. “I honestly don’t know that I could cope with living with someone else. Twenty four hours a day.” I lit the cigarette, glad to see my fingers were steady. “I’m not sure you could stand having me around all the time either.” And what, I wondered, would he do if I disappeared and wouldn’t say where I’d been,

and another one of Toby Kendall's associates was found with his throat cut or something similar?

"You don't have to say yes straight away," Josh said gently. "Take time to think about it...please."

"I'm – very honoured at what you've asked me, Josh." All things considered, honoured was hardly adequate. But I knew that after I thought about it, I would have to say no. I needed my privacy. Sleeping with Josh was a pleasure; being married to him would cramp my style, to say the least. Yet, saying no to him could well break his heart. And mine.

Maybe, a little voice within me whispered, maybe it's time to give up this one person crusade against the drug trade. After all, my luck couldn't hold forever. One slip, and I'd have either the law or Toby Kendall – or even both, God forbid! – down on me.

"I'm going home now, Josh. And I will think on it, indeed."

By the time he and Davy came to dinner a few days later, I still hadn't made up my mind. It was much more difficult than I thought, and for many reasons. I was still amazed at our mutual attraction; after that most inauspicious start all those years ago I would never have believed such a thing possible. Although, thinking back, I remember observing Joshua and thinking he was the sort of person I'd like to be with. Maybe that was one of the reasons I'd never married. And he loved me! That was even more amazing.

That same nasty little voice inside me asked whether he'd still love me if I told him *all* about myself. I hoped never to have to do that. No, I didn't think I could marry him. At the same time, I didn't want to let him go.

After that, other events, that neither of us could have foreseen, determined our future.

Chapter 28

That Friday, Josh told me, he would be taking his last trip out to the farm he had part owned. Everything had gone ahead successfully for him to sell his share to his brothers in law and everyone was satisfied at the outcome.

There was a small amount of paperwork to be done, lots of packing and sorting, and farewells to a number of people he didn't anticipate seeing often, if ever, again. Although he invited Davy to go, he wanted to spend the weekend studying and catching up on homework assignments. We waved to Josh as he departed, the trailer hitched to the back of his station wagon. There was a lot of stuff out there; he told me gravely, that he wanted to bring back to his house. A few items of furniture, books and general household goods he and his wife had owned and which he

preferred to keep instead of passing them on to the rest of the family. I left Davy to his study and went home.

I had an unpleasant shock when my phone rang early Sunday morning and the caller identified himself. A familiar voice and one of the few cops for whom I have any time. Enough time, in fact, that we have been friends for a number of years. As far as he knows, I'm a retired teacher.

"Amelia, it's Nathaniel Dane."

"Yeah, Nat? Hello."

I wonder if you know a David Gordon?"

"Davy? Yes – is there something wrong?" I was surprised how much that possibility disturbed me.

"Can you come to the house where Davy's parents live? Now? He tells me you know the address."

"Of course. But tell me, is there a problem. Is Davy all right?"

"He will be. Can you come straight away? He's been asking for you, and says you're a good friend of his grandfather. We can't get in touch with Joshua Taylor at the moment."

"I'll be there as soon as possible." I didn't like the sound of this at all. Lucky there weren't any speed cameras or cops between my place and Davy's parents' house; it was early Sunday morning and the roads were comparatively empty. I pulled up in front of the house to see several vehicles on the front grass and the roadway. There were two police cars and an ambulance and what was probably an unmarked police vehicle.

A uniformed policewoman opened the door and took me in, where Nathaniel Dane, tall, grey haired and a Senior Detective in the police force, waited. Davy sat on a chair, a bandage around his left arm and a bruise on his face. The room looked as if it had been hit by a bomb; there were broken bottles, upset furniture and – what concerned me most – a quantity of blood in several different locations. Ominously, there was also a body ... no, make that *two* bodies on the floor. One was by the window and the other near the lounge. I could see blood on the timber floor and what appeared to be spilt cooking oil or fat. Two other uniformed men were prowling around the house and a petite older woman was examining one of the bodies. With her back to me, I couldn't see who the corpse was.

"Davy!" As I entered he leapt up and ran to me. Automatically, I put my arm around him, careful not to touch his injured arm, and looked over his head at the other man.

"Nathaniel? What the hell happened here? Who – ?" and I indicated the two bodies.

“Amelia – they killed my dad! They beat him up!” Davy sounded hysterical and I pulled back to stare at him.

“What?”

“The two dead men are Ryan Gordon and William Thomson, commonly known as ‘Thomo’,” Nathaniel told me. “Davy’s mother Mandy Gordon has been taken to hospital, with multiple injuries. She should pull through okay. But –”

“Oh, shit, Davy! I’m sorry. What happened here? And what happened to you?” I looked from him to Nathaniel. “Shouldn’t *he* be in hospital, as well?”

“Wanted to see you first,” Davy mumbled against me. “They took Mum in the ambulance and patched me up. I’m all right,” he said bravely. “It’s only a scratch.”

“How much of a scratch?” I demanded and Nathaniel said dryly,

“A knife wound.”

“*What?* Tell me what the hell’s been going on here.”

“Come through here into the kitchen and sit down. We – ah – have a few things to sort out. Davy, would you please tell Amelia what happened here?”

As I listened, I made a decision about Toby Kendall. He was going to die. Preferably slowly and in a great deal of pain.

Chapter 29

After Josh had left for the farm, Davy had kept true his intention to study. He worked most of Saturday, treated himself to pizza for dinner, watched some mindless TV for a couple of hours and studied again. It was close to midnight when he put the books away and fell into bed.

Somewhere around six in the morning the phone in the living room shrilled at him. He stumbled for it but the answering machine picked up.

“Dad? Help, please ... they –” Mandy’s terrified voice was cut off abruptly. Davy didn’t hesitate. He grabbed up his clothes and flew outside before he realised he had no wheels of any kind. Then he spotted Joshua’s neighbour Alan Tomic in his garden. The Tomics were early risers and fanatical gardeners ... and they had a car.

“Um, Mr Tomic ... can I please borrow your car?”

Alan Tomic frowned. “You got a licence, son?”

“Um ... it’s *very* important. I’ll be really, really careful. Please. My grandad’s away and I’ve gotta go –”

“All right.” Alan Tomic scratched under his nose. “You got your P-plates?”

“Ah ... no.” Davy sighed. He didn’t have a licence either, but wasn’t going to mention that tiny detail. He *could* drive.

“Where do you need to go? Has something happened to your grandad?”

“No. My – mum rang. There’s some sort of trouble at home. I have to go.” He - getting frantic. “I have to go *now!*”

“I’ll take you. Just a mo while I grab the keys and tell Abby.” His wife. Davy jumped into the car and gave directions. When they pulled up outside his house he turned to the older man.

“Thanks. You’d better go home. I’ll be all right.” He watched as Alan Tomic drove away. Maybe fortunately, the old man was fearfully deaf. Davy however, could hear the ruckus from inside the house as soon as he got out of the car. There was a single vehicle parked on the verge and the next-door neighbour (a notorious busybody) was standing on the footpath, holding his mobile phone.

The man buttonholed him.

“I’ve already rung the police!” Busy informed him. “There’s been all sorts of hell to pay in there for the past half an hour at least!”

“Call them again!” Davy shouted as he raced up the driveway and around to the back of the house. Banging on the front door, he decided, wasn’t likely to be a smart move. He opened the laundry door carefully and went through the kitchen. He snatched up a frying pan from the sink en route and hurried along the passage. From the noises, it wasn’t as if they would have heard him anyway. He hefted the pan and stood, horrified, in the doorway of the living room.

Against the front door he saw a tall man, brown haired, solidly built and with a moustache and neatly trimmed beard. If he didn’t know better Davy would have taken him for a politician or a prosperous businessman. This man he knew, only too well; this was Toby Kendall. The bastard Davy considered responsible for Mandy and Ryan Gordon being the drug addicts and pushers they were. Mandy’s sobs of terror caught his attention. She was sprawled inelegantly on the couch, her face bruised and bloodied and her clothing torn. Standing over her, busy unzipping his pants, was another, more slightly built man. A third stood near the window and a body lay at his feet. It was Davy’s father Ryan; and he was unmoving, blood seeping into the carpet beneath him.

Davy screamed incoherently and ran forward. He raised the frying pan and swung a blow at the thug about to assault his mother. The man grunted in shock as the used oil splattered over his face and onto the floor. He turned, his hand going to his pocket and coming out with a knife. Horrified, Davy backed off, the messy pan still in his hands. He didn’t hear the coarse comments from the other two; saw only the knife swinging towards him. As the man attacked, Davy instinctively raised and swung the pan again, barely feeling the blade as it sliced into his arm. He staggered backwards.

His assailant stepped forward to stab at Davy again, but skidded on the slippery floor. His body twisted; he reached out awkwardly and his skull connected

with the sharp corner of a table. He convulsed a couple of times and lay still. Blood trickled slowly out from under his head. Open mouthed and stunned, Davy stared as Kendall's other companion ran across the room.

"He's dead! Thomo's dead! You killed him, you little shit –" He swung his fist at Davy who fell and watched in terror as the man pulled out a gun. Kendall however jerked his head and snapped at his henchman.

"Outta here, Ray, let's go. Now! The brat can keep till another time. The cops'll be on their way. That bloody busybody next door is on the phone."

Davy heard the roar of their car and moments later, when the police arrived and burst into the house, he was sitting on the floor, tears running down his face as he tried to wipe the blood from his mother's face and straighten her clothing.

Chapter 30

Amelia

"Davy." I shook my head. "I'm so sorry." Not half as sorry as Kendall and his mob were going to be. I addressed Nat. "What are we going to do next?"

"He needs to go to hospital, or to a clinic, to get that arm fixed. It'll need stitches, the other ambos said. They checked it out and patched him up temporarily before they took Ms Gordon to hospital. We'll need some sort of statement from him. And Joshua Taylor – do you know how we can get in touch with him?"

"He's out at the farm," Davy said, almost whispering. "But his mobile doesn't work out there. He's probably turned it off anyway." I'd noticed how unimpressed Josh was with many aspects of modern technology, especially communications devices. Damn it, he didn't even own a computer until Davy moved in with him.

"Where's that?"

"Davy?"

"Out the other side of Gnowangerup ... the other side of that, way outta town, but, yes, Gnowangerup'd be the closest place."

Nathaniel nodded. "Give me the mobile number, can you?" Davy rattled it off and he made a note of it. "Right, I'll get in touch with the police station in town and they can contact your grandfather. I'm sure he'll be on his way back here as soon as possible. In the meantime –"

I stood up. "I have a doctor friend who runs a clinic. He'll see Davy."

"How old *is* Davy?" Nathaniel asked.

"Fifteen."

"Hmm. Ah, we may have a problem here. Davy is a minor; he's been involved in a crime –"

"I didn't do anything!"

"No, of course you didn't. However, you *are* witness to a crime. You need to be protected." It was the young policewoman, trying to be helpful. Davy gave her a look of disgust.

"Amelia can protect me."

Nathaniel didn't say what he thought of *that* idea. He didn't need to; his expression said it all. He and I would have to have words, I decided. He continued.

"– and we are currently unable to contact his next of kin. Apart from his mother, of course, and she's in no fit state to say anything." He regarded me inquiringly, his tone formal. "Do you have any – ah, legal relationship with Davy Gordon, Ms Ross?"

"No. his grandfather and I are friends." Damn, I could see what was coming.

"I may need to contact the Department of Child Protection." He hesitated and shrugged regretfully. "I *am* sorry."

"I want to go with Amelia," Davy insisted. He got up and stood beside me, his stance registering his defiance of all authority that might stand between him and me.

"Um, let's see if we can sort this out. What if we go to the clinic my friend runs – and it *is* a proper medical clinic, by the way. They'll fix him up there and I'll bring him along to the hospital to see Mandy." I looked at Nathaniel. "I'm sure that between you and me, we can manage to satisfy the law and anyone else. When you contact Joshua, I think he'll be happier to hear Davy is with me than with any bureaucratic organisation. It's only going to be until he gets back, anyway. Maybe a day."

Nathaniel considered. Thanks be; he was sensible and logical.

"All right." He rubbed his chin. "I'll tell you what. You take him to your doctor friend and get that arm looked at. Better than cluttering up the casualty department, I suppose and you'll probably get it seen to quicker as well. After that, take him to the hospital, where his mother is and I'll meet you there. We can talk through everything else. Okay?"

I'd always managed to get on well with Nathaniel Dane. I didn't care for cops much; they're constrained by rules, regulations and bureaucracy. It was a relief he had been the one called to Davy's home after the attack. Anyone else I might have had more difficulty convincing.

Davy and I exchanged looks and he nodded.

"Yes."

Nat addressed the young policewoman. "Go with them." He gave me a quick grin. "Mind Mrs Ross doesn't exceed the speed limit by too much." Davy grimaced but made no objection as she followed me out and got into the back. I've never driven with a uniformed cop in the car; I hoped her curiosity wouldn't impel her to examine my bag while she sat there.

Toby Kendall, however, was doomed. Not for what he'd done to Mandy and Ryan. Personally, I didn't give a shit for them, except in how their treatment impacted on Davy. Oddly, I decided at the same time that after I dealt with him, I'd give Joshua my answer.

Chapter 31

After Davy had seen my doctor friend and had his arm treated – involving stitches, a tetanus needle and a sling, I took him to the hospital to see his mother. The young policewoman smiled at me as we got out of the car.

“Sure you weren't ever a cop or a professional driver, Ms Ross?” She laughed. “I felt safer with you behind the wheel than with some of my colleagues.”

I shook my head and, after a moment, her hand. She meant well and she was very young. It's a long time since I was that young.

Mandy lay unconscious, bandaged and bruised. Davy sat by her bed and held her hand carefully. There was a drip attached to her other arm and oxygen tubes in her nose. He blinked, close to tears. For all her faults, Mandy Gordon was still his mother. Interestingly, he hadn't yet expressed any regrets about his father's death.

“She's going to die?”

“No. She'll be fine. ”Nat's voice was firm and I inwardly blessed him. “She'll be in here for several days, at least. Afterwards –” He shrugged. “In my opinion, such as it is, she'd benefit from rehab treatment of some kind. You know, there were a lot of drugs in her system. She's been on them for a long time.”

Davy nodded sadly. “I know. That's why I live with my grandad. But now – now my dad's – dead... Maybe she can come and stay with him. I think he'd like to try that.”

“Amelia, I need to talk with you.” Nathaniel nodded towards the doorway. “You stay here, Davy. There's a call button for a nurse if you need anything, okay. We'll be back soon.”

“Okay.” He sat stroking Mandy's hand and I followed Nat out of the ward. We walked along a passage until we found an open area with seats. He gestured to one and I sat. I would have liked a cigarette but that's a big no-no in hospitals nowadays. Later would do. “What's your connection with these people?” he demanded.

“Davy and his grandfather are friends of mine. I know about his parents. That's all. Why?”

He shook his head. “It'll be several hours, well, more than that, probably even late tonight or even tomorrow before Joshua Taylor can get back here. We're still trying to get in touch with him. I rang the police station out where his farm is, and the local constable is driving out to the farm.” He grunted. “There's no phone there, and his mobile's been switched off since Friday.”

I smiled faintly. "Joshua is not over fond of modern technology."

"I figured that out. Point is, Davy *is* a minor. You have no legal ties to him or Josh or Mandy. The boy is witness to a crime and involved in a death –"

"He didn't kill anyone. As a matter of fact, if you people had taken much longer to get there he might have been killed himself," I pointed out and he waved his arm.

"Of course. I know that." He rubbed at his face irritably. "Look here, if I let you take Davy away from here and something happens to him –"

"Something like –"

He scowled. "Something like that bastard Kendall getting at him –"

"Oh. You people *do* know what Kendall's been up to? Apart from having his thugs beat people up?" He looked at me interrogatively. "He's a drug dealer and you know it. So why haven't you arrested him long ago?"

Nathaniel grunted. "Shit, Amelia, you know a lot. Yep, we've known about him for some time now. But he's small fry. We keep tabs on him and eventually he'll lead us to the next in the chain. Sooner or later we get the top dog –"

"And in the meantime," I said sourly, "people like the Gordons and heaps of others suffer. Why the hell don't you *do* something to stop this filthy drug trade?"

"You know it's not that easy." He wasn't trying to make excuses, was stating a fact. "Anyway, that's not the problem at the moment. Who's going to protect you and Davy if I let you take him out of here?"

Oh, dear.

"Nat, I do not need protecting. I can look after Davy. I can keep him safe."

"With all due respect, no way. You are a retired school teacher and practically a senior citizen and a woman –"

"That's enough!" I stood up angrily. Only the fact we were in a hospital area prevented me from shouting at him. "I am not helpless. I may be older than you, and old enough to be Davy's grandmother, but believe me, I am quite capable of taking care of him and myself."

"Against people like Kendall and his mob?" Nat asked wryly. "Come on, be reasonable. What can –"

"Speaking of Kendall," I interrupted, "what are you lot doing about him at the moment? Davy said he was there, he and one – make that two – of his mates. They killed Ryan and beat Mandy up. Aren't you trying to find them?"

He blinked at me. "Of course we bloody well are! But –" There was clear embarrassment in his face, "– well, they seem to have disappeared."

“What? You mean you can’t find them? A couple of crims, and you’ve lost them? I don’t believe this, honestly.”

“Yeah. I’m bloody unimpressed with the situation, too. Look – and I’m talking out of place here, so don’t repeat what I’m saying, okay – we found Kendall’s vehicle parked out at the long term parking area at the domestic airport. At least three interstate and two international flights left between the time he left the Gordon’s place and the car was located. Unfortunately, they could be anywhere. We know he’s not at his house; we went there first and searched it top to bottom. His wife wasn’t at all impressed, screeched at us about invasion of privacy and yelled for their lawyers. She said we were traumatising their children.” He snorted in disgust.

“I’ll bet,” I said sourly. “People like him always have a string of lawyers at their beck and call. What about the other one – Ray, I think Davy said his name was?”

Nathaniel shook his head. “No luck there either. We searched the club and the restaurant as well. As for Ray, no one even seems to know where he lives. We *will* find them,” he assured me. “It’s just going to take time.”

“What do you intend to do about Davy?”

“D’you think he’d be safer staying here at the hospital?” Nat suggested and I looked at him sideways.

“Nathaniel, there are more ways to kill someone *in* a hospital than out of it.”

He blinked. “That’s not exactly something I would have thought you’d know anything about.” He frowned. “Where d’you think he’d be safest? I don’t like the idea of calling in the Child Protection people. They’re well intentioned, but ... “

I sat down again. “I have a holiday house. Kendall wouldn’t know anything about it.” I shrugged. “There’s no reason for him to know anything about me, anyway.” *So I thought.* “Davy and I could go stay there. I’ve got a mobile phone, so we can keep in touch. You can let Josh know we’ve gone somewhere safe. I can ring him anyway when he finally turns his phone on.”

“Yeah, sure. But that still brings us back to the question of who would protect you? And who would protect Davy?” He frowned. “Listen here, we’re friends. I’ve already said more to you than I should’ve. Trouble is, I don’t have the resources or the people to bodyguard him. Mandy’s safe enough in here –” He chuckled. “– in spite of what you just said, because the staff on this floor are all trained and screened. Actually, no one is able to get on this floor without a clearance.” Yes, that was true; Davy and I had been met at the lift by a uniformed cop and escorted to Mandy’s room. “But Davy –”

“Hmm.” I rubbed my nose and dug in my handbag. “Um, Nat, this is something I’ve never shown to anyone else.” I produced a plastic card and held it out. It was a much updated version of the card Smith had given me all those years ago. Nathaniel turned it over in his hands and frowned. “Take this, go and ring the number on it, and ask him about me.”

“What *is* this?”

“Just – go and do it.”

“It’s a Canberra number. A government department. It’s *Sunday*, Amelia. I’m going to get an answering machine.”

“No.” I shook my head. “Not on that number. It’s a 24/7. You’ll get a reply. Insist on speaking to Arthur Charles Smith and tell him what’s happened. Tell him how I’m involved.”

“Damn.” He glared at me and rose. “All right. Stay here. I’ll be back.”

“I’ll be back in fifteen minutes,” I told him. “I’m going outside for a cigarette.”

We headed off in opposite directions, but it was he who found me ten minutes later. I was on my way back inside but Nat pointed.

“Let’s go for a walk.”

I shrugged. “I gather you spoke to Smith.”

He grunted derisively. “Yes, I did that. Amelia, you’re a spook.” He gritted his teeth. “Damn it, I hate dealing with the bloody spooks. They stuff everything up. And they never tell you anything worth a damn. Bugger!”

“I’m *not* a spook, Nat. I just work for them. Well, I used to.”

“I don’t want to know the details. I really don’t.” I didn’t blame him for being upset. He’d never known me for anything other than a mild and quiet retired schoolteacher. I wasn’t sure what Smith told him, but it had been sufficient to change his view of me. I put my hand on his arm.

“Nathaniel, I have known you for years. I’m the same person, you know. I haven’t mutated into some sort of monster. I can take him away some place where no one will find him. But you have to let me do it my way. All right?”

He didn’t like it. I didn’t like it, either. At least now he wouldn’t be trying to organise protection for Davy and me. Before we went back into the hospital he bent and touched my shoulder.

“Take care.” He paused. “Should I know where you’re going?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea. You know, you must know, that you have moles in your department.”

“Yeah. It’s a bloody pain.”

“You don’t want any of them to pass on to Kendall where he can get at Davy. I’ll find us somewhere safe. You can contact me on my mobile. If you have to.” I gave him the number and got his in exchange. He wasn’t happy, but he shrugged.

“Yeah. All right. Take care, Amelia.” I didn’t point out he’d already said that.

“I will.”

Chapter 32

“Where we goin’?” Davy asked. He wasn’t upset at the idea of leaving his mother at the hospital; while he sat holding her hand she merely slept and he had realised she was in good hands. Nothing would be gained by his sitting around there. Like many teenagers, he looked and felt uncomfortable in such surroundings.

“First of all, back to get clothes and stuff for you and for me, then we’re off for a little trip.”

He was thoughtful. “That cop – he paid a lot of attention to what you said. Were you a cop once, too? You’re not now, but *were* you?”

“No.” I smiled. “I was never that. But I’ll look after you, Davy. Till your grandad gets back.”

After that, when they were safe, I would go and take care of Toby Kendall.

We moved quickly, and within an hour of leaving the hospital had been first to Joshua’s place, where Davy collected the rats and a few bits and pieces for himself. I spoke briefly with Tomic, assured him things were okay and promised him a bottle of his favourite Scotch for his favour to Davy. If anyone asked after us, I told him, he had no idea where we’d gone. Unless it was Joshua or a cop with ID. He looked worried at this.

“Problems? Davy’s not in any trouble, is he?”

“No,” I assured him. “He’ll see you in a day or two. After Josh gets home.”

At my place I lured Lennie into his carry cage, packed a few things and paused. I dialled Joshua’s home number and left him a message. It would be wise, I thought, to let someone know where we were. Josh had every right to know his grandson’s location.

Chapter 33

At the hospital, a narrow-eyed man wearing an orderly’s uniform sat outside on a bench and smoked while he ate lunch. A late lunch; he was on shift work. He swilled his coffee, tossed the scraps into a bin and pulled out a mobile phone.

“Boss? Lettner here.”

“Got anything t’tell me?” demanded Kendall.

“Oh, yes, interesting developments. The woman’s in the ICU. In a restricted ward. No one can get at her.”

“Stuff her; she’s not important. What about the kid? Is he there too?”

Lettner grunted. "Yeah, well, I saw the kid. And Ray and Thomo did a good job on Ryan. He was dead before the ambos got there. Not gunna cheat you again, that one."

"I already knew that, you moron. What about the kid?"

Lettner blinked. Lucky that Toby Kendall paid him well; he'd had enough of the bloody man and his arrogant manner. He lit another cigarette from the butt of the previous one.

"He was at the hospital with the cops. 'N' get this, not just them. That old bird Miles was trying to find out about – she was there, too. And she had words with the cop. In the end she took off with the kid. Dunno where they went."

"Did he now? That's interesting. Okay, Lettner. Get in touch if you hear anything new."

Bloody Kendall. Rude bastard. Didn't even bother to say thank you or goodbye. Lettner ground his cigarette into the gravel and returned to his duty.

Toby Kendall scowled at Ray. They were in a hotel room on the south side of the river, but as he stared out the window he was seeing, not the blue water, but his profitable business evaporating and disappearing, due to the idiocy of his underlings.

Firstly, that moron Ryan Gordon had tried to cheat him out of profits from selling on marijuana and amphetamines. He wouldn't be doing that again. Kendall's mouth twisted and he lit a cigarette.

That fool Thomo – thinking with his dick instead of his brain – he almost deserved being offed by a brat with a frying pan. All his fault! Well, he'd paid for it.

Ray swigged back a stubby of beer and sprawled on his bed, his shoes still on.

Kendall stared coldly at him. What a slob. He sat down and considered. The cops had let the brat go off with that Ross woman. The same woman Miles suspected of killing six – *six!* – of his underlings, and in various ways. He'd seen her on the CCTV, and remembered her from the time she'd stopped off at the Gordons' place. She looked harmless. Maybe she wasn't, or maybe Miles had leapt to a few too many conclusions. It had been known to happen.

Speaking of Miles ... he grabbed his mobile.

"Yeah, boss?" The geek answered after the first ring. Musta been waiting for his call. Kendall approved of that. The geek didn't have Ray's muscle, but he sure had more brains. Not difficult. "Yeah, the cops've been through the club here, and they went to the restaurant. Nah, they didn't find a thing." He could hear the amusement in Miles's tone.

"Where does that bloody woman live?" Kendall demanded.

“Uh, maybe not a good idea for you to go there? The cops could be watching the place. They’re still hangin’ around at the Gordons’ joint and they’d know her address too.” He’d found it without any difficulty. Didn’t even need the Internet; the phone book had been sufficient.

“Yeah,” Kendall snarled. “From what Lettner at the hospital said, she’s thick as thieves with the bloody cops.” He ignored the young man’s snort of amusement. “This is what yer gunna do, Miles. You take a drive around. Go check out both places. ‘N’ that brat, um, Davy’s his name, I think, find out where he’s living.” He frowned, grabbed one of Ray’s stubbies from the fridge and took a mouthful. “I seem t’remember Ryan saying the kid was with his grandfather. But he meant Mandy’s dad, not his. Reckon you can track him down?”

“Natch.” Miles sounded offended at this doubt about his ability. “Her address was a snitch t’find. You want me t’come and pick you ‘n’ Ray up?”

“Yeah. Later on. Ring me back first. We’re fine here. No one asked any questions when we booked in. We just mentioned Jobo’s name –” Jobo was one of the ‘big boys’ in the eastern states; he part owned the hotel. Kendall and Ray weren’t the first crims on the run to find the place a safe haven. “I’ll be waiting for you, Miles.” He let his voice go cold. “Don’t disappoint me, mate.”

He finished the beer and tossed the empty stubby into the bin. “Ray, get off your arse and go get us some food.”

Simple, Miles thought, sniggering as he put the phone down. Tracking down old Mrs Ross had been a cinch. Mandy Gordon’s father might be trickier, but there were records of marriages and births ... he settled himself comfortably at the computer and tapped keys gleefully. He almost felt sorry for Mrs Ross.

He remembered Zookie and Keller and the others and stopped feeling sorry for her.

An hour and a half later, he was deep into websites and dates and names, when he remembered Kendall’s instruction to take a drive and check out the Gordons’ place and Amelia Ross’s as well.

Damn! He’d clean forgotten that part of what he’d been told. Kendall would be pissed off with him if he neglected to follow orders. He left the computer running, grabbed up his car keys and hurried out.

Chapter 34

There was no sign of anyone around her house; he parked at the end of the street and watched for half an hour. No visitors, no vehicles cruising slowly past. No suspicious looking anything. Miles sighed and drove off. Computers were easier.

If it had been quiet at Amelia’s place, the same could not be said of Ryan and Mandy Gordon’s house. The two bodies had been removed. There were still two

police vehicles parked in the street, along with two unmarked cars. Cops and plain clothed workers were going in and out of the place. Miles watched as one, loaded with photographic equipment, trundled out of the house, loaded his paraphernalia into a vehicle and drove off.

Nah, no way would the kid have come back here. He'd be off somewhere with his grandfather or Mrs Ross. There was no one at her place. He shrugged and set off home to his beloved computer. Miles believed in letting his fingers do the searching, ably assisted by Google. He was good at it. He was also tired.

Records of births and marriages gave him Mandy Gordon's maiden name and that led to further information about her parents. Miles hesitated briefly at the discovery Mandy's brother had died young, then he continued, enthralled at his own ability to dig into people's background.

Joshua Taylor. .. There he was! Miles noted his current and past addresses, telephone numbers and occupations and avoided the temptation of digging deeper. He only needed an address for the bloody man. He made a call to the number listed and was not surprised to get no response, merely the ubiquitous answering service available. He hung up and started digging around into Amelia Ross's details.

If, as Kendall believed likely, Davy Gordon had gone off with her, there were any number of possibilities for their whereabouts. Miles frowned. Where the hell would she go to hide in safety? Or what she would believe to be safety? Not her home address; that was for sure.

He rang Kendall again.

"Found the old boy's address and phone number but there was no one there. Hey, boss, you reckon that cop mate of yours might have any idea where they've gone?"

Kendall snarled at him and Miles winced. No, his cop mate had absolutely no bloody idea. Useless bastard! Miles had better come up with something more useful, and soon. He sighed, hung up and got back to work.

Amelia Ross ... aka Annerlika Roschka ... now, *that* was interesting! He blinked at the screen. Arrived in Australia November 1963, became a naturalised citizen in 1969 and legally changed her name to the present Amelia Ross. He grunted thoughtfully; he'd never know she wasn't Australian born. When he'd been in her class way back in 1990 he hadn't even been interested in nationalities or backgrounds. He couldn't recall her even having a detectable accent. She'd been plain old Mrs Ross to him and he'd never thought any more about it. Fascinated, he read on.

In the 1990s, after she retired, she'd applied successfully for a passport and her record of overseas destinations indicated an enthusiastic traveller. All very interesting, but was really getting him nowhere.

She owned her home, well, big deal! Hang on, for an ex teacher, she was very well off ... now, if he could override this password ... and that one ... he could get into all her banking details. This was chickenfeed; he'd long since wormed himself into all of Kendall's financial records. Hers were much simpler. Interesting; she'd held a part time position with a Federal government department, and at the same time as she'd been teaching, back between 1980 and 1991. Hmm...

Miles stretched and yawned. He'd earned a break. Coffee and food sounded like an excellent idea. Afterwards, he'd find that bloody woman, if it was the last thing he did! Not just for Zookie, and Keller, and all the others. Not even to please his boss, but for his own satisfaction. She was a cunning old bitch. He'd track her down and take great pleasure in doing so.

And after that? He brushed away the thought that Kendall would most probably – certainly – kill her and probably also the boy if he were with her. Dwelling on such possibilities would take away his personal satisfaction at the success of his search.

Fortified with caffeine and a hamburger, Miles attacked his computer again.

Chapter 35

In Canberra, a warning light showed on a computer in Arthur Charles Smith's departmental headquarters. Someone had illegally accessed records. He frowned. A hacker? Bloody hell, as if things weren't difficult enough for his department anyway.

Someone looking for information about Amelia Ross. Interesting, bearing in mind the earlier telephone call from Nathaniel Dane, also regarding her and at her instigation. She'd never done that before, never called on help from him. Admittedly, all she had required was for him to assure Dane she was more capable than she appeared and he could trust her.

Smith's eyes narrowed and he leant back. This hacking was a worrying development. Had she finally slipped up? He hoped not. In truth, he had no idea how many deaths, apart from those he'd requested, could be credited to that mild mannered – but very cold-eyed – woman. He made a note to get Barnes to look into it, asap ... they liked Amelia; her work for 42S had always been of the highest standard.

But she was getting on ... well, weren't they all? Maybe their day was done, but he hoped not. Intelligence and security work gave him a rush nothing else ever would or could.

Finally success. Miles whooped with delight. She had another house; admittedly only a holiday house, but it was a distinct possibility. Not that far from the city, maybe a couple of hours' drive. Less, the way that maniac Ray drove. Miles decided they'd go in his car. Well, currently Kendall's was out at the airport, where they'd dumped it to avoid detection and set up a false trail.

The coffee had helped, but he was tired, so tired. No one else ever appreciated the mental strain involved in computer work; they jeered at what they could not understand. He'd have a break first, then he'd contact Kendall and they could find Mrs bloody Amelia Ross and take care of her. He settled himself on the sofa and closed his eyes. There was plenty of time

Chapter 36

Amelia

I've had the beach cottage, less than a hundred kilometres from the city, for about four years. Originally, it had belonged to a family of cheery Italian immigrants and on the occasions I'd visited the beachfront town, I had watched the progress as they all shared the job of building it. When, five years later, they decided to put it on the market, I was happy to pay their asking price. It wasn't posh or elaborate, but suited me perfectly.

The house stood on a slope. A verandah stretched all the way along the front, over a garage and small storage area. Inside, there was one main room with a couple of bedrooms opening from it. Neither the previous occupants nor I had bothered with floor coverings of any kind, except for a couple of rugs in the bedrooms. The original wooden floor looked and was comfortable and easy to keep clean, although in a few spots by the walls there were nails showing and even a few knotholes. It was a holiday cottage, for god's sake. I could live with its flaws.

At the back, there was a sleepout, bathroom and loo and laundry, all with louvred windows looking down to the next street, with half a kilometre of low scrub and bush between it and the sand hills leading to the beach.

Davy was silent as I slid the car into the garage. I offered him the key.

"Here, go and open the front door for me. I'll bring the bags and the cat cage." I smiled. "And the rats."

"I can help. Sheesh, Amelia –" He rolled his eyes. "It's only a scratch. Doesn't even hurt anymore."

"Okay." I smiled and dug our two bags out of the boot and handed him his, pretending not to notice as he winced at the weight. I retrieved Lennie's carry container from the back seat. He opened one eye, looked at me and went back to sleep. For not the first time, I thanked my lucky stars I'd opted for a placid rag doll instead of a more active Siamese or similar breed.

The wooden steps creaked as we went up and into the house. I dropped my bag on the floor. The fridge was still running; I came down here at irregular intervals and figured it was as easy to leave it on as off. The weather had been warm and the place was stuffy, so I opened a couple of windows and pointed to the two doors in the end wall.

“You can have the room on the right. There are sheets and blankets in the cupboard in there. Can you manage to make the bed okay?”

His only reaction to that was to grin crookedly and roll his eyes as he disappeared into the room. I put my bag in my room, opened the window, filled and turned on the kettle. While I waited for it to boil, I sat out on the front verandah to have a cigarette and consider things. Hopefully Joshua would get the message we'd left on his phone. Maybe the police would track down and arrest Kendall.

I hoped not. I wanted that pleasure. If I found him before the cops did, there would be no need for a trial afterwards. He'd gone free so far because the possibility of tracking down the next link up from him in the drug trade was considered important enough to override minor felonies. When he condoned or maybe even ordered the murder of Ryan Gordon, Kendall overstepped the mark.

Davy and I were on our own. Thanks to Mr Smith, I had been able to avoid passing on the address of my beach cottage to Nathaniel. I suppose, if he wanted and needed to, he could find it easily enough, but I didn't plan on us staying there for long. Once Josh turned up, I could pass Davy over to him and get on with what I did best. Mr Smith had been right, all those years ago.

I rubbed my face, ground out the cigarette and looked up as Davy appeared, a cup of coffee in his good hand. One day, I decided, he was going to make some lucky woman a wonderful husband. In spite of his admitted current lack of interest in girls, he had assured me, he was most definitely not gay. Girls were just...in the future.

“Thanks. There's Coke in the fridge, I think. I leave some stuff in there.”

He grinned and produced the can. “Found it!”

Trust him. He'd never go hungry or thirsty. It seems all teenagers have an innate ability to locate food and drink wherever they go.

The coffee was very welcome and when I glanced at my watch I realised with a shock it wasn't yet four o'clock. We'd all had an early start to the day. I stood up and stretched.

“I think I need a walk. You want to come down to the beach?”

He was cautious. “You reckon we're safe here? That – Kendall – won't find us here, will he?”

I shrugged. “Can't see how. He might well find my address and even your grandad's, but I can't see how he'd find this place.”

“Okay.”

“Go and put your shoes on first.”

“Shoes?” He blinked at me. “Didn't you say the beach?”

“Oh, yes, but we’re going to walk down through the scrub. It’s a bit rough, and, um, every so often I see a snake out there.”

“Um ... a snake? What sort?”

“Dugites, mostly. Sometimes a tiger snake. I certainly wouldn’t want to go treading on one at any time.” I grinned at him. “Not unless I was wearing steel capped boots. Then I just might think about it. We can take our shoes off when we get down to the beach.”

I do *not* like snakes. Neither, apparently, did Davy. He fetched his shoes and put them on with the closest display to meekness I’d seen from him.

Chapter 37

There was a short track to the beach, down through scrubby bushland and sand to a gravel road which led in turn to a car park. White sand sloped down and beyond it was blue choppy water. Several kilometres out to sea, a large rocky island reared itself and there were half a dozen smaller outcrops. I had been out to the larger island once or twice; there were birds and lizards and other small creatures there. I preferred the mainland.

We walked couple of kilometres along the beach and back; I figured the physical activity might tire him and help him sleep that night. He had become fretful during the car trip and I wondered when a reaction to the traumatic events of the morning would set in. He hadn’t mentioned his father even once. It wouldn’t help to push him; I believed Joshua better suited to counselling if indeed counselling was required. After we got back to the house, I tried his mobile and home number a couple of times, without success. I gave Nathaniel a quick call that evening, to reassure him we were okay. He told me there’d been no further developments; no sightings of Kendall had been reported. He also reassured me that Mandy Gordon was safe and her condition was improving.

When I set down my mobile I noticed Davy was looking thoughtful. More than that, he seemed miserable. Even hearing his mother was okay didn’t cheer him.

“Davy?”

He looked up at me from where he sat huddled on the end of the sofa.
“Amelia ... that man Thomo –”

“He tried to kill you, Davy. And he was going to assault your mum.” I regarded him seriously. “You’re not feeling bad about him, are you?”

“I didn’t mean for him to die. I just – swung that pan at him – and he slipped over and cracked his head! I didn’t mean that to happen!” He was trembling now and tears were running down his cheeks.

“It was an accident. He caused it to happen. And don’t forget – he was trying to kill you at the time. Don’t cry over him.”

“I – I know that. But I keep seeing it happen again. In my mind.”

I’d managed to keep him occupied all afternoon and evening without time to think, but now the images would return. When I killed the man who had been supplying Hermann and me, I saw his face every day and every night for weeks afterwards. I tried to keep my voice gentle. Maybe Josh would be better to advise him, but he wasn’t there and I was.

“Davy, you *will* remember it, for a long time. Don’t let it ruin your life. Your mother is going to be proud of you, when she’s better. She’s going to need you too, you and Josh. That man is dead, Davy, and he deserved to die. If he wasn’t dead, you would be, and probably Mandy as well.” Damn it, I had gone all hard on him, not gentle at all. He blinked at me.

“It doesn’t bother you much, does it? That someone’s dead.”

“I’m sorry about your dad, yes. As for that Thomo, he got what he deserved. I don’t care about him at all, and you certainly don’t need to either.”

It was time, I decided, to let Davy into what Joshua already knew about me. If nothing else, it would distract him from any feelings of guilt that might be trying to creep in to his mind.

Chapter 38

I found him a Coke and settled down with coffee and a cigarette. Lennie was on the sofa and Davy was idly stroking him. I was serious when I spoke again.

“Listen, Davy. A long time ago, when I was young, I was *not* a nice person –”

“Heh, really? That’s what my grandfather said, too. He wouldn’t give me any juicy details. Are you going to? Do you have a deep dark secret? It wasn’t a baby or anything like that. What could it have been?”

“Davy –” My voice was edged. “– shut up. I am being serious here. Deadly serious, as a matter of fact. I lived in Germany and I was a nasty little bitch of a girl. I fought with my parents, and they were good people, but I hated being disciplined, told what I could and could not do. I suppose I rebelled, like lots of teenagers did. Then I fell in with a lot of very bad people. I ... was a drug addict. I managed to kick the habit when my boyfriend died.” And my baby. “And then –” I let out my breath in a deep sigh. “Then I killed people. For money.”

Ah, that got his attention.

“What? What for?”

“They were the people who provided drugs, for young suckers like Hermann and me. Look.” I was wearing a tee shirt over long cotton pants, and a light cardigan over that. I took the cardigan off and held out my arms. “See, I still have scars on my arms. They’ve faded... well, it’s been over forty years. They’re needle scars, and – way back when I was using drugs, well, I wasn’t always careful, and my arms got

infected more than once. I was lucky it wasn't any worse." I put the cardigan back on and walked around the room. "I got help and I was able to do something, to make myself feel better for what happened way back then. With luck, when your mum gets out of hospital, she'll be able to get straight."

He was frowning now. "That's why you go to church. To pray for your soul."

"More or less." And for theirs. "One night I met your grandfather. He saw me kill a man."

Davy's eyes widened and he gasped in something between horror and enlightenment.

"Oh. I see. That's why he was scared shitless of you. That's why he got so upset that time he went around t' see you."

I smiled. "Your grandad isn't frightened of me anymore, you know."

"Yeah, that's right. He told me he was hoping you'd marry him." He grinned cheekily. "That would be great, I reckon."

"Hmm. We'll have to wait and see about that." I stretched and yawned. I still hadn't made my mind up about Joshua's proposal. My heart said yes although my head had grave doubts about how it could all work out. I valued my freedom to do whatever I wanted, when and how I wanted. I could not, in my wildest dreams, visualise Josh sharing my activities against people like Kendall. From our previous discussions, I was sure he would disapprove.

Davy was thoughtful, and when he spoke again, his voice was low. "Ah, Amelia ... how many people did you kill?"

Oh dear, was that a tone of admiration in his voice? I hoped not.

"Far too many, I think." I shrugged. "There was a man I met. His daughter had been a drug addict – she died – and he wanted to do something about the filthy trade. He helped me, and paid me. He was a very wealthy man. An American."

"Hmm." Davy frowned. "You don't look like someone who's done all those things, you know. You look harmless."

"I hope so." That was an advantage of being a middle-aged woman. Most people didn't even see me. If they did, they didn't notice or remember me. Annoying when I wanted service in a shop, but brilliant when I preferred to be invisible.

Maybe if I'd been more alert, things might have gone differently. But I was tired and I'd had a long day. So had Davy. After all, it was early morning when he had received Mandy's desperate call for help. By the time we finished our little heart-to-heart talk about the right and wrongs of killing people it was close to eleven pm and we were exhausted. I fell into bed and slept very soundly. Alas, not for long.

Chapter 39

About midnight, I was rudely awakened, by loud voices and rough hands. Toby bloody Kendall. He marched into my house and into my bedroom as if he owned the place, damn him, and switched on the overhead light. His off sider Ray dragged me from my bed before I had the chance to reach for the pistol from the bedside table. At least I was decent; I wear PJs to bed, even in the summer.

Lennie dived under the bed at their loud entry. Smart cat! It was a shame I couldn't join him.

"Oh, bugger," I mumbled. "What the hell do you want, Kendall?" I blinked at him, feigning middle-aged shortsighted bewilderment. Much chance of that with a gun on my bedside table. Kendall picked it up and weighed it in his hand.

"Been after you for a long time, Ms smart arse Ross. Bumping off my men wasn't a smart move."

I'd been trying to protect Davy, and had dragged him into deep trouble. I had never considered the possibility that Kendall might have tracked *me* down, and for what I had been doing against him. I suppose I had been over confident of my own ability to do too many things.

'Ms smart-arse Ross' was closer to the target than he thought. I had been stupid, arrogant to think Davy would be safe with me. More like, I was going to get him killed. At the same time, I was curious as to *how* Kendall had connected me with the deaths. I'd been careful. "Huh? What are you talking about? And what the hell d'you want here? It's the bloody middle of the night."

He snorted. "Dunno who you think you're kidding, you stupid bloody woman, but we've been on your track for a while. Would have been here earlier, but Miles fell asleep on the job and didn't bring me up to date till I got on the phone and woke him up." He stepped towards the door and Ray prompted me along, his pistol in the small of my back.

"Nice little place you've got here," he sneered. "Quiet and out of the way."

"Not that far out of the way," I retorted. "I do have neighbours."

"Yes, and they're not home. We checked." He smirked at me and jerked his head towards the door. "Out into the other room."

I shook my head at the sight of Miles dragging Davy along with him. I had promised to protect him. What a lousy protector I had turned out to be. Maybe I was getting too old for things. But we weren't dead yet. Ray and Miles shoved Davy on the lounge and me onto a kitchen chair. Kendall handed my gun to Miles, who fingered it as if unaware of its function and slid it away in his pocket. I suppressed my faint amusement at his reaction and shook my head. It really was no smiling matter.

Kendall cast a glance at Davy. "Good one. Both you and the brat. We can kill two birds with one stone, huh, Miles?"

"You don't need Davy. Let him go."

"Get real. He killed Thomo."

"He didn't," I said. "Thomo managed to do that all by himself. Not to mention the fact that he was trying to rape Davy's mother at the time."

Miles blinked uneasily; I don't think he had known that.

"Maybe –"

"Shuttup!" Kendall snapped. "She's the one we're after, Miles. He's a bonus."

"Oh, come *on* –" I tried to sound innocent, and harmless, and all the other things one normally associates with a woman in her sixties. They weren't fooled.

Kendall pulled out a chair and sat down, watching me coldly. Ray slouched near the door, gun in hand. Miles looked as if he'd much rather be anywhere else. Davy was huddled on the lounge, but his eyes had gone bright and watchful. I needed to be careful, or he'd get us both killed.

Yeah, like Kendall wasn't going to kill us anyway.

Davy, I thought, *don't*. Whatever it is you're thinking of, don't do it. I managed to catch his eye and shook my head. *No*. He sighed and seemed to shrink further into himself, but the tension was gone from his attitude.

"Miles is a geek," Kendall said to me, almost conversationally, "but he's a smart geek. He found out a lot about you. CCTV and computers are wonderful tools, Ms Ross."

I smiled back at him as brightly and insincerely as I could manage. Too late now, I thought, to deny anything. I could however keep us all talking for as long as possible.

"Yes, indeed," I agreed. "Timothy always was a bright pupil."

"Timothy!" Ray snorted disdainfully. Miles flushed.

Kendall scratched at his ear with one hand and held his gun pointed at me with the other. He looked from Miles to me.

"Find something to tie her up with ... *Timothy*."

"Huh?"

Kendall rolled his eyes. "She's an old bird, but I wouldn't trust her as far as I could throw her. And we're not in a hurry." Oh, so he was going to savour the moment, was he? Could be a point in our favour. He went on. "Now, find something t'tie her up with. Move yerself!"

Chapter 40

The younger man stared around the room, almost desperately. Well, I suppose there was a distinct lack of tying up materials available. He started to go through the drawers and gave a sound of triumph when he turned back with a length of nylon clothesline. Damnation! I knew I'd meant to stick that out in the laundry. I sighed and put my hands behind the chair as Kendall ordered. Miles fumbled with the cord. He wasn't very good with things like that. It was to be hoped Ray wouldn't come and check his handiwork.

"Sorry, Ms Ross," Miles mumbled into my ear before he moved back to stand near Kendall. Behind me, I flexed my wrists and fought against the smirk I could feel on my face. Miles was never a Boy Scout; if he were, he'd failed the 'tying knots' course. They didn't bother tying Davy up. I suppressed my quirk of amusement at being considering more dangerous than a fifteen year-old boy. Well, I was.

"So," I went on, sounding far more cheerful than I was. "Exactly what did *Timothy* find out about me for you, Kendall?"

Kendall lit a cigarette and leaned back. His tone was almost conversational. But there was ice in his eyes. Miles fidgeted and Ray leaned against the wall, his gaze flickering around restlessly.

I went on. "I wouldn't mind a cigarette, too. A last request." If he came close enough to me, imagining I was helpless, he'd find out damn soon I wasn't. Even better, his mate Ray. *He* had been next on my list.

"Maybe later."

"I'll hold you to that." I shrugged; didn't want to appear too keen or he'd wonder about the wisdom of approaching me, tied up or otherwise. I could wait. Miles I more or less discounted when it came to using a weapon; his discomfort was obvious. Let either one of the others near me, and I'd have his gun within seconds. For an 'old bird' I could move quickly when necessary. This was going to be necessary. Kendall's voice was hard but my opinion of him had dropped even further. He was wasting time gloating. Moron!

"Six of my men have been murdered in the past months. Miles here did some research and found that some of them had left my premises either shortly before or at the same time as you, when you were either at the restaurant or the nightclub. You were the only one in the right place at the right time. Or else you had some other connection to them." His tone became a sneer. "Bit fucking old, aren't you, for the nightclub scene? Did you think we wouldn't notice you?"

I grinned nastily. "The cops never did. We middle aged women, Kendall, we're invisible when we want to be. Not like your thugs. They're... conspicuous."

"You think maybe I should be hiring you instead of getting rid of you, perhaps?"

"Now there's a thought. But I only kill people who deserve it."

“You’re not going to be killing anyone else,” he said flatly. He turned his attention to Davy. “As for you, you little bastard –” Davy started up off the lounge but clearly thought better of it. He subsided and Kendall scowled as he turned back to me. “Just what *is* he to you?” he sneered. “A toy boy, perhaps? That offers some ... interesting scenarios for your deaths.”

Davy spoke up. “She’s my grandmother.”

“What?” Kendall stared in disbelief. “Her? Get real! Huh!” He made a rude noise. Ray sniggered. I glanced at him and battled to keep my face blank. A distraction I had not anticipated had appeared. Not half a metre from him, a snake slithered from one of the knotholes in the floor. I had intended once to cover them up but had missed several. Davy had seen it, too. I looked back at Kendall and smiled faintly.

“Davy’s grandfather and I are acquaintances. That’s all. You really should let him go, y’know.”

“Don’t be so fucking stupid!” Kendall snorted. “I owe you, for those men – and as for him –” he shrugged. “Too bad. Why’d you pick on me, anyway? Running a one person vigilante scheme, were you?”

I didn’t answer. What would the point have been? He wouldn’t care that I’d heard about him in connection with the drug trade, years earlier, on a job I’d done for Mr Smith. He’d been younger, starting out on his criminal career, but had prospered – through the deaths and misery of many others – in the intervening years. I’d remembered the name, and when I came across him again, had decided to, as he put it, run a ‘one person vigilante scheme’. Not that it made much difference now. Just my small gesture against all the scum like him. Satisfactory, but pointless, in the grand scheme of things.

“She’s gonna be my grandmother,” Davy insisted. “She and my grandad are gonna get married.” Bless him, he was trying his best to distract Kendall. After that first quick glance towards the snake, he was speaking to keep their attention focused on himself.

The snake had worked its way free out from the knothole and raised its head, testing the air.

The rats! They were in the cage on the table; the reptile could sense them. And they could sense *it*. They were restless, running back and forth and sniffing nervously. Davy looked across at the cage and frowned, realising what the snake was after. He caught his breath and Ray stared at him.

“What the hell you lookin’ at, kid?” He glanced down and screeched. “A bloody snake! Shit!” Foolishly, he tried to stamp on it. It curled around, lifted its head and bit him on the ankle. He screeched again, bent and tried to grab it, whereupon it obligingly sank its fangs into his hand. He dropped his gun and threw the reptile across the room, uncaring of its direction, as long as it was away from him. It twisted in the air and wrapped itself round Kendall’s arm, unfortunately not the one holding his gun. I wasn’t sure whether it bit him or not. It certainly distracted him. He swatted at it and it dropped to the floor near Miles.

He reacted by leaping onto a chair. Kendall blinked stupidly, the gun in his hand lowered. Maybe the reptile *had* bitten him. I hoped it wouldn't suffer from food poisoning. I pulled free of the chair; my hands had been free since about ten seconds after Miles had done his best (or worst) with the clothesline, and I dived towards Ray's fallen gun. *He* was too busy wailing and screaming even to know where the weapon was. Male hysteria is a wonderful thing to see.

"Behind the lounge, Davy!" I shoved him out of the way and snatched up the weapon, aware that Kendall had come to his senses and was raising his gun. I fired just as he did. In the background, I heard a vehicle door slamming and footsteps pounding up the wooden steps to the verandah. Damnation, I thought ... surely not reinforcements for the bloody man?

No – it was Joshua Taylor who burst in through the front door. I stared at him dully, realising something was wrong. Ray's gun slipped from my grasp and when I put my hand to my waist it felt wet. I felt an overwhelming sensation of cold, but nothing hurt. There was blood on my fingers and I stared at it stupidly. Mine? How come? No, that was Davy's line ... '*how come?*'... I giggled inanely. Dimly, I could hear sirens approaching.

The cavalry. Just a little late to save the day. Better late than never ... I was losing it, I knew.

In front of me, Toby Kendall lay sprawled on the floor, face down and unmoving. Good. I'd got him. Damn it, he had shot me, too. Miles was still on the chair and Ray, in hysterics, was finding it hard to catch his breath. The snake, after causing total chaos and not succeeding in getting anywhere near the rats, had disappeared, most likely down another knothole. I hate snakes, but I could have kissed that one. Stupid, I thought. It was a dugite. They're venomous. Kissing a snake ... what a bloody daft thought, Amelia, I told myself. I'd rather kiss ... Joshua ...

Then I was falling, almost in slow motion and all I could think was that it was going to hurt like hell when I hit the floor, probably flat on my face. I'd probably break my nose. I don't remember anything else. I don't remember hitting the floor.

Chapter 41

"Amelia? Wake up. Wiggle your fingers. And your toes. Move them. Now. Come on."

The voice was insistent. I wanted to curse, to tell its owner to go away and do something physically impossible, but it persisted. I could get peace only by complying and moving my fingers and wrists, then my toes and feet. Blackness. I was dizzy. I was cold. The voice came and went through a fog. I could hear other vague voices, concerned, demanding and gentle. Some were familiar; others weren't.

The blackness faded to a dark swirl. Faces came and went. Lights shone into my eyes. The voice returned to make me move again. I slept. Once I opened my eyes and saw Davy over me. Another time, Joshua.

And I dreamed. Weird dreams. Frying pans, cats, snakes and skateboards. I'm not sure what sort of drugs they were pouring into me, but they produced bizarre effects. Pethidine, or maybe morphine. I floated; I dreamed of running and flying and even bouncing along. I dreamed of falling, a long, long way down. I never hit the ground, just floated off again. Weird.

After what seemed a long, long time, I managed to open my eyes and focus. Davy and Josh were there; their faces swam above me and I blinked.

"Josh?" My throat hurt and he leant forward to offer me a sip of water through a straw. His expression was strained and there were shadows under his eyes. He swallowed and rubbed my hand. I tried to move the other and he spoke.

"No. Don't try to move your arm. They've still got a drip in there."

"What – happened? Is Davy – ?"

"Davy's fine. You had us worried. We thought we were going to lose you." He sighed. "Amelia, do you remember what happened?"

I tried, but couldn't concentrate.

"I'm tired... Gotta sleep some more... Come back later..." I drifted off again. The last thing I remember was the sensation of my hand in his. It felt secure.

When I next awoke I felt better. They were both there again, Davy and Josh. This time I could remember, too, what had happened. Oddly, my first question was about my cat.

"Lennie? Who's been feeding Lennie?"

Davy laughed. "He's fine. We've got him at our place."

"Good." I concentrated on his face. "Are you okay?"

"Yep. Grandad got there just at the right time. The cops were right behind him. He called an ambulance for you."

"Kendall's dead." Another voice; this time Nathaniel Dane. "His mate Ray is still in intensive care. That snake bit him a couple of times and he had a nasty reaction to that and to the antivenene as well."

I yawned. "Stuff Ray. Um, what about Miles?"

Davy chortled. "He ran. Took off like a rocket."

"Is that so?" I tried to laugh. It hurt. Josh continued.

"Yeah. We were concerned with you and he bolted. Out the front door and then he took off. They'd all come in his car. The cops found it later, back at the nightclub, but there's no sign of Miles yet."

"I'm not even sure that there's gonna be." Nat sounded tired. "We'd already got a search warrant, so we went through the nightclub and the restaurant again and

Kendall's place too. Extra carefully this time. Seems like Miles got in before us – he sweet talked Kendall's wife into letting him into his office and musta cleaned out all the bank accounts. Stupid man should have known better than to trust a computer geek with his finances. Might be better for him if we catch up with him first. Kendall's mates in the eastern states are gonna be highly pissed off."

"Right." Good luck to him, I thought. Miles was resourceful. With luck, he'd surface in another country, with another identity. He might even be satisfied to live on his ill gotten – or well earned, depending on your point of view – gains. I was ready to doze off again.

"Amelia." This time it was Davy. "Mum's goin' to be all right. She's coming off the drugs in here. Then she's coming home. To Grandad's place."

"That's nice." Frankly, I didn't give a damn about Mandy Gordon. I shut my eyes and drifted off again. For the first time since I'd had my baby, I was helpless. Oddly, I didn't care. It was comfortable. I was safe. Joshua and Davy were there. They were looking after Lennie. I cared more about that cat than about Davy's stupid mother.

Chapter 42

A month later, I was sitting at home, recuperating. The movies are deceptive, you know. The hero gets shot in one scene and five minutes later he's fully recovered. That's bullshit. Believe me. I was lucky to be alive. If Josh hadn't arrived when he did, stopped the bleeding and called the ambulance, they would have been burying me too. The cops were right behind him, but he got to me first. Kendall got a nice funeral anyway. All his underworld mates sent enormous floral tributes, erring on the side of bad taste. Ray lingered for eight days, but succumbed to a combination of snake venom, complications from the anti venene and pneumonia. Very sad. I don't think.

Joshua suggested I should stay with them when I got out of hospital, but I refused. Better that they take in Mandy; she needed care and support, not to mention someone to keep a stern eye on her in case she fell back into her addicted ways. She bounced back resiliently from Ryan's murder, started to put on a little weight and to take an interest in Davy. I suspected her life as a widow would be an improvement on her life as a wife. She was young enough to make a new start. Like I had, all those years ago. I wished her well, but didn't want any more contact with her than necessary. Not until I was fully recovered, anyway.

I had a visitor one afternoon. Nathaniel Dane. Grave faced, he placed a small flat package on the table. I offered him coffee but he suggested something stronger, so I found the bottle of good Scotch and poured him one. I considered and poured another for myself.

He toasted me quietly and pointed past me at the flowers on the table.

"From Joshua?"

I grinned crookedly. “Um, no, actually. Arthur Charles Smith. And his department.” There *were* flowers from Josh, of course; they stood beside my bed. There were flowers from Davy. From the Tomics, and Josh’s brothers in law...I’d never received so many bouquets in my life.

Nat rolled his eyes. “That bloody spook. He’s been on the phone to me every other day, about you. Y’know, he rang me back, just before you got yourself shot. Someone had been hacking into your records.”

“Oh. Timothy Miles, I presume.”

“Yep. We haven’t found him yet.” He grunted. “I don’t reckon we’re gunna, either. Amelia, you’ve got mates in high places.”

“Hmm?”

Nat pointed to the package on the table. “That. We went through Kendall’s places with a fine toothcomb. Just as well for you, y’know, that I’m the computer expert in my department. Miles had been doing a lotta interesting research. On you.”

“Oh.” There wasn’t much I could say to that.

“There are three computer discs in there. They were extremely interesting viewing and reading. There are no other copies of the stuff on them. I assure you of that. Smith was very precise in his instructions to me, and to my superiors. My advice to you is to destroy them.” He gave me a long hard stare. “I’m so close to retiring it won’t matter to me if anything ever comes out. I and everyone else can always claim to have been pressured by a Federal department. You don’t want anyone else to get the impression you’re something more than a middle aged retired teacher, do you?”

“You know me, Nat – that’s all I really am.”

“Yeah, sure.” He stood, drained his glass and bent to give me a brief kiss on the cheek. “Spook,” he muttered under his breath. Then he was gone.

I was safe. I had wondered, vaguely, how Kendall had been able to track me down. No one else ever would, though. It had been Miles, I realised. An ex-pupil of mine – clearly I’d taught him entirely too well.

His research *was* fascinating. I ran the discs through my computer and gained considerable respect for him as I did. He still hadn’t been found; there were reported sightings all over the country but I had the feeling Timothy Miles might never be found. Suited me okay. I remembered liking him when he was at school. I suspected his poor knot tying wasn’t entirely by accident, either. If things had gone differently back at my beach house, he might even have proved an ally.

He took my gun when he fled, I remembered. I hoped he did an efficient job of getting rid of it. Ballistic tests, if it should ever turn up, would indicate it was the weapon which had been used on Kendall’s associate Bryce.

I smashed the computer discs into fragments and dumped the pieces in half a dozen rubbish bins in widely scattered suburbs.

I was in the garden again, dozing rather than weeding, when Joshua Taylor came through the gate.

This time, I reached out my arms to him and said yes.

the end

