

Blood Ties
by JD Nixon

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**Cuttings from my scrapbook . . .**

*Wattling Bay Messenger*, Tuesday, 3 April, 1888

**Man lynched by angry crowd after terrible murder**

Residents of the small township nestled at the foot of Mount Big were shocked last week when two timber-getters stumbled over the body of Mrs Elizabeth Fuller, aged 21 years. The murdered woman was found in a paddock off to the side of the road leading to the township. It appeared that she had been outraged before being

brutally beaten about the head with a large rock that was found in near proximity. Mrs Fuller, described by the townsfolk as a very comely woman, had been on her way to lend assistance to her husband's sister during her first confinement.

Suspicion for the heinous crime fell immediately on bullock driver, Mr Ned Bycraft, aged 30 years. He was seen by the timber-getters with bloodied hands running wildly from the paddock shortly before their most gruesome of discoveries. According to the timber-getters, Mr Bycraft had publicly threatened to do violent harm to Mrs Fuller on several occasions for rightly rejecting his insistent and unwanted attentions. The husband of the murdered woman, Mr Clem Fuller, also a timber-getter, had reportedly come to physical blows at least twice with Mr Bycraft over his unseemly behaviour towards Mrs Fuller.

An angry crowd of local men (one of whom is believed to have been Mr Fuller) ran Mr Bycraft to the ground before hanging him to his death from the branches of a nearby tree.

Constable Dougal Tighe from the Wattling Bay constabulary was ordered to the Mount Big township to investigate both deaths. But after receiving no co-operation in his enquiries from the local townsfolk, Constable Tighe advised this reporter that there would be no further investigations undertaken into this matter.

Ned Bycraft's older brother, Mr Bill Bycraft, told this reporter that his brother was innocent of any crime and had actually himself been running for help after discovering Mrs Fuller's body when he was noticed by the two timber-getters. He further threatened that there would be a deadly reckoning on those responsible for killing his brother, particularly on the Fuller family.

Mr Fuller told this reporter that justice had been delivered for the dreadful outrage and murder of his wife and that he did not regret the circumstances of Mr Bycraft's death. He would not admit to being a participant in the lynching though.

Mrs Fuller was buried on Friday in a small but well-attended service. She is survived by her husband and two young children.

Mr Ned Bycraft is survived by a wife and seven children.

*Wattling Bay Messenger*, Wednesday, 22 January 1986

### **Life sentence for 'depraved' murder of young mum**

Robert John Bycraft (known as Bobby), 29, seasonal fruit-picker of Mount Big Town, was today found guilty and given a life sentence in the Supreme Court for the vicious murder of young mother, Leonie Mary Fuller, 24. Bycraft showed no emotion as Justice Leonard MacEnroe told the court that the murder was one of the most depraved crimes he had ever presided over in his twenty years on the bench.

Mrs Fuller was attacked in her house in Mount Big Town by Bycraft in June last year. She was half-strangled before being raped and stabbed repeatedly, with such savagery that the blade of the knife broke off inside her body.

Mrs Fuller's daughter, who was only two at the time, was also attacked during the violent crime, sustaining several serious knife wounds to her arms and torso. Police believe that the young child may have witnessed her mother's brutal murder. The little girl was unconscious from blood loss when discovered by her distraught father. She was found lying underneath her parents' bed, where it is believed that Mrs Fuller pushed her to save her from the murderous frenzy. The court heard during the trial that Mrs Fuller suffered extensive defence wounds during the attack trying to protect her daughter and herself. Mrs Fuller was three months pregnant at the time of her death.

Mrs Fuller's friends and family, including her husband and parents, were in

court for the sentencing and were abused by relatives of Bycraft, some of whom had to be forcibly removed from the courthouse by court security.

A spokesman for the Fuller family, Mr Abel Stormley, later thanked the Wattling Bay detectives for their relentless efforts to solve the crime and bring Bycraft to justice. The family also extended thanks to the community at Mount Big Town for their support during the family's traumatic experience.

Bycraft is expected to appeal his conviction.

*Wattling Bay Messenger*, Wednesday, 13 May 1998

### **Man found guilty of assaulting teens**

Redmond Christopher Bycraft, 22, unemployed of Mount Big Town, was today found guilty in the Wattling Bay District Court of two counts of assault occasioning bodily harm and one count of attempted abduction after he attacked two teenagers in Mount Big Town in mid-February.

The court heard that Bycraft deliberately ran his car into the two teenagers, a female aged 15 and a male aged 16, as they cycled to the beach early one Saturday morning. The male teen was knocked unconscious in the attack and Bycraft then attempted to drag the injured female teen into his car, but she was able to fight him off. Bycraft suffered a knife wound during the assault and fled the scene bleeding.

It was claimed by the defence during the trial that Bycraft had been drinking heavily and smoking marijuana the evening before the assault and had accidentally run into the pair. It was further maintained that the female teen was mistaken in her claims that Bycraft had tried to abduct her and that he had been merely trying to assist her, a contention rejected by the jury.

The judge commended the teen on her calm thinking and self-defence skills, stating that the outcome could have been much worse had she not been so skilled. She recommended that it was important for all teenage girls to ensure that they could defend themselves in similar circumstances.

Bycraft was sentenced to two years detention. It was revealed after the verdict that he had previously served a three year sentence for the sexual assault of a sixteen-year-old teenage girl after meeting her in a nightclub in Wattling Bay in 1994.

*Wattling Bay Messenger*, Saturday, 12 December 2009

### **Female cop slashed during dispute**

A female police officer required stitches to her arm after being slashed with a knife yesterday as she attended a domestic dispute in Mount Big Town. A man was later charged with assault and taken to the Wattling Bay watch house.

*Wattling Bay Messenger*, Monday, 5 July 2010

### **Cop car run off road by stolen vehicle**

A female police officer sustained minor injuries in Mount Big Town last night when her patrol car was rammed and forced off the Coastal Range Highway during a pursuit of a stolen vehicle.

A witness said it was a miracle the officer wasn't seriously injured or killed in the accident that left the patrol car badly damaged.

Two youths were taken into custody and were charged with dangerous operation of a vehicle while under the influence. They will face the Wattling Bay Children's Court today.

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Prologue

In my dream I'm always running. Not the steady comfortable jog of my usual morning exercise, but a desperate sprint. My legs are burning and my heart pounding, a painful stitch down one side, sweat stinging my eyes. I draw in huge ragged breaths, my throat dry and raspy. A single-minded imperative keeps driving me forward, determinedly placing one foot in front of the other despite my utter exhaustion. I have to get to my house to save my mother's life.

But there is a Bycraft hunting me down as I run and I throw frequent frightened glances over my shoulder, praying he's not getting any closer. He will kill me if he catches me. I know that as sure as I know my own name.

Sometimes in my dream I'm surrounded by bushland as I run, on an isolated road so long and straight that I can see it converging to a disappearing point in the distance. My house is at the end of that road and my mother is in the house, screaming for help in terror. But no matter how fast or hard I run, I never get any closer to the end of that road. It just keeps rolling out in front of me, as far as my eye can see.

Other times I'm in an unfamiliar building and can't find my way out. The building is large, filled with identical white corridors that lead into and away from each other in a confusing warren. I run in a wild panic, bouncing into walls, going around in circles, butting up against dead ends, all the while searching for the exit. Some of those corridors terminate with a window and I press my forehead against the glass to see my house on the other side of the road and hear my mother's agonised cries of fear and pain. Furious and frustrated, I bang and kick and ram the glass with my shoulder, shouting, but it never breaks. Then I start running again, looking over my shoulder as I look for the exit.

I can't stop for a minute because of that Bycraft chasing me relentlessly down that road or around those corridors. It's usually Red who's pursuing me, a malicious grin across his face. But sometimes it's Craig or Tommy or Bobby Bycraft himself, a razor-sharp knife hidden behind his back. Once or twice it is even Jake.

My dream always ends the same way. Somehow I have finished running and find myself standing on the veranda of my family home. The front door is ajar and I cautiously push it fully open, creeping down the central hallway into the silent house. The bloody handprints on the walls and splatters on the pastel apricot carpet fill me with apprehension. I ignore the overturned furniture in the lounge room and step over the broken remnants of my mother's favourite lamp. My stomach is a tight ball of fear as I slowly make my way to the kitchen at the back of the house.

My mother is lying huddled up against the blood-smeared back door as if she had been trying to escape through it when she finally fell. A broken knife protrudes from her back, its handle tossed carelessly to the floor. Her face is turned away from me, covered by her long dark-blond hair, now sticky and matted. Her pretty yellow dress is stained orange with all the red. She is barefoot, her blood-sprayed legs arched gracefully, feet pointed, her toenails painted a bright magenta that clashes with the dark crimson of her spilled blood.

I drop to my knees in a lake of her blood. Tenderly, I sweep her bloodied hair from her forehead, looking down at her young, beautiful face, my mouth stretched in a silent wail of anguished denial. Tears flood my eyes and flow down my cheeks,

*dripping to the floor. I am too late to save her.
I'm always too late to save her.*

Chapter 1

It was chilling to hear. From the open front windows of the house an unnerving symphony of suffering ruptured the night-time peace. Frantic screaming clashed brutally with guttural grunts, loud deep thuds and what sounded alarmingly like a chainsaw. Goosebumps bristled down my arms and I paused a moment to double check my equipment, reassuringly patting each piece as I went through my mental stocktake – gun, OC spray, baton, handcuffs. Steeling myself with a deep breath, I climbed the spongy, rotting timber stairs to the veranda. Despite the lingering heat of the late summer night, the neighbours had prudently slammed their windows and doors shut. The street was deserted, but prying eyes stared out at me from behind every curtain.

I banged on the front door, dislodging peeling flakes of ugly mud-brown paint. There was no response. But then the screaming stopped suddenly with a last spine-tingling yowl, the instant silence that replaced it welcome, but eerie. I took advantage of the unexpected lull to thump harder on the door with my fist. The screaming recommenced, even louder than before, but I'd finally been heard and it was cut off abruptly mid-cry. *Thank the heavens*, I thought with relief. Two o'clock in the morning was no time to be playing death metal music. Especially when it was blasted so loudly that it made your bones vibrate and your ears feel like they were bleeding.

The veranda light switched on and Red Bycraft flung open the door, his eyes widening in delight when he saw it was me standing at his threshold. He was bare-chested and barefoot, dressed only in faded low-slung jeans that showcased his honey-brown skin, tattoos, muscled arms and six-pack. Like all the Bycrafts, he was tall, well-built and beautiful, with the golden colouring common in his family. He was also trouble. Big time.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the lovely Tessie Fuller standing right before me in the flesh," he drawled, leaning against the doorframe and crossing his arms and ankles, snake-like yellow eyes roaming my body. "And what mouth-watering flesh it is too." He flicked out his tongue and ran it slowly around his lips with offensive intent.

I didn't react.

He took a step closer to me, leaning down until his face was mere centimetres away and his eyes drilled into mine. His voice dropped to an intimate whisper, almost caressing. "I can't wait for the day I get to taste it. To bruise it. To bite it. Get to force myself inside it."

The alcohol fumes on his breath made my nose twitch. I resisted the sudden strong urge to step backwards, instead returning his stare steadily and making every effort not to show just how much he made my skin crawl. He wasn't going to intimidate me – not now, not ever. Before answering, I deliberately, conspicuously, trailed my eyes down the jagged ten centimetre scar running down his neck that I'd given him when I was fifteen.

"We both know that day's never going to happen, don't we, Red?" I reminded him coldly.

He smiled with lazy menace and shifted even closer. I caught the masculine scent of his underarm sweat, not entirely masked by the musky deodorant he wore.

The day had been stifling; the evening not much cooler.

He continued to whisper. "I disagree, Tessie. I think we both know that day will definitely happen. We have unfinished business, you and me. And I have such a hard-on for you."

He gripped his crotch and bared his teeth with a hiss.

I refused to entertain him by reacting to his crude taunting, maintaining my professionally stony demeanour. He pouted at me for spoiling his fun and ran his hands through his longish wavy golden hair, his chest muscles tensing enticingly as he did. He was a mean bastard of a man but he sure did come in a good-looking package.

"What can I do for you tonight, lovely piglet?" Piglet was the 'pet' name the Bycraft family had for me. I hated it, which of course only ensured that they used it as often as possible. "Because I can think of a hundred things you could do for me."

All of them sadistically carnal too, I bet, I thought.

His hand shot out to glide his index finger along my jawline to my chin, then upwards to my mouth, trying to thrust his finger between my lips. I flinched at his touch, immediately batting his hand away and reaching for my OC spray, eyes fixed on his. He laughed with malicious satisfaction at finally prising a response from me. I relaxed my right hand, but kept it in close access to the spray. He knew I wouldn't hesitate to use it if I felt threatened enough. I'd already sprayed him once since he'd returned home from jail. Drugged up and off his face one steaming hot January afternoon, he'd come at me with a cricket bat in his front yard when I'd turned up to investigate yet another complaint. I'd loved every second of watching him crash to the ground, writhing in agony in the dirt, howling and rubbing his tear-drenched eyes. In fact, it had been the highlight of my week.

"I've had a report of a disturbance here tonight," I told him in my impassive cop voice.

He shrugged easily, indifferent. "I was just chilling to some music in my own home. No need to get you involved." He smiled with deceptive friendliness.

I didn't smile back.

"Who rang you?" he asked casually, as if he wouldn't seek immediate and violent retribution on that brave neighbour.

Again I remained silent, unblinking.

He sighed dramatically and said with insincere contrition, "All right. I promise I'll turn the stereo down."

"It's not about the music, Red. It's about the shouting earlier in the night. Is everything okay here?"

"Everything's just peachy, thanks for asking, Officer Tess," he mocked.

I persisted. "I want to check on Sharnee."

"Was it her old bitch of a mother who rang you?" he demanded, losing some of his cool, his mouth tightening unattractively. His eyes shifted from my face, past my shoulder into the darkness of the night. Sharnee's mother and two sisters lived directly across the road.

I didn't answer.

"Sharnee's asleep." He moved to slam the door in my face. I stuck my boot out to prevent him.

It was my turn to look over his shoulder. "No, she isn't. I can see her moving around in the kitchen behind you."

Anger swept across his face as he turned around to shout into the house, "I told you to get off to bed, you stupid fucking slag! You better fucking well do what I tell

you to next time if you know what's good for you."

"No need for that kind of language. Ask Sharnee to come to the door. When I'm satisfied she's all right, I'll be on my way. And make it snappy. I'm very busy tonight."

We faced off for a moment before he backed down. "*Sharnee!* Get your fat, ugly arse out here so that piglet can see you're okay."

She scuttled to the door and poked her head around timidly, looking up at Red with an equal mixture of fear and devotion in her soft brown eyes. Sharnee Lebutt was only thirty and had once been a pretty woman, but hard years of life with Red as his on-again, off-again girlfriend, casual punching bag and the mother of three of his five children, had marred her prettiness with premature wrinkles and a permanent expression of anxious despair. Why she let him return to her again and again was beyond me. He was an uncaring father to their kids and an unfaithful sponger who treated her like dirt. What sane woman would want *that* in her life? Perhaps she had never given up her dream that he would marry her? Everyone in town knew that's all it would ever be for her though – a dream. Red, like most of the Bycrafts, was not the settling down type. And he'd proven that to Sharnee thoroughly by also knocking up two of her three sisters.

At thirty-five, he was the oldest of the Bycraft generation I'd grown up with, and in my opinion he was the worst of a very bad bunch. He had only been released on parole a few months ago after serving four years for the aggravated sexual assault of a fifteen-year-old girl. It was his fourth stint in the slammer for similar crimes and you could tell from just looking at him that he was already planning his next attack on some unsuspecting vulnerable young woman he'd pick up at a nightclub. Most of his assaults were never reported, and any woman courageous enough to make a complaint against him usually withdrew it soon after, in fear of her life after being personally threatened by him. The only reason he hadn't gone down for longer after his last attack was because his poor little traumatised victim had flatly refused to give evidence against him in court.

"You okay, Sharnee? What happened here tonight?" I asked her with concern.

"What happened, lovely piglet," butted in Red, not giving her a chance to speak, "is that we had a tiny disagreement over the fact that the useless bitch didn't have enough rum and smokes in the house for me tonight. I might have raised my voice a little and given her a light slap on the wrist to remind her of her duties to me, but that's all. Nothing more."

More like a fist in the face than a slap on the wrist, I thought, turning to the silent woman. "Sharnee?"

"That's right, Officer Tess. Just like Red said," she confirmed softly, watching him with wary eyes.

"Let me see you properly."

Her eyes still fixed on Red, she unwillingly stepped out from behind him into the veranda light.

"Is that bruising around your right eye?"

"N-no, Officer Tess."

"Yes it is, you stupid cow," hissed Red impatiently, prodding her ungently with his elbow. "Don't you remember? One of the kids opened the bathroom door suddenly and the doorknob hit you in the face."

"That's right. I forgot. Thanks Red." She looked up at him again, clearly afraid.

"Which kid?" I asked, glancing from one to the other, not believing a word I was hearing.

"Kyle," Sharnee said.

Simultaneously, Red said, "Teagan."

"I meant Teagan," Sharnee corrected instantly, flustered. "I *meant* Teagan. Silly, stupid me! I can't get anything right these days." She smiled weakly at me, not quite meeting my eyes. "Everything here's fine, Officer Tess. Now if you don't mind, I'd like to do what Red told me to and go to bed. It's very late and I have to get up for the kids in the morning."

She hurriedly darted back inside, leaving Red smiling at me, slyly triumphant.

"I don't want to hear of any more disturbances here tonight, understand? And that includes the music," I warned him and reluctantly headed back to the patrol car.

I hated leaving Sharnee with him because he would probably rough her up again the second I left. But there was nothing I could do if she refused to complain about him. And she was inexplicably loyal to him, despite everything he did to her, so I had no real hope that she would ever complain. Especially to me.

"Bye for now, lovely." Red stood on the veranda and watched me get into the patrol car, kissing the air in my direction and grabbing his crotch again when I looked up at him, an arrogant smirk creasing his features.

I muttered to myself about him I switched on the ignition and nosed away from the curb.

But as I did, music blared out at ear-shattering volume from his house again. I jerked the steering wheel and pulled the patrol car back to the curb, switching on its rooftop flashing red and blue lights to warn him that my patience was wearing wafer thin. I hadn't been joking when I'd said I was busy tonight. I waited for a minute. His silhouette filled the front window, checking that I'd noticed his defiance, and when he saw I had, the music abruptly stopped once more. Red was only delivering his usual "fuck you" in farewell, but being on parole he couldn't afford to provoke me too far. I waited for another minute of blissful silence to make sure that he'd behave himself, watching as the lights in his house were extinguished one by one, before driving off again.

I hadn't even drawn a breath though when I received a phone call from Abe Stormley, owner of the town's only pub, The Flying Pigs. He wanted to know when I was returning, because "we have a situation with Des". Five minutes later, back at the pub, I was confronted with an unpleasant spectacle.

"Des, for the last time," I said patiently, "if you want me to give you a lift home, you have to put some clothes on." I paused a beat, looking him up and down. "At least put your pants back on. I can't have you bare-arsed in the patrol car. It's unhygienic."

Des swayed in front of me trying to focus, then without a word opened his mouth and projected a stream of vomit that landed like a homing missile right on my boots.

"Aw shit," I complained mildly, glancing down at the mess. "I just cleaned those this morning."

"Sorry Tessie, love. You see, it's like this . . ." he slurred, index finger up to make his point. Then he slowly dissolved in front of me until he was lying collapsed in an unattractive naked heap on the sticky carpet.

I rubbed the back of my neck with tiredness and exhaled heavily while I thought. I nudged him with my soiled boot a few times. He didn't move. I didn't want to pick him up. He was starker for one thing and not a lightweight anymore, for another. There were parts of my job I really hated sometimes – usually they involved the Bycrafts, but tonight was an exception.

“Does anyone know where Des’s clothes are?” I shouted out at the happy-drunk crowd milling around me, bending down to give my boots a perfunctory wipe with some paper napkins I pinched off the nearest table. A few of the crowd pointed helpfully over at a far corner of the room. Others pointed to the opposite far corner. I lifted my eyes to the ceiling in silent supplication, sighed again and headed towards the first corner.

“Anyone seen Maureen?” I shouted again, over my shoulder. Didn’t matter who I directed my question to; there were usually half-a-dozen people willing to listen and help me. There was always someone to look out for you in this neck of the woods. My mother used to call the townsfolk insufferable sticky-beaks. She never got used to country life. Or so Dad told me.

“Maureen took off about an hour ago,” boomed Abe from the bar where he was perfecting the head on a fresh pint. He was probably the only other sober person in the room besides me. “She went home. Said she’d had enough of it.”

I turned to throw him a grateful glance. I was with Maureen – I’d had enough of it too, especially at this time of the night. He winked at me in sympathy, but didn’t volunteer to help me wrestle Des into his clothes. There was a limit to citizen cooperation I had found, especially when it involved drunken naked men.

I eventually tracked down Des’ clothes to where he had carelessly discarded them in the pub’s function room. I smiled for the first time that evening as I picked them up. I must have missed a doozy of a speech from him. He had been a lazy cop and a negligent boss, literally counting down the days to his retirement, crossing them off in red marker on his wall calendar each day. I’d done most of the crime fighting in the couple of years I’d been back in town, and while in his favour he’d given me a lot of freedom, he’d also taken most of the credit for any successes, leaving me to wear the blame for any failures.

It was hard to be angry with him though because he had kissed the Blarney Stone when he was born for sure, and I reckon he’d be able to talk underwater buried in a cement coffin, gagged and following a laryngectomy. I’d barely got a word in the whole time we’d worked together. He had the gift of the gab, was a real charmer and his speech would have been a work of art. Well, it should have been because he’d laboured over it every day for the last six months instead of doing any real work.

I wish I’d been at the pub to hear it, but I’d been at old Miss Greville’s house, half-heartedly searching her dark overgrown garden by torchlight for the third peeping tom she’d reported that fortnight. She’d clutched my hand gratefully, if a little shakily, when I’d assured her that there was nobody there. I hadn’t wanted to remind her that if there was even the remotest chance of a man peeking on ladies in our small town, he’d be heading straight for the nudist community which was only a couple of kilometres away.

Failing that, he had the option of waiting around until eight on a Sunday night when, as regular as clockwork, the town’s good-time girl, Foxy Dubois, gave an impromptu free striptease performance in her lounge room after spending the afternoon drinking at Abe’s pub. There was always a crowd at *her* window on Sunday nights. But what a peeping tom patently wouldn’t be doing in Little Town however, was wasting his time spying on Miss Greville, a ninety-three year old spinster who had confessed to me with breathless confidentiality that she always bathed with her underwear on, “just in case”.

Of course I had wanted to attend Des’ retirement bash. He’d been my boss, after all, and I’d known him for the whole twenty years he’d lived here. But we were a

two-cop town and when one cop is the guest of honour at his own party, the other one hasn't got much choice but to be on duty, even if she'd been on duty every day for the last month while her boss was busy organising the big event. The evening hadn't been too onerous though I had to admit, with most of the townsfolk, with the exception of the Bycrafts, gathered at the pub for Des' send-off. Much of my activity tonight had been confined to ferrying drunk people back home.

I didn't normally run a blue light taxi with the town's only patrol car, but it was a special occasion and I didn't want to make myself unpopular by booking people for being public nuisances or for driving under the influence. Especially after I'd spent the morning manning the radar gun on the highway approaching town from the south. That was where the long mountainous climb finally levelled out and people let their speed rip just as they came to a sixty zone. A lot of interstate drivers, as well as a few locals, would receive an unwelcome penalty notice for speeding in the mail soon. The locals should have known better though. There was always the chance that I'd be lurking behind that thicket of overgrown oleanders on the side of the road just past the 'Welcome to Mount Big Town' sign, because that's where I always perched doing radar duty on that side of town. So I spared no sympathy for those townsfolk who I'd clocked over the speed limit today, but tonight I conveniently looked the other way and lent a helping hand where I could.

I had warned Des about running an open bar until midnight at The Flying Pigs, and as usual he'd listened courteously to my advice and then patted me on the head as if I was his much-loved golden Labrador, Mr Sparkles. But soon after our chat he had left the station with his mobile phone clamped to his ear, loudly arranging for Abe to have beer, wine and spirits generously on tap until the stroke of twelve for all his guests and after that the "fucking freeloaders" could pay for their own, he laughed uproariously into the phone. I didn't get mad at him for being so patronising though, because when I thought about it I'd rather that he treated me like Mr Sparkles than like his long-suffering and much-ignored wife, Maureen. At least Des *pretended* to listen to me. And there was the pat on the head, after all. The rumour around town was that he hadn't touched Maureen for fifteen years.

But right now I had a drunk, unconscious and naked former boss on my hands. With a great deal of disagreeable (and hopefully forgettable) effort, I managed at least to get Des panted up, commando-style admittedly, but as long as his bare butt wasn't touching any of my patrol car seats, I was satisfied. With the help of some of the more sober guests, I walked Des to the car, manhandled him into the backseat and secured him. He lurched immediately to the side, held only in place with the seatbelt. I really hoped he wasn't going to throw up again.

I drove off slowly, but before I could drop off Des, I had to deliver a few of the other guests who had opportunistically jumped in for a free ride after helping me get Des to the car. Some of them lived a fair way out of town, on the small-holding farms that formed the bulk of Little Town's outlying population. I was being taken advantage of I realised, but as I said before, it was a special occasion so I didn't kick up too much of a stink about it. I turned onto the Coastal Range Highway and headed out of town.

When I finally returned to town and reached the house where Des and Maureen lived, neighbouring the town's police station, it was in total darkness. I presumed that meant Maureen was in a major snit with him. On the dozens of times I'd escorted Des home after a night out with the boys, she had usually left the veranda light on for him at least. He'd probably forgotten to mention her in his speech tonight, was my guess. I was willing to bet that Mr Sparkles had received a number

of loving references though.

Speaking of Des' adored and spoiled pet, Mr Sparkles let out one irritated bark at being woken up and waddled down the front stairs over to me, sniffing at my crotch in his usual disrespectful manner.

"Stop doing that," I objected, pushing him away. "You know it's me, Sparkles."

He looked up at me with his gorgeous brown eyes, cocked a leg and pissed on the back tyre of the patrol car. It was a deliberate act. He knew it was my job to wash the car.

I let out an impatient sigh. "No need to be like that. I've told you a million times that I just don't like you sniffing me there. It's nothing personal – I'd say the same to any dog."

He shot me a contemptuous look and then pissed on the front tyre as well. The dog sure knew how to make a statement. He sniffed at Des, flinching in disgust at the alcohol vapours coming off him, before waddling back up the stairs to his comfy bed on the wide front veranda.

With no helpers, and only Mr Sparkles as my lazily amused audience, I performed an awkward dance with Des trying to get him up the stairs and into bed. We staggered one way, halted, teetering on the edge of tumbling over together, then righted ourselves and staggered the other way. He was a weighty man and was very drunk and it was the longest twenty metres I've ever traversed.

Maureen had locked the front door in her temper, but luckily I knew where the spare key was kept. So did the rest of the town. A large green ceramic frog with a comically wide mouth and the words 'spare key here' engraved on its chest, probably wasn't the smartest place for anyone, let alone a cop, to hide their extra house key. I retrieved the key from the frog's mouth and inserted it into the keyhole, opened the door and we staggered together towards his bedroom, knocking over at least four of Maureen's tacky china knick-knacks as we did. They filled the house to capacity, perched precariously on every horizontal vantage point. Their house was a nightmare for anyone who liked to gesture wildly as they spoke.

I eventually managed to manoeuvre Des onto his marital bed, letting go of him gratefully as he fell heavily onto the mattress.

"Thank God," I muttered to myself as I stretched my agonised muscles.

"Don't you dare take our Lord's name in vain, Teresa Fuller!" snapped an angry voice from the other side of the bed. Maureen was very religious and, apparently, very awake.

"Sorry Maureen. My deepest apologies," I said insincerely, stretching again. *Jesus!* I thought rotating my shoulders. It was going to take me an age to recover from this.

"Did you knock over any of my treasures? I heard a lot of strange noises as you came in," she asked suspiciously.

"No Maureen," I lied. They were moving out over the weekend to the city to be closer to their children and grandchildren in their retirement, so I figured I could be loose with the truth with her. Besides, she'd obviously forgotten the bit in the Bible about looking after your own damn husband.

I made a hasty retreat and closed and locked their front door, replacing the spare key in the frog's mouth. I could already hear Des snoring from out on the veranda. Maureen was in for a noisy night by the sound of it. Mr Sparkles gave a half-hearted bark and made moves as if he was getting up to sniff me intimately again.

"Don't even think about it Sparkles, you pervert," I warned. He settled back on his bed again and glared at me with undisguised hostility as I made my way down

the stairs. I yawned hugely, stretched again and opened the car door to an indescribably obnoxious smell. I let my nose guide my way to the back seat.

"Oh no," I moaned quietly in disgust because the revolting odour was coming from a large stain on the seat where Des had been sitting. I didn't want to investigate any further that evening, but wound down every window as I drove back to the pub, trying not to heave. It would require some intensive car cleaning the next morning, but not tonight – I was way too tired.

Most of the guests had gone by the time I returned to The Flying Pigs. Abe's step-sister, a pretty sixteen-year-old, was collecting empty glasses and wiping down tables.

"Hey Romi," I called to her as I headed over to talk to Abe.

"Hey Tessie," she replied affectionately, flashing me her devastating smile. She was a smart, lovely girl and a real heartbreaker, with big sky blue eyes and light blonde hair. She had lived with Abe for the last ten years since their father, Abel, and his second wife (Romi's mother), were killed in a head-on accident with a semi-trailer as they drove to the city to spend a weekend away for their wedding anniversary. Her dream was to head off to the city herself in a few years to study law at university and I knew that Abe would miss her a lot. So would the teenage boys in town, although none of them had ever had a chance with her because Abe watched over her like a hawk. And you wouldn't willingly tangle with him. He was six feet of hard muscle from all the heavy lifting he did in his job, with a shaved head, emotional dark eyes, deep growly voice, craggy features and had a reputation as a hard fighter. You couldn't run a country pub without being able to sort out drunk, aggressive patrons when you needed to. He was a good man to have on your side.

He was busy at the bar restocking bottles in the fridges and replacing glasses freshly cleaned from the dishwasher ready for the next day, when he finally noticed me.

"Teresa, you're back," he smiled warmly.

"I am, Abraham." I leaned on the bar, not bothering to hide my huge yawn.

We were old friends and had gone to school together. He'd been my first boyfriend but had dumped me towards the end of eleventh grade when he'd been seduced by Carole Smyth. She was in the year above me at school, the same year as Abe, and had decided that his well-muscled physique was very much to her liking. I still hated her for that. They'd had a hot and heavy romance over the summer and then she'd broken Abe's heart in turn when she had left for Sydney, bragging to all of us that before long she'd be a top model and we'd see her face on the cover of all the magazines. None of us had ever heard a word about her since, though I believe her parents received a phone call from her now and then.

Abe had moved on from her, but he had stayed in town and when his father was killed in that terrible accident, had taken over his pub and also taken up guardianship of his little step-sister. It was a lot of responsibility for an eighteen-year-old to bear, but Abe had always been a pragmatic kind of guy and didn't waste any energy in bemoaning his fate in life.

That same year he had met his wife, Marcelle, as she backpacked through town from her own little village in France, entranced by our nearby treacherous mountain and its beautiful lake. They knew they were made for each other the second their eyes met across the bar when she'd perched on a bar stool in front of him, flicking her shiny black hair behind her shoulders and showing off her long tanned legs. She'd teasingly asked him for a Pernod in her sexy accented English, not seriously

expecting a country pub to have any. He'd swallowed hard and rolled his tongue back up into his head, but was able to produce it with a flourish and a devastating smile, cheekily telling her he'd been waiting forever for someone to ask for one. Abe loved foreign spirits and we had our fair share of international tourists in town throughout the year, so he took a risk and stocked up. Any that didn't sell were enjoyed by him and me when I joined him for regular dinners in his flat on the upper floor of the pub. We'd travelled around the world together through exotic alcohol.

Marcelle had been charmed and they ended up spending the night together. She stayed in town and soon after that first meeting Abe and Marcelle had decided to marry, both still just eighteen at the time. They married out near the lake in a small but touching ceremony, with me as their bridesmaid and one of Abe's school mates as the best man. They had called their only child Antoinette, a lovely French name, but it had inevitably been shortened to Toni by everyone in town since she was born. She was now ten and at this time of the night was fast asleep upstairs in Abe's flat.

Marcelle had slipped into life as a country publican's wife with remarkable ease and their marriage had been truly happy and fulfilling. But tragically she had died three years ago in circumstances that were wrenchingly heartbreaking for both Abe and me. I'd loved her like a sister and missed her every day. I also felt an incredible weight of guilt about her death that I would never be able to shake off. I'm no stranger to anguish, believe me, but her death absolutely ripped me apart. To my stunned disbelief, life had gone on afterwards, and we'd all had to pick up the pieces of our shattered lives and carry on. Months later, I'd felt disloyal and heartless the first time I'd smiled again after her funeral. I often wondered if Abe had felt the same way, but Marcelle's murder was a topic that we never broached. It was still too raw for both of us, even after this passage of time.

"Any more trouble or can I head off home?" I asked him, barely suppressing yet another yawn.

"It's all good. Go home, sweetness. You look tired," he said.

"I sure am," I admitted. "It's been a long day. Do you want me to check on Toni before I go?"

"Romi checked on her five minutes ago. Off home with you, Tessie. Your bed's waiting for you." His smile was poignant as he said that.

He hadn't dated much since Marcelle's death and part of the reason for that was because my arrival back in town a couple of years ago had rekindled his amorous feelings for me. He definitely wouldn't knock back an invitation to join me in my bed, but he wasn't going to get one. He'd had his chance with me in high school and I hadn't forgotten the miserable tears I'd quietly spilled into my pillow every night for three months after he dumped me so cruelly. Maybe I would have got over him faster if I didn't have to catch the same bus as him and Carole Smyth to and from school every day, pretending I didn't care while they enthusiastically tasted each other's tonsils in the backseat. So for now, I was content to keep him as a friend only, even though I'd be the first to say that I cared a great deal for him.

I made one last check around the pub, rounded up a couple of stragglers and drove them home, ignoring their ungrateful complaints about the smell in the car. That done, I finally, happily, drove south out of town to my own home. I kept the patrol car with me at home and was responsible for detailing it every week. Officially, it should have stayed with the senior officer at the police station, but we were a bit slack about protocol around here, and Des had made it abundantly clear

that he had more important things to do with his time than wash cars. I'd never worked out what those important things were, but they seemed to require an inordinate amount of time spent at the pub.

I left the windows down in the patrol car after I parked in my front yard. I'd worry about that awful stain in the morning, but hopefully the fresh air would move the odour on during the night. I was tired. I'd been on duty since eight on Friday morning and now it was three in the morning on Saturday. That was a long shift for anyone.

I kicked off my disgusting boots at the welcome mat, carefully and quietly opened the front door and tiptoed down the hall towards the bathroom.

"Tessie love?" a voice called from the front-facing lounge room. I detoured to the left immediately.

"Dad," I remonstrated, going over to kiss him on the forehead. "What are you doing up so late? I told you I wasn't going to be home for ages tonight."

"I couldn't sleep," he said and clutched my hand. He was now wheelchair-bound and was the whole reason I'd chucked in my promising city cop career to return home. I was lucky that the junior officer vacancy had come up in town at that time and was grateful every day for the chance to be here with him, helping him when he let me, earning the both of us some money to get by. It was the main reason I put up with so much from certain people in town.

"Did the party go well?" He'd been invited but hadn't felt up to going.

"Des took all his clothes off and threw up on my boots," I told him, flopping down on our saggy old lounge and pulling my hair from its tight bun. "I think he left me a 'present' in the back seat of the car too, but I'm too knackered to care about that right now."

He laughed. "Must have been a hell of a party. How was his speech?"

"Can you believe that I missed it? Miss G called me out again."

"Another peeper?"

"She only wishes," I smiled tiredly. He smiled too, but there were lines of pain and weariness in his face. I stood up. "Come on, let's get you off to bed," I insisted. He only stayed up because he worried about me, even in this quiet mountain town where we'd both been born. But he had good reason to worry, not that we ever spoke about it much.

Dad had been a seasonal mixed farmer in his prime, delivering quality produce to the nearby farmers' markets and to the Big Town restaurants. He had practised organic farming, had been meticulous with his soil improvement and his planting, fertilising, cultivating and harvesting, but had to give it away when he'd been diagnosed with a rare form of fatal lymphatic cancer over two years ago. I'd been on the brink of breaking it big in the city when I'd heard the awful news, but dropped everything to come back to the small town I couldn't wait to escape from to look after him. He was the world to me. Nothing else mattered. Nobody mattered more. He was my only family.

He waved away my help as usual, being a proud and independent man, and wheeled himself off to bed in our modified house. I spent a few moments in the bathroom, splashing my face, running a comb through my long, straight dark-blonde hair and brushing and flossing my teeth. Peering in the mirror, I frowned when I noticed the purple smudges of tiredness under my dark gray eyes. I was in desperate need of a solid eight hours sleep. Wearily, I changed into the longish Powerpuff Girls t-shirt that I wore as a nightie. Romi had given it to me for Christmas last year as a joke because I was always banging on about girl power to her. Then I strapped

onto my right thigh the leather sheath holding the viciously sharp hunting knife that I carried with me everywhere when I didn't have my gun on me.

I preferred to be armed at all times.

I was on-call day and night, which was part of the trade-off for the supposedly quiet country life, so I hung a fresh uniform close by, secured my Glock and utility belt within easy reach, left my phone in its charger on a loud ringtone, set out a clean pair of boots and socks and fell into bed, groaning with happiness as my head hit the pillow. I soon fell into a deep sleep, utterly exhausted.

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A stealthy noise woke me less than an hour later. I sprung upright in bed on full alert, my ears straining into the darkness, holding my breath.

I heard it again – a soft crunching sound from the front of the house, drifting through my open bedroom window. Someone was approaching up the gravel driveway. They were trying to be quiet, but I was finely tuned to the house's myriad noises, as you would expect having lived in it most of my life. It could just be Denny Bycraft spying on me as usual, I rationalised to myself. Or it could be Red Bycraft, brooding over our earlier encounter and deciding that he wasn't finished with me for the night. It wouldn't be the first time that had happened. All things considered, I'd much rather it was Denny.

I patted my knife and slid out of bed, slipping my police utility belt around my hips as well. I didn't bother wasting time changing out of my nightie or to don shoes. I moved silently, not wanting to wake Dad. He had probably taken a sleeping tablet, as he did most nights now, but sometimes they didn't work. He didn't get a lot of sleep anymore so I was very protective of the little he had.

At my bedroom window I listened intently again. Nothing. Whoever my mysterious nocturnal intruder was, they'd stopped momentarily. A minute later, the footsteps started again, less perceptible this time as the intruder left the driveway and walked across our patchy lawn. They were heading down the side of the house, past the lounge room towards my bedroom window.

"Oh no, you don't, sunshine," I promised under my breath and tiptoed out of my room, down the hall to the front door. Slowly I opened it and stepped out onto the front veranda.

A refreshing ocean breeze had sprung up since I'd returned home and the surrounding gum trees rustled gently. A semi-trailer hauling petrol, its lights blazing in the darkness, flew faster than the speed limit along the Coastal Range Highway that fronted my property, before snaking its way through town. It lit up the yard brilliantly for a few seconds and I could see that my intruder had definitely left the front yard and had moved down the side of the house.

I ran down the stairs lightly and crept to the corner, not minding the cool dampness of the dew on my bare feet. I peered cautiously around the side of the house. A silhouette was in the distance, disappearing around the back of the house. Damn! They were moving faster than I had expected.

I picked my way carefully down the side, using the bright moonlight to avoid all the rusty, broken farm machinery and piles of timber that Dad had dumped there over the years. One day I'd get around to hauling it away.

When I reached the back, again I peered around the corner. My intruder was standing in the yard, hands on his hips, staring at the house. I couldn't see any of his features as the moonlight was highlighting him from behind, but could tell it was a

man from his broad shoulders and narrower hips, and his height, which was definitely over six feet. There was one thing I was positive about though – he sure wasn't a Bycraft.

So who the hell was he?

He moved towards the house, stalking up the ramp and testing the back door handle. Finding it locked, he turned and headed for the other side of the house. That instantly angered me. What made this complete stranger think he was entitled to loiter around my property in the middle of the night, trying to break in? If he was some lout from Big Town thinking that my humble home seemed a likely place to burgle, then he could think again. *He'd sure picked the wrong woman to mess around with tonight*, I thought, enraged. I had a very low tolerance for trespassers.

Silently, because I was barefoot, I rushed up behind him and threw myself on him in a fierce tackle, my arms tight around his lower body. He fell heavily, his arms flung out in wild panic, grunting when he landed as my momentum forced the air from his lungs.

"What the . . ." he spluttered as I straddled his legs and drew out my handcuffs. "Who the fuck are you? Get off me!" He struggled against me, trying to buck me off his back.

"Police! Don't move!" I instructed in my loud cop voice.

"Like hell you're the police!" He groaned as I grabbed his left arm and twisted it unkindly behind his back so I could clap on the handcuffs. He immediately flailed his arm about to escape my hold. "I know how cops operate and that's not –"

"Oh, I bet you know how cops operate," I interrupted heatedly, labouring to maintain my grip on his arm. He was strong. "A creep like you who sneaks around people's houses at night is bound to come into contact with them all the time."

He moved his right hand to reach around to his back pocket. "I can –" he started to say, even as he arched his back again in an attempt to throw me off.

"I *said* don't move!" For all I knew, he had a weapon in his pocket. Maybe even a gun. I pulled out my knife and ground his face into the dirt with my forearm across the back of his neck. His resulting moan was muffled by the soil. "Keep still!" I shouted, touching the blade of my knife to his neck. "I have a knife at your throat and you better believe that I won't think twice before using it."

"For God's sake," he mumbled into the earth, ignoring my threat and thrashing his body around, trying to free his face. I had to quickly re-sheath my knife, not wanting to accidentally stab him or, even worse, myself. It was all I could do to stay on top of him. He reached for his back pocket again, so I pushed his face further into the ground, virtually lying on top of him in an attempt to subdue him.

"Stop moving!" I yelled in his ear. It was impossible to cuff him while he was struggling so much.

"I can't breathe," he gasped, trying to twist his face to the side.

"I'm not falling for that one, buddy."

I managed to clamp one handcuff around his left wrist and vainly reached for his right. His body twisted, curved and bowed in a frantic last-ditch effort to dislodge me from his back. It worked.

"Get off me," he snarled, showing teeth as he flung me off him. His voice sounded smothered, like he did have a throat full of dirt.

He staggered to his feet, coughing, and made a run for the side of the house.

"Hey!" I shouted and leapt from a crouching position to grasp him around his calves, bringing him down again. I scrabbled to move up his body, stretching my fingers out to clutch at his arm.



He grabbed my shoulders and flipped me on my back, looming over me in the darkness. “Are you crazy or something? Give me a chance to –”

“Escape? I don’t think so, matey.”

I clutched his upper arms and endeavoured to roll him onto his stomach again so I could finish handcuffing him. But he wasn’t interested in that plan and pinned me to the ground by my shoulders. In a flash, I raised my knees to my chest and propelled him backwards with my feet. Surprised by my sudden move, he tumbled, losing his balance. I sprang up and pushed him prone to the ground with my foot between his shoulder blades, his face back in the dirt. I dropped to my knees onto his back, causing him to yell in pain, and reached for his right arm, yanking it ungently behind, fully cuffing him.

“My eyes! They’re full of dirt. I can’t see!” he called out, coughing and choking. “Water! For God’s sake, get me some water!”

I climbed off him and hauled him to his feet. Stumbling together, I forced him towards the house, roughly smushing his face up against its weatherboards. He turned his face to the side and I saw that his eyes were streaming, grit-induced tears flooding his cheeks. I patted him down quickly, searching for any concealed weapons. He was clean.

“Who the hell are you and what are you doing creeping around my house?” I yelled into his ear, furious and pumping with adrenaline. “I’m arresting you for suspected break and enter.”

He gasped for oxygen, coughing some more and sniffing loudly. His nose was running freely by now. Swallowing a pile of dirt couldn’t be considered a dignified experience for anyone.

“My name’s Finn Maguire. I’m the new officer-in-charge at the police station,” he was able to splutter after a few further minutes of choking. “Check my wallet. Rear right trouser pocket.” The pocket he’d been reaching for when I’d stopped him. “Then get me some water. Please! For the love of God.”

A heavy knot of dread settled in my stomach. I slid my hand into his pocket and pulled out his wallet, flipping it open. Unfortunately, he wasn’t lying. The unsmiling face of Sergeant Fintan Liam Maguire stared back at me from both his police identification card and his driver’s licence. I stepped backwards away from him, releasing his arms, appalled at this unpromising turn of events.

Oh dear.

I’d just tried to arrest my new boss.

## Chapter 2

We didn’t speak for the next ten minutes. Hurriedly, I uncuffed him and marshalled him into my house to the bathroom where he stood at the vanity basin splashing his eyes liberally, with no regard for the expensive tailored shirt he was wearing. I watched him silently, guiltily, handing him a large glass of chilled water that he gulped down without breathing.

He thrust the glass back at me without looking my way, busy splashing. “More,” he demanded.

I brought him another glass that he also drained in one gulp, leaving the empty glass on the counter. When he had washed all the dirt from his eyes, he gently patted down his face with the clean towel I handed him after another brusque demand, and tried to mop up his wet shirt as well. Hanging up the towel neatly afterwards, he finally turned his sore, red-rimmed eyes to me, giving me a slow

once-over.

His eyes widened as he took in my short nightie, bare feet and tousled bed hair. His eyes grew even larger when he noticed the utility belt I still had slung around my hips and the knife strapped to my thigh, before returning to my face, carefully considering my every feature as if he needed to memorise me for a future identikit picture. I endured his scrutiny with increasing edginess, beginning to fidget, but reminded myself that he had no idea who I was and a good cop always eyeballed a suspicious stranger.

"I thought country people were supposed to be friendly," he said finally, in a snide tone. He had a posh voice, typical of the graduates of one of the city's elite private schools.

"I'm sorry that I restrained you," I said sincerely. "But I did warn you not to move. A number of times." And that was as apologetic as I was going to get. He could take it or leave it. He was the trespasser after all, and as a cop himself, he should have known better than to disregard a police directive.

He regarded me silently for a moment, before frowning and pulling out a torn scrap of paper from his pocket. "I was looking for Senior Constable Fuller. I was told he lives at this address."

"Looking for him in my backyard in the middle of the night, were you? Thought he might be in my kitchen, did you?" I asked tartly, not caring for his automatic assumption that his new work partner was a man. God only knows who he thought I was in that case, running around barefoot in the darkness with a gun and a knife, tackling men. Some kind of vigilante wild woman?

He had the grace to redden slightly. "I was told that he'd gone home not so long ago, so I was hoping to find a room with a light still on before I woke up the whole household."

I put my hands on my hips and drew myself up to my full height, a respectable five-eight (and a quarter), noticing as I did that he was considerably taller – maybe even six-three or six-four.

"I'm Senior Constable Fuller," I enlightened him.

He stared at me some more, confused, then frowned again. He'd be giving himself wrinkles soon if he kept that up. "I was told I was looking for a Terence Fuller." And he held out the scrap of paper. A name and address was scrawled on it in Maureen's notoriously illegible handwriting.

"I'm *Teresa* Fuller. Tess for short," I informed him, with a little less acid. Maureen's 'Teresa' did look a lot like 'Terence'.

"Oh," was all he managed to say. I hoped he wasn't one of those men who have a problem working with women, because he seemed at a loss for words at that news, still staring at me rudely. You would have thought that he'd learnt better manners at that fancy school of his. I hadn't at my humble public school though, so I stared back.

He wasn't particularly good-looking, but he had a commanding presence enhanced by his height, muscular body and impeccable grooming. His hair was black and curling and his eyebrows equally black and nicely arched. His eyelashes were long and lush and his eyes a lovely but moody dark blue, deeper than an ocean. He had a patrician nose, a shapely but serious mouth and a determined jaw, his chin having one of those cute clefts in the middle. But overall, his features combined into a formidable expression that was probably intimidating to a lot of people. He didn't look as though he was going to be a lot of fun to work with. He was elegantly dressed, but now appeared tired, scuffed and extremely pissed off.

"I wasn't expecting you until next week," I said, wondering if I should offer to shake his hand or whether it was now too late for such niceties. What on earth was the proper etiquette when you'd just mistakenly tackled someone? Nana Fuller had never given me any advice about that specific social situation.

"It seems there was a miscommunication somewhere. I was assured that the police house would be ready for me to move into today."

"But Des and Maureen are still there. They're not moving out until Sunday."

"So I was told by the very angry woman who flew out to attack me when I opened the door to the house fifteen minutes ago. When I finally managed to calm her down and convince her not to call the police . . ." He stopped. "Which would be you, I presume? She ended up directing me to your place anyway. So, one way or another we were destined to meet tonight, Senior Constable." His lips compressed with displeasure. "I just didn't expect it to be in such personally painful circumstances."

I remained quiet. I had no intention of apologising to him again.

"And I don't know what procedure manual you were working from tonight," he reprimanded, "but it wasn't the one that I'm used to. We don't threaten suspects with knives in the city."

I continued to regard him silently. I had good reasons for being so aggressive with someone creeping around my house at night, but I wasn't going to tell him on our short acquaintance.

Suddenly I realised that he was bone-weary and had probably driven from the city straight after work that afternoon, a good seven hours drive.

"You're welcome to stay here until they leave," I offered. He took a while to respond, giving it some thought.

"If you don't mind, I'd appreciate it," he said reluctantly. "There don't seem to be many accommodation options in this place and everything is booked out."

"There was a big party in town tonight," I explained. "For Des, who just retired. You're his replacement."

We both tried unsuccessfully to suppress a yawn.

"Follow me," I said without any further conversation. I just wanted to get back into bed.

I showed him to our spare bedroom that was directly across the hall from mine. It wasn't luxurious or modern, but it was clean and much more comfortable than sleeping in his car. His gaze wandered around the room, taking in the timber hardwood floorboards, cream-coloured VJ walls, sash windows, high ceiling and ornate cornices. It was simply furnished with a cast-iron double bed covered by a white *broderie anglaise* bedspread, two bedside tables with lamps, a combined dresser-wardrobe, a plain timber chair and a threadbare rug that had been in the family for yonks. While he brought in his luggage, I stowed my Glock and belt away again. When he was done, I unwisely asked him if he was hungry. He admitted that he was.

I subdued my sigh. I'd had a load of practice in patience since I'd returned home. I led him to the kitchen and used the microwave to heat him up some of the food I'd left for Dad that evening. When I realised that Dad hadn't even touched his meal, I determinedly swallowed my distress at that unwelcome piece of information. He was eating less and less each week. I'd especially made his favourite lamb casserole to tempt him, but instead I fed it to the stranger sitting at my old, battered kitchen table.

I sat there for a while to keep him company, head propped up on my hand,

despite the fact that he didn't speak a word to me, busy forking up the food at double rate. He must have been starving. I think that my eyes closed and my head drooped, because he suddenly spoke sharply to me, shaking my arm as my head nudged towards the table. I sat up, instantly alert, blinking furiously.

"Go to bed, Senior Constable. You don't have to wait up with me."

"Sorry Sarge," I said, yawning. "I've had a long day. Don't worry about the plates. I'll wash them up tomorrow morning." And I stumbled back to my bed and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow. I didn't stir until my alarm went off at seven.

Unwillingly, I forced myself out of bed, which I really didn't want to do, but if I slept in any longer it would screw up my biorhythms. The house was silent and I guessed that both men were still asleep. As I padded to the fridge to pour myself a glass of juice I noticed that the dishes the Sarge had used last night had been neatly washed and left to drain.

Dad wasn't someone to be alarmed by the sudden appearance of a stranger, so I decided not to wake him to tell him about our visitor. I hit the road for my customary morning jog, admiring the cute midnight-blue sporty BMW now parked in our driveway next to the patrol car as I walked down the stairs. My new boss travelled in style.

I headed off on my favourite route that took me past the secret bikie retreat and nudist community to the beach cove that was reached by a set of steep stairs leading down from the road. The morning air was already warming up and I soon fell into a nice rhythm jogging along the road, waving to the surprising number of people up and about at this time on a Saturday morning. It was always reassuring to see people around when I jogged by myself because it made me feel safer. For that same reason, I never listened to music when I jogged. I negotiated the stairs down to the sand and ran on the beach for a couple of kilometres, some of it in the soft sand because I like to torture myself sometimes, before turning back.

I was in training for an eight kilometre fun run that would be held in the city in less than a month's time. I was part of a four-person team, composed of all the female cops in the vicinity I was able to round up and force to participate. There was me, self-appointed team captain; Fiona, a veteran detective of thirty years who smoked two packets a day and had a huskier voice than a phone-sex operator; Jenny, a probationary constable uniform who was over-keen to do anything to lift her profile with her colleagues; and Eliza, a senior constable uniform, who was battling a weight problem after having her third baby and thought doing a fun run would be the motivation she needed to finally start shifting those unwanted twenty kilos. The three of them worked together in Big Town, a ninety minute drive away from me, so we hadn't had the chance to train as a team yet, and to be honest, I wasn't convinced that any of them were doing any training at all.

We'd agreed to call our team 'Babes in Blue' and planned on wearing dark blue shorts, light blue t-shirts and a dark blue cap as a homage to our police uniform. Jenny had wanted to call us 'The Fast Fuzz', but Fiona immediately vetoed that idea, complaining that it made us sound like twenty-dollar hookers offering quickies in a dirty alley. She was pretty big on girl power herself.

I didn't hold any hopes for us setting a record time in the run, or even finishing as a team, but it was a fun run I participated in every year in memory of Marcelle, and I was hoping to do a personal best. Romi was going to run with us as well, but as an individual junior competitor, not as part of our team. She often joined me for my early morning jog, but had obviously decided to have a sleep-in this morning

after her late night working in the pub for Abe.

Back home, I climbed the front stairs, face flushed, sweating up a storm, legs burning with effort, only to meet the Sarge at the top. He was dressed with casual style in designer jeans and an expensive t-shirt, and didn't appear pleased to see me at all, judging by his unhappy expression. I moved past him, giving him a quick nod in greeting and did a few stretches on the veranda to warm down and relieve the tightness of my muscles.

"You left the patrol car unlocked and its windows down all night," he accused.

*Good morning to you too*, I thought, but said calmly, "I know. But there's a reason for that. I wouldn't do it normally."

"It could have been stolen. It could have been taken on a joyride."

I stopped in the middle of a calf stretch and looked at him. "Sarge, I know every young person in this town. If the car had gone missing, it would have taken less than an hour to find out who was responsible," I argued reasonably. "Someone would ring me the second they saw them driving the car."

In reality it would probably take even less than five minutes, my thoughts straight away honing in on Chad Bycraft, a notorious joyrider. You never left your car unlocked when you visited the Bycraft family. To do so only resulted in an inconvenient trip out to the mountain lake, Lake Big, to retrieve your vehicle from its public carpark where it had been abandoned. Not to mention the bill for removing the stains left behind on the seats from the marathon drinking and sex sessions Chad had held in it while he had the chance. I'd learned all that from bitter personal experience in my first week back in town. When I'd left town to go to university, Chad hadn't been old enough to drive. He still wasn't when I returned, but had obviously picked up some skills during those years.

The whole Bycraft family were bad news – in jail, on parole or heading towards jail at a fast clip, like Chad. There was only one Bycraft I had any time for and that was Jake, older cousin to Chad, younger brother to Red. He worked as a prison officer at the nearby low security prison and was a real honey of a man – good-looking, easy-going, loving, kind and respectable, with a great body. He was also my boyfriend, much to the horrified disbelief of everybody I knew. I teased him endlessly that he must have been switched at birth because he was so different to all of his numerous brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts and uncles. What the Bycrafts lost by being disreputable, they made up for by being ridiculously fertile. The town was overrun with Bycrafts. We had a plague of Bycrafts in Little Town.

Needless to say, because of my career choice, I wasn't welcome in the Bycraft family as Jake's girlfriend. That didn't stop me from flaunting my relationship with him in front of them now and then though, because I got perverse enjoyment out of making them all uncomfortable. And God only knows that they'd made my life a nightmare over the years.

"Fuller, it's not about *if* the car went missing," the Sarge argued, snapping me out of my reverie. "It's about preventing the car going missing in the first place. You've been careless with government property."

I wanted to bite back at him, but restrained myself. "Sorry Sarge," I said mildly, not meaning it at all. I decided then that I liked him better when he wasn't talking. I zoned out his further ranting, bending down to unstrap from my thigh the leather holster which sheathed the knife that Dad had had made especially for me. I had three holsters – two for wrapping around my thigh, my favourite and a spare, and one for slinging around my hips. Which one I put on depended on what I was wearing that day. A girl needs to have a choice in her self-defence fashion.

He stopped lecturing and watched me in surprise. “Do you keep that knife with you all the time?”

“Yes, except when I’m in uniform.”

“Is the town that dangerous?” he asked, scepticism mixed with curiosity.

“For some people it is,” I replied curtly and headed towards the door.

His expression reflected his concern that he’d been landed with a partner who was paranoid, maybe even crazy. And last night’s escapade wouldn’t be dissuading him of either, I figured with resignation. I’ve grown used to people judging me without knowing anything about my circumstances though, so I didn’t dwell on it for too long. And I really couldn’t blame him for thinking that way, because on first appearances Little Town did seem to be a peaceful bucolic ideal where children frolicked in the street and people left their doors unlocked. And it would have been as well, if it wasn’t for the Bycraft family.

He stopped me at the door as I was heading for the shower, my knife dangling from my hand. “After breakfast, I want you to take me for a reconnaissance of the town and give me a tour of the station,” he ordered.

I was about to object because I’d been on duty for over thirty days straight and I needed a day off, but my complaint died a quick death when I saw his face. I swallowed my annoyance and nodded in agreement. I would probably be back home in half an hour, I reasoned to myself, trying to see the bright side. A tour of the station would take five minutes, tops. It only had two rooms. The town would probably take ten minutes, all up. We locals didn’t call this place ‘Little Town’ for nothing.

I squeezed past him and entered the bathroom to shower, dressing casually myself afterwards in denim shorts and a sky-blue t-shirt, leaving my hair out long and loose. I slipped my knife holster back around my thigh, regardless of what the Sarge thought. Dad was awake by then and I introduced him to my new boss and left the two men to get to know each other while I cooked a hot breakfast for us all. Dad offered to clean up afterwards, so I let him. He liked to help out around the house as much as possible, but was growing increasingly incapable of doing certain things. Washing up was still doable for him since we’d had the dishwasher installed last year. It had cleaned out our bank account, but I thought it was worth it. Whatever Dad wanted, I was determined that Dad would have.

“Let’s head off now, Fuller,” the Sarge demanded when I finished.

“Why don’t you call me Tess?” I suggested, looking up at him. “We’re going to be working closely together after all.” Des had always called me Tess and I’d always called him Des. Little Town was that kind of place. I was starting to miss Des and his relaxed ways already, which surprised me.

He blinked down at me for a moment, not encouraging my attempts at friendliness one little bit. “Can we head off now?”

Thinking of the smelly stain on the back seat, I tried to delay. “Can you give me thirty minutes? I have to –”

“I want to go now,” he insisted.

“But first I just need to –”

“I said now, Fuller.” He glared at me.

I snatched up the keys to the patrol car and stormed out the front door. I’d learned a few things about my new boss this morning – he didn’t like to listen and he wanted things done his way. Well, he needed to learn that I liked things done *my* way, the right way, just as much.

I threw myself into the driver’s seat and started the patrol car. He sat in the

passenger seat and did up his seatbelt. With an evil gleam in my heart, I wound up all the windows. I reversed speedily and spun the car around to head out of the gates onto the highway. We drove twenty metres down the road when he spoke up, his nose scrunched in disgust.

“What the fuck is that smell?”

“Someone had an accident in the back seat last night. I was going to clean it up this morning, but I didn’t get the chance,” I explained, regarding him with innocent eyes.

“Turn around now,” he demanded, winding down his window. Smothering my smile, I performed a speedy three-point turn and drove back up to the house, screeching to a stop next to his sports car. He jumped out before I’d even stopped properly.

“Let me know when you’re finished,” he said, slamming the door and stalking off back to the house. Pounding up the stairs, he startled Dad who’d wheeled himself out to the veranda to see who had arrived. And I know it’s petty and wrong, but I hummed happily to myself the whole time I cleaned that revolting stain off the seat.

Twenty minutes later, we sped off again, windows down, the unpleasant odour replaced by the slightly less unpleasant odour of disinfectant and fabric deodoriser. The Sarge seemed to be in a bad mood so I didn’t bother chatting to him as we drove. I was out of the habit of talking much while I worked anyway, either being by myself or not able to compete against Des’ endless stream of chatter on the rare occasions we had worked together.

We drove the five kilometres north on the Coastal Range Highway into town without exchanging a word. I turned off the highway into the police station’s small gravel carpark. The station was an old rectangular timber building painted an institutional puke-green colour, with a rusting tin roof. It was set on low timber stumps with a veranda running along each of the short sides of the rectangle, accessed by a small set of stairs. As a tiny nod to modern times, a slippery metal ramp had been installed at the end of the front veranda for wheelchairs and prams, which on a wet day proved impassable for both.

The front door of the station led to a small reception area, painted a peeling dull cream colour with a sash window at either end. A corkboard on the wall held a faded recruitment poster and old flyers about Crime Stoppers. An uncomfortable hardwood bench seat and small matching timber table slotted into the corner, both bolted to the floor. A display rack sat on the table, crammed full of unpopular and dusty pamphlets on Neighbourhood Watch, personal safety for women and securing your home against burglary. To my knowledge, nobody had ever taken one to read. The townsfolk had no interest in being told how to keep safe – they’d been looking after themselves for generations.

A battered and scarred hardwood timber counter ran the length of the tiny room, effectively cutting it in two. I unlocked and lifted up its hatch and ushered the Sarge behind the counter.

“This is the front counter and waiting area,” I explained, rather unnecessarily.

“There’s no safety screen installed?”

I glanced at him in surprise. “No.”

“What do you do if someone threatens you with a weapon?”

“Duck?” I suggested, shrugging my shoulders.

He cut me a hard look and said flatly, “I’m being serious, Fuller.”

I was beginning to think he’d have trouble being anything but serious.

Hurriedly, I pressed on with the tour.

"Underneath the counter here are all our forms," I pointed out and also brought the counter bell to his notice. "The counter is never staffed because when I'm here, I'm usually out the back, so we need the bell to let us know when we have a customer."

That's all there was to see in the front room, so I took him through the doorway to the back room, which was painted the same faded cream colour.

"That's my desk." I waved my hand in the general direction of my workstation, engulfed in a sea of paperwork that was spilling over onto the floor. "And that one will be yours," I added, pointing to the pristinely clean desk situated next to it.

Both desks were covered in the graffiti of generations of bored officers, some of the drawings X-rated, all carved into the varnished timber. I was the first female officer to serve in Little Town and one long hot summer afternoon last year, I'd added my own initials, a cheesy loveheart and the date, using my manicure scissors. It tickled me being part of that kind of history. I glanced at the Sarge before deciding that he definitely wasn't the graffiti kind of guy. I doubt he'd leave his mark behind.

The desks had a light and airy position with a nice view out the back of the station of the rising mountain range. Each was situated underneath a sash window, neither of which I could get to open despite all my efforts. An ancient computer sat on top of each desk and an equally antiquated telephone and printer/fax rested between them. A row of rusty and decrepit filing cabinets filled the opposite wall between the windows, some of the more elderly ones leaning alarmingly to the side. A tiny kitchenette was at the far end of the room. I showed him where the tea, coffee, sugar and milk were kept. Then I unlocked the back door and led him out to the back veranda where the bathroom took up one end.

"And that's pretty much it," I concluded. I was right – the whole tour had taken less than five minutes.

"Where's the watch house?" he asked, looking around him without much enthusiasm.

"We don't have one. We only have a lockup." *Hmm, this was going to be awkward*, I thought. "It's, um, out the back."

"Show me."

Reluctantly, my heart sinking, I led him up a cement path to a small, freestanding timber building on low stumps with a tiny veranda, also painted puke-green. It had two cells, both with barred windows and sturdy barred iron doors, currently standing open. He stood for a moment taking in the scene before turning to me.

"What's this?"

"It's a chicken."

"Yes, I know it's a chicken, Fuller. I'm not completely ignorant about the country. I mean, what is the chicken doing in the lockup? In fact, what are all these . . . two, four . . . What are all these five chickens doing in the lockup?"

I didn't want to answer him. I rubbed the back of my neck. I glanced up at the sky hoping to find inspiration for a believable story, then I glanced down at the ground, scuffing my feet. There was nothing for it but the truth. "Well, they kind of live here."

"You've turned the lockup into a chicken coop?" His eyes burned into me, but his voice was insultingly slow and patient.

"Yes," I admitted, grabbing a handful of feed from the nearby bin and scattering



it on the ground for my girls. I refilled their water container and collected five eggs, holding out three of them to him. "Des and I usually split them."

He stared down at the eggs, but didn't take them. "The chickens have to go."

"But we never use the lockup."

Incredulous, he asked, "What do you do when you arrest someone?"

"I try not to arrest people here much," I confessed.

He blew out an angry stream of air. "Explain yourself."

"It's complicated," I mumbled, turning back to the chickens, hoping that he'd accept that as a response. He wouldn't.

"I'm perfectly capable of understanding complicated situations, Fuller." I almost got a brain freeze from the iciness of his voice.

I sighed. "I usually give people a warning or a penalty notice for minor infringements and for major infringements I take them to Big Town to be processed." I suddenly wished I was anywhere in the world but here having this conversation with him.

He clenched his jaw and lifted his eyes to the sky. "Big Town?"

"That's what we locals call Wattling Bay, the nearest regional centre. It's about a ninety minute drive north-east to the coast. They've a proper watch house there and the personnel to staff it twenty-four hours a day. It's not practical for us to keep people here. We don't have the resources." A squabble among the chickens for the feed drew his attention back to them. I pleaded with him. "The chickens are used to living in the lockup, Sarge. They've lived here their whole lives. It would be traumatic for them to move."

"The chickens are going," he repeated, making it quite clear by his tone of voice that he wouldn't take any nonsense from me today, or any other day for that matter. "Either you move them or I will eat them. One by one."

I stared at him rebelliously. "You wouldn't do that." It was a barbaric threat – they were my pets.

"I have a whole cookbook full of delicious chicken recipes, Fuller." His dark blue eyes blazed with intent.

Fury robbed me of speech.

"Hmm," he pretended to ponder, "that one will be the first, I think. Maybe even tonight. I have a sudden desire for *coq au vin* for dinner." He'd pointed right at my favourite hen, Miss Chooky. She was the prettiest, the best layer and had the strongest personality.

"I'll move them," I spat out, burning up with incredible anger at the thought of him eating my little Miss Chooky in a wine and mushroom sauce. "I'll need a few days to organise things."

"Okay," he agreed, placid now that he had his own way. I loathed him intensely at that moment and spun around to stalk back to the station. I was going to walk home. He could find out about the town by himself. I had better things to do with my Saturday than hang around with him – like cleaning the toilet, for example. He grabbed me by the arm and spun me back around. I shook off his arm angrily. I couldn't stand people I didn't know touching me.

"Now you need to show me the town," he said in a cool voice. I struggled for self-control, wanting desperately to slog him one – he had threatened my precious girls. Expressionless himself, he watched the emotions flying across my face in quick succession, my hands clenching and unclenching by my side. I took a deep breath, closed my eyes and willed myself to calm down.

When I opened them, I was tranquil again. "I want to make sure Des pulled up

all right this morning, first,” was what I finally said and detoured off up the cement path leading to the police house at double pace, leaving him in my dust.

### Chapter 3

I ran up the front stairs, impatiently fended off Mr Sparkles’ impertinent nose and knocked politely on the door. Maureen opened it and gave me her ‘friendly’ smile, which was faker than a counterfeit Mona Lisa finger-painted by preschoolers.

“Tess, my dear, thank you so much for bringing Des home last night,” she gushed and clutching my arm, dragged me inside the house. She shut the door behind her, but wasn’t able to fully close it, an obstacle in the way. Confused, she let go of me and again slammed the door shut hard. A shout of pain sounded from the other side. Cautiously, Maureen opened the door to the Sarge, his foot jammed in the doorway, agony imprinted on his face, Mr Sparkles’ nose buried in his private parts.

“*Jesus!* Get this bloody animal away from me!” he shouted and pushed Mr Sparkles away roughly before shouldering the door. He shoved it open until it slammed against the wall and forced himself inside.

“We do *not* take the Lord’s name in vain in this house!” Maureen shrieked in fury and commenced swatting him on the arm with both hands. Mr Sparkles barked loudly in sympathy. “And we certainly do *not* use curse words in this house, either!”

Des gave immediate lie to that statement by staggering out of the bedroom, still in his stained pants, his gray hair a frizzy halo around his head, his face as wrinkled as an elephant’s butt. “What the fuck is going on out here? Can’t a man get some sleep around this place without all this fucking noise?”

Maureen shrieked again and abandoned the Sarge to start on her husband who was in no shape to defend himself. Sparkles upped the ante on the barking a couple of notches.

“Oi!” I shouted into the melee. Nobody listened.

“Everybody, *shut up!*” bellowed the Sarge. There was immediate silence, Des and Maureen as still as statues. Even Mr Sparkles cooperated. He had a really loud voice. I was impressed, despite myself.

“Christ!” he shook his head and said unwisely into the silence, because he instantly set Maureen off again and she flew at him, her hands flapping away, slapping him everywhere she could reach.

“You’re a heathen! You take the Lord’s name in vain *and* you knocked over four of my Jesus figurines last night when you tried to burgle us. You broke the head and one of the arms off my favourite figurine. You broke Jesus! You’ll burn in hell for all eternity for that!”

Mr Sparkles started barking again.

“For God’s sake . . .” he tried, but that only threw petrol onto the fire of Maureen’s religious rage.

Des and I exchanged glances. He sneaked off to the bathroom, away from the fray, and I thought about heading for the front door. However, I felt a reluctant obligation to look after my new boss on his first day in town even though he was pig-headed and unfriendly and he’d threatened to eat my favourite pet and deserved everything he got as far as I was concerned.

“I’m going to arrest you if you don’t stop hitting me right now!” he threatened Maureen, struggling against her furious onslaught.

“Oh yeah? You just try!” she screamed at him, slapping him across the face and

aiming to knee him in the groin. Maureen had a real temper on her – she was truly God’s little warrior. Unfortunately at that point, Mr Sparkles became over-aroused by all of the excitement and reared up to start humping the Sarge’s leg, clutching him around the hips with his paws, barking excitedly all the while.

“*Jesus Christ!*” he shouted as he tried to push the amorous dog away, which propelled Maureen into an increased frenzy of anger.

I didn’t intend to, but it was so funny that I started laughing and once I started I couldn’t stop. The Sarge shot me a poisonous look that promised me a slow and painful immolation if I didn’t do something and do it soon. I wanted to help him, but I hadn’t laughed like that for years and it took a while to control myself. Finally though, with only a few renegade snorts of laughter remaining, I threw myself into the melee. I grabbed Maureen gently around the neck with the crook of my arm and dragged her off the Sarge, pushing her down into one of the lounge chairs.

I pointed my finger at her. “Stay there and quieten down or I’ll tell Des about the bottle of gin at the back of the pantry, behind the tinned tomatoes.” She paled, her eyes widened and she shrunk back into the chair, suddenly afraid and instantly silent. She relied heavily on her piety for superiority in her relationship with Des. Being discovered as a secret soak would cast a very long shadow over that, in her mind.

I moved over to Sparkles and glared him in the eye. “Let him go now, dog,” I demanded in a low, mean voice. He ignored me, his face filled with ecstasy as he kept rutting, lips wide in a happy grin, tongue lolling, eyes rolling back in his head. I reached down and grabbed Mr Sparkles by his testicles and squeezed them tightly. I immediately had his attention. He yelped in pain.

“Back away, Sparkles, or I’ll get my knife out and cut them off right now,” I threatened and squeezed them even harder. He stared at me and I stared at him, and then he let go of the Sarge, fell back on four paws, whined pitifully and limped back to his bed. I turned around, breathing heavily, wiping my doggy-ball hands on my shorts and screeched with ear-splitting shrillness, “*Des?*” The Sarge jumped in fright beside me.

A sheepish Des emerged from the bathroom, cleanly bathed, wrapped in a bathrobe but worse for wear, obviously carrying a massive hangover and terrified of me. “Yes Tessie, love?” he asked in a placating voice.

“Get packing! This poor man,” and I nodded my head over my shoulder at the Sarge, “wants to move in. You have to be out tomorrow. Understand?”

“Yes Tessie,” he agreed immediately.

I turned to his wife. “Maureen? Is that doable?”

“Yes Tessie,” she said, scared stiff.

I relaxed and smiled, my good humour restored. “Excellent. Everybody’s happy. Could you both please excuse me? Now I know that you’re okay, Des, I have to show the Sarge around the town. See you later.” I walked to the door and turned. “By the way Maureen, you owe the Sarge an apology. It was Des who broke your Jesus figurine.”

And knowing that I’d just detonated World War III in that household, I hummed happily to myself, pushed past the Sarge who appeared rather traumatised after his ordeal, and ran down the stairs. Mr Sparkles’ malevolent glare followed me. I washed my hands thoroughly in the station bathroom, secured the building – the station wasn’t open on the weekend – and jumped in the driver’s seat of the patrol car to join the Sarge, who was waiting patiently and quietly in the passenger’s seat.

He glanced at me, his face expressing a multitude of emotions, but obviously none he felt able to put into words at this stage. I revved the engine, reversed like a hoon and squealed out of the parking lot, skidding and spraying gravel everywhere, before slowing down to the speed limit when I hit the street, like a model citizen.

"Fuller!" he shouted in alarm, clinging onto the door's armrest.

"Just my bit of fun, Sarge," I said, grinning to myself. "I love that gravel carpark."

He shook his head and turned away to look out of the window. He was probably calculating how long it would take him to drive back to the city if he left right now.

I drove down the Coastal Range Highway. It had been an act of unwarranted generosity by the state's founding fathers to gazette this place as a town way back in 1889. To be brutally honest, it wasn't up to scratch as a village and barely even passed muster as a hamlet. If pressed, I would probably refer to us as a cluster.

Little Town was nothing but a tiny dot in the local Referdex and a mere fly speck on the state road map. It was the kind of place that people drove through to get somewhere else, quickly. But the town had a few things going for it – it was situated at the base of Mount Big, with easy access to the good angling at Lake Big; there was access to the delights of the Pacific Ocean via its sheltered beach cove; and it also had exceptionally fertile soil. Otherwise, everyone would have drifted away eventually and the town would have died a natural death like so many other little towns. But the tourists, the government facilities nearby and the increasing numbers of small seasonal farmers kept the town's pulse alive. In fact, we were one of the few small rural communities in the state to have grown in population from the last census. It was just a pity that neither the town's police force nor its budget had grown along with it.

I began the tour, knowing that it wouldn't take very long. "This town was built on a crossroads. The road to the north leads down the Range to the prison and to Big Town. You came in that way when you arrived from the city. You would have passed the turnoff."

He nodded in memory of passing the prison and the turnoff to Wattling Bay.

"The road to the south leads down the Range to the hippy commune and the mental health clinic. The road to the east leads past the secret bikie retreat and the nudist community, then heads down to the beach. And the road to the west leads up to Mount Big and Lake Big."

"Mount *Big*?" he criticised. "That's not very imaginative."

I shrugged. "I guess all the good names were already taken by the time the explorers reached here. It *is* pretty big though – second largest mountain in the state and largest mountain in the Coastal Range. People get lost on it all the time. Hope you like bushwalking because you'll be doing a spot of it now and then." I smiled. "In the worst possible weather, of course."

Out the window I spotted a woman talking on her mobile, pacing back and forth in agitation outside the post office/newsagency, gesturing wildly with her free hand. It was Stacey Felhorn and she was either arguing with her best friend Dorrie Lebutt, Sharnee's younger sister, or with her boyfriend Rick Bycraft, Jake's older brother. She was always falling out with one or the other, sometimes with violent results that required my intervention. Maybe she'd just discovered what everyone in town already knew – that Rick and Dorrie had been sneaking around together behind her back for months. I continued to talk absent-mindedly as I watched her. "That's why this town is named Mount Big Town. But we locals all call it Little Town."

"Okay, you're doing my head in," the Sarge complained. I turned my attention

back to him. "Let me try to get this straight. This town is really called Mount Big Town because it sits at the base of Mount Big, but you all call it Little Town and you all call Wattling Bay 'Big Town' because it's the biggest town close by." I nodded. "That's very confusing."

"It's a local thing, which is why I'm giving you the heads-up," I said. "It's not that difficult to understand. This is Little Town. Wattling Bay is Big Town. Easy peasy."

He glanced at me, reluctantly curious. "That dog earlier? Did you really squeeze its —"

"Yes," I cut in, matter-of-fact. "And it's not the first time I've had to either. It seems cruel, but he won't respond to anything else when he gets himself into that state." I laughed. "Mr Sparkles is a real public nuisance. Des should have had him seen to years ago. He's as horny as a bunch of politicians at a showgirl conference." The Sarge raised his eyebrows in surprise. "Sparkles, that is, not Des."

He studied me for a few moments. "Thanks. I appreciate it."

"No worries." My eyes remained straight ahead, but I smiled to myself. We drove in silence for a while.

"So with all those local names for everything, what do you call the city?" he asked.

"The city. Why, what do you call it?" I smiled to myself again. He shot me a withering glance.

My mobile rang and I answered it, speaking while I drove.

"Miss Greville —" I started and then listened some more. "Really? Another one?" I suppressed a sigh. "Okay, I'll be right over. Keep your doors and windows locked. I'll be there soon."

I pulled a u-turn in the main street and sped off to Miss G's house on Pine Street, filling in the Sarge as I did. He frowned at me, not listening.

"Police should lead by example in the community," he said, butting in to my explanation about Miss G and her imaginary peepers.

"Huh?" I asked stupidly, my mind on Miss G. His words sunk in. "Oh yeah, that's so right, Sarge. I totally agree with you."

"That means police obeying the law themselves."

"Absolutely. If we don't, who will?" I agreed absently, keeping my eye on some of the younger Bycraft kids racing along the road on bikes, without helmets. There was no point trying to pull them over to reprimand them. They'd only scatter to the four winds and I'd be left looking like ten kinds of a fool trying to chase them down in every direction. I'd learned that from personal experience as well.

"And that means not talking on a mobile while you're driving or doing u-turns over unbroken double lines," he continued in a pointedly cold voice.

He caught my attention then. "Oh," I said uncomfortably. "You're talking about me, aren't you?"

"Yes I am, Senior Constable."

*Oh brother*, I thought, barely stifling a massive eye roll. This guy was going to be a barrel of laughs to work with. Fortunately for the both of us at that point, I arrived at Miss Greville's house and rattled up her pothole-pocked driveway.

Her house was typical of the oldest houses in town — timber built, timber stumps, tin roof, verandas on all four sides, lovely wrought-iron details on the railings, cream-coloured paint and deep green trim, peeling with age and weather. We climbed the front stairs, me warning him about the final, rotten third tread. I knocked on the door, loudly announcing our arrival so as not to alarm her. She was

a jittery bunch of nerves by the time she answered the door, which wasn't like her. She started in alarm when she saw a strange man at her threshold.

"Miss G, this is Sergeant Maguire. He's Des' replacement. I was just showing him around town when you called me," I explained quickly.

Her eyes lit up when she heard that. "Oh, Sergeant Maguire! Welcome to Little Town," she trilled, forgetting her fear in the excitement at taking in his tall muscularity and nice eyes. He was quite the change from Des, who hadn't visited her or anyone much personally for years. I'd done all the running around and all the community service in town since I'd returned. She was obviously impressed to have the town's senior police officer attending to her in her hour of need.

I took her to the kitchen and made us all a cup of tea, making sure that hers had plenty of sugar and leading her gently to her well-scrubbed kitchen table to drink it.

She told us in her clear and lucid manner that she'd risen at seven, had a leisurely breakfast and read the Big Town paper, the *Wattling Bay Messenger*, slowly. She had cleaned up her breakfast dishes and gone to her bedroom to change out of her nightie, when she saw a man peeking in her window. It had given her such a fright that she'd taken a full half-hour to settle before she felt able to call me. Everyone in town knew that I had the station phone permanently redirected to my mobile because I was rarely at the station, being busy in the field most of the day. Des had never answered the phone on the few times he'd ever showed his face in the station.

"We'll take a look around outside for you," I soothed and the Sarge and I spent the next ten minutes fruitlessly searching her large unkempt yard for any signs of the phantom intruder.

"Does she have any family?" he asked, his cheek bleeding where he'd been scratched by an overgrown rose bush. I repressed a strong urge to reach up and wipe away the trickle of blood.

"No, she's the last of the Grevilles," I said, dragging my eyes away from him.

"Maybe she's doing this to get some attention?" he suggested. I glanced back at him. Nope, no good. I still wanted to wipe the trickle away.

"She's not really that type of person. She's fairly sensible," I said instead. To escape before I embarrassed myself, I decided to take a quick look under Miss G's bedroom window and forced my way through the wild growth, peering down at the ground. I turned back to him. "Sarge? What do you make of these?"

He pushed his way through as well to examine what I'd found. In the bare dirt directly underneath the window were a couple of scuffed footprints. We stared at each other.

"Looks like we got ourselves a peeper, after all," he said.

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We searched around the other windows, but didn't find any more evidence of someone peeping on Miss G.

"That's the only window that has dirt underneath it. Is this the first time she's reported him at her bedroom window?"

I nodded. "He was at the lounge room window twice and at the kitchen window once."

"Anyone in town known to be a peeper? Someone we can talk to now?"

"There's only one that I know of, but he's my own personal peeper. He doesn't bother anyone else." He raised an eyebrow at that and I continued, "Anyway,

nobody needs to peep in Little Town. It's much easier to head down to the nudist community and climb the mango tree next to the fence. You cop a real eyeful from there." Both eyebrows were raised now. "So I've heard," I added hastily.

"Maybe our peeper prefers the more mature woman?" he suggested.

"Eww! Sarge!" I protested. "Miss G's ninety-three."

"It takes all types, Fuller. You should know that by now."

"Doesn't mean it's right though." I strode away from him towards the house again, thinking hard. I stopped suddenly. He ran smack bang into me knocking me off balance, he was following me so closely.

"Sorry," he said, slightly sheepish, his hands briefly on my upper arms righting me. "What's up?"

"There's a pattern," I answered hesitantly, looking up at the wide blue sky for inspiration. "Last week he peeped on a Friday night and a Saturday. This week, it was a Friday night . . . and now a Saturday again." I turned to him. "It's a pattern, but what does it mean?"

"What do you think of when you think about Friday nights and Saturdays?" he pondered. "Nothing springs to mind."

"Only someone who works," I said automatically, speaking as a working woman with responsibilities. "It's the only time you get to have any free time." Well, obviously I meant every other working person in the world except for me because here I was on a Saturday, working again, after also having worked on the preceding Friday night.

"So," he said. "Maybe someone who works full-time and has decided to use Friday nights and Saturdays to peep? It's not much of a hobby."

"Maybe they're not peeping, but scoping?"

"Anything worth stealing in there?" he asked, regarding the house doubtfully. I had to admit that it had seen better days, the paint peeling, roof rusting badly and timber warping in many places. But it had been a beautiful colonial homestead in its time.

"The Grevilles were the original settlers in these parts." Followed closely by the Fullers. "They built up a huge fortune at one point from forestry and then sheep farming." Unlike the Fullers, unfortunately. "Don't know how much is left now though." My fingers twitched when I saw that blood still trickling down his face. He finally noticed it himself though and swiped at it impatiently, surprised when he pulled his hand away to reveal blood. He wiped it again carelessly and turned his attention back to me.

"What's the rumour in town?" he asked, a question that I gave him a lot of credit for – town talk was invaluable in local investigations.

"The rumour in town is that there's a pile of money hidden somewhere in this house. But everyone in Little Town knows that's a bunch of hooey, because old Mr Greville, Miss G's father, was the town drunk and blew it all on whoring and boozing." I smiled dryly. "I mean he blew what was left after his ancestors made some exceedingly bad land investments. Those folk from Big Town though, well, they're greedy and they probably believe the story. It's bound to be someone from there, I guarantee."

I remembered old Mr Greville from when I was a kid. I'd visit the pub with Dad and Nana Fuller for the cheap Sunday roast lunch. That was a real treat, always much better than what Nana Fuller could make because, not to be disrespectful to her memory, she'd been a bloody awful cook. And there Mr Greville would be, propped up in a corner, stinking of his pipe, booze and piss. He'd been a scary

figure for a little kid and I'd sometimes have nightmares about him chasing me, his greasy long gray hair flying behind him, toothless mouth gaping at me, dirty claw-like fingernails out ready to snatch me. Or stab me. I gave an involuntary shudder at the memory. I hadn't thought about him for years.

"You mentioned that the family made bad land investments. Was that locally? Because to me it seems as though there's a lot of interest in land around these parts. I mean, you have two big government complexes here already – the prison and the mental health clinic."

My eyes rested on his face, impressed again. "You're right, Sarge. We have a lot of folk wanting to set up base around here, especially the government. Can you imagine the fuss there would have been if they tried to build a prison or mental health clinic anywhere near the city? Little Town is perfect for those kinds of things. We've the space and we're glad for the jobs. Unfortunately for the singles though, the extra men and women around usually choose to live in Big Town, not here. And they don't mingle much with us in town." Little Town was not a matchmaker's paradise and I thought he might be interested in that bit of information, not having a clue about his relationship status. "There could be something in those rumours after all."

"This will require some new-fashioned police work, Fuller. Computers, computers, computers," he said dryly.

"We might need to visit Big Town then, because our computers are ancient. Mine's been buggered for weeks."

"What kind of internet do we have here?"

"Intermittent slowest broadband speed on a good day. We're a long way from the exchange," I advised, noting with a smile the dismay crossing his face.

"Welcome to the country, Sarge."

He bit back what he was going to say when Miss Greville poked her head out from the back door and asked us if everything was all right. I turned to the Sarge then and smiled again.

"We don't need a computer. We have Miss G."

Chapter 4

When we advised Miss G that we needed to speak to her further, she invited us to share her lunch. I insisted that she sit down while I quickly made us all some sandwiches with the bread, sandwich meat, mustard, cheese, onion, tinned beetroot, lettuce and tomato I found in her pantry and fridge. The three of us sat around the kitchen table to eat, the Sarge discreetly screwing up his nose at the white bread, cheap meat and plastic cheese. We ate the sandwiches, brewed and drank another pot of tea and then we got down to business. By tacit agreement, I spoke for the two of us.

"Miss G, there have always been rumours circulating around town about a big fortune hidden in this house," I began.

She giggled charmingly. "Tess, my dear, I've spent over eighty years looking for that fortune. But do I look as though I'm roaringly rich?"

I smiled with her. No, it certainly did not look as though she was living the high life. Her clothes were patched, her food plain and her furnishings were very old, probably the original pieces her family had shipped over from Dear Old Blighty in the early 1880s.

"Did you ever think about any land holdings that the Grevilles might still own?"

I coaxed.

That took her by surprise and her sharp blue eyes enlarged behind her spectacles. “Well, I don’t know, dear. I wouldn’t think we had any left, but you’d have to speak to the family lawyers about that. Murchison and Murchison. In Big Town.” She thought for a few moments. “We have sold off bits of land over the years to various folk, but I’ve no idea what happened to that money. I leave all the details of that sort of business to my lawyer, Mr Murchison.”

The Sarge and I glanced at each other.

“Do you know where the Grevilles owned land around these parts?” I asked.

She pushed back her chair and stood shakily. “I don’t, but I’m sure it’s all in the library, Tess dear.”

The Sarge and I stood as well and I indicated to him with a nod that he should follow Miss G to the library while I washed up the plates. I could never leave an elderly lady with any dirty dishes or mess after my visit. Fierce Nana Fuller, an absolute Gorgon for good manners, would never have forgiven me if I had. And ten minutes later, crockery and cutlery carefully washed, dried and put away, the benches and table wiped down and the chairs neatly pushed back in, I joined them in the library. It was a dim and dusty room, crammed with oversized chairs, tables and books. No one had been inside for years judging by the thick dust settled on every horizontal surface. Boxes of documents were stacked almost to the ceiling. The Sarge, covered in dust himself after moving a few to peer inside, was regarding them with resigned unhappiness.

“What was that you said about new-fashioned police work?” I teased, brushing at the sleeve of his expensive t-shirt, sneezing three times in a row when the dust went up my nose.

He turned to me, handed me his handkerchief and pulled a face. “We’re going to have to take everything back to the station and go through it.”

I blew my nose noisily and shoved his monogrammed linen hankie in my pocket. It was my turn to pull a face. “Or we could just ring Murchison and Murchison,” I suggested. “I know. Why don’t we have a race? You go through all of this and I’ll ring the lawyers and we’ll see who comes up with some information first?” I dared to flash him a cheeky smile.

“Good thinking, Fuller. Except *I’ll* do the ringing and *you* can do the sifting.” And he flashed me a smile in return that completely transformed his face into something almost handsome. But the smile was gone as soon as it came.

Miss G laid her gnarled, wrinkled hand on my arm. “Tess dear, was there someone at my window?”

I exchanged a quick glance with the Sarge and decided to be honest with her. She was a sensible woman. “We found some evidence that shows that there may have been someone standing underneath your bedroom window, Miss G. Just to be careful, can you stay for a few days with Bessie?” Miss G and Bessie Goodwill had been best friends since they were five-years-old, which was a long time ago for both of them.

“Bessie lives with her girl in Big Town now,” Miss G reminded me.

“That’s right.” Bessie’s ‘girl’ was over seventy herself. “We’d be happy to drive you to Bessie’s daughter’s place, and we could go and speak to your lawyer while we’re at it. With your permission of course, Miss G.”

She looked at me shrewdly. “You think this has something to do with the Greville family’s ‘secret treasure’, don’t you, Officer Tess?”

“It’s just a possibility, Miss Greville,” the Sarge reassured. “But we would

prefer if you could stay with your friend for a while.”

She fixed her gaze on him, then nodded and went off to ring Bessie and pack. While she was occupied sorting her necessities, the Sarge used the phone to ring her lawyers, but it was Saturday and there was no answer at the office.

“Guess it will have to wait until Monday,” I shrugged. “Do you want me to drop you back at my place or at the station? No point you wasting your Saturday coming to Big Town too just to drop off Miss G.”

“I’ll tag along,” he insisted and I shrugged again, not caring one way or the other. *Whatever floats his boat*, I thought.

When Miss G was ready, we carefully locked up her house and the Sarge gave her his arm to help her down the stairs and into the patrol car, which was thoughtful of him. He stowed her bag in the boot while I settled her in the backseat, on the other side to the still damp stain, and ensured her seatbelt was securely fastened.

“It’s so lovely to be fussed over,” she twittered happily. I smiled at her in the rearview mirror and drove down her bumpy drive to the street.

I kept her occupied during the ninety minute drive by questioning her about what Little Town had been like when she was growing up. It surprised, and depressed, me just how little the town had changed since then. Most of the town’s buildings dated from its establishment as a timber town, including most of the private houses as well as the police station, lockup and police house. When the timber ran out, the townsfolk had moved the sheep in to replace it. These days though, small seasonal organic farmers dominated the local agricultural scene. Mount Big was an ancient volcanic plug and the surrounding soil was extremely fertile, which was great for us locals because we enjoyed cheap, fresh fruit and vegetables all year round. That was especially fortunate for Dad and me on our limited income.

We drove into Big Town, a pleasant coastal urban centre with a population nudging twenty-five thousand. It sprawled around a deep bay that provided good commercial and recreational fishing. When I was a kid, Dad had often taken me fishing there with a close friend of his who possessed a large boat and an even larger family (seven kids). That evening we’d have a beach barbeque of fresh fish, which made a nice change from all the lamb and mutton Dad and I normally ate. I had warm memories of driving back home at the end of the day, sleepy, happy after running around madly with all of those other kids, a bit sunburnt and windswept, the smell of fish permeating his old Land Rover.

We dropped Miss G off at Bessie’s house and I cruised past Miss G’s lawyers’ office just in case someone was working today even if they weren’t answering the phone. But the place was in darkness. Before I turned to head back home, I made a detour to the bay to the fishermen’s market. The Sarge gave me a look that spoke volumes of what he thought about cops who did their personal shopping in the patrol car.

“I won’t be a sec,” I cajoled. “You want some fresh seafood for dinner, don’t you?”

His disapproval wavered at the mention of fresh seafood, so I took advantage of his weakness and ran off to the market without a second glance. Of course all the good stuff was gone by that time of the day, but I still managed to squeeze out of my favourite fisherman some decent green king prawns that he’d been hoarding for his own family. True, I had to kiss his fishy, salty and stubbly cheek to win over that favour and then listen to a lot of good-natured and jealous ribbing from the others about that, but I didn’t mind. The older guys had all known me since I was a kid.

Dad and his friend had always sheepishly bought our dinner from the market on the many occasions we'd returned unsuccessful after our own fishing expeditions.

Waving goodbye to them, their best wishes for Dad ringing in my ears, I was back in the car before the Sarge could change his mind back to disapproval. I sped off home towards Little Town. I thought I'd done quite enough unpaid overtime for the day and planned on heading straight home, whether he wanted to or not. As we approached Little Town though, I noticed something that I couldn't ignore.

"Shit," I muttered under my breath, then more loudly to the Sarge, "Hold on!"

I flicked on the siren and lights and planted my foot, swerving around other cars on the road, my eyes firmly fixed on the small frog-green hatchback in the distance ahead of us. It didn't try to outrun me or avoid me, just kept driving along at a steady speed on the road that wound its way up the lower reaches of the Coastal Range. It was only when I was right up its backside and we'd reached the flatness of Little Town that the driver, with a pleased expression that I could clearly see in the car's rearview mirror, noticed us and hastily pulled over to the side of the road. I pulled over too and turned off the siren, but not the lights.

"What's going on?" the Sarge demanded to know.

"Stolen vehicle," I said.

"How can you be so sure?" I really hated people questioning my judgement, especially other cops, but held my resentment in with some restraint. I replied with patience tempered through gritted teeth.

"Because I know for a fact that the person driving that car doesn't have a licence or a car. He's also unpredictable and can be very volatile. I wish I had my gear with me. I might need cuffs and spray. Can you look in the glove box to see if there are any quick restraints in there? I think I threw some in a while ago, just in case."

He opened the glove box, dug through the mess, handed a pair to me and slipped a pair into his own jeans pocket.

"Ta. The driver is Martin Cline, a patient at the mental health clinic and the car belongs to one of the psychiatrists who work there. I've told her to stop leaving the damn car unlocked so many times now that I've lost count. Martin's a regular escapee and he likes to drive. For some reason, he loves that car and tends to steal it more than any of the others, but that's probably because the stupid woman keeps leaving it unlocked all the time. Normally he doesn't cause any problems. He usually just goes for a little zoom around town then back to the clinic, but every now and again he becomes very aggressive, drives erratically, tries to run people over. I never know what mood he's going to be in."

"I'll deal with this," he decided, opening his door.

"No, Martin's used to me. You'll just scare him."

I opened my door and climbed out, approaching the car slowly. He appeared to be calm, sitting quietly in the driver's seat with his hands on the steering wheel, waiting for me. I'd long thought that being pulled over by me was a critical part of his fun and he loved the excitement of being caught by the police. When I hadn't seen him for a while, or he'd gotten away with one of his little drives without being caught, he always made sure the next time that he drove around town for long enough that I would either notice him myself or someone would ring me to tell me he was on the loose again. Jake likes to tease me that Martin is in love with me and while I scoff at him, he might have a point because Martin does try to run down Jake every time he sees him.

I reached the driver's door and Martin wound down the window.

"Hello, Officer Tess. You look really pretty today with your hair loose like that. But you're not in uniform." He was disappointed.

"No, it's the weekend, Martin. I don't live in my uniform, you know."

He laughed in an inappropriately loud and raucous way that far exceeded any humour in my comment. *Oh dear*, I thought.

"You going to step out of the car for me so I can take you back home?" I asked.

"Who's that man with you?"

"That's Sergeant Maguire. He's the replacement for Des."

"Why are you hanging around with him on the weekend in your normal clothes? Are you on a date?" Slightly peevish tone.

"No Martin, we're not on a date. We had some police business in Big Town to attend to. I was just showing him around town. You're not helping to create a very good first impression of the town driving around in a stolen car, are you?"

He was hurt. "Officer Tess, it's not *stolen*, it's just borrowed. I'm going to take it back."

"I know you are. But you took it without permission and that's wrong, remember? That's stealing. We've had this talk a million times before."

A sulky expression settled on his face. "Are you still seeing that Jake Bycraft? The Bycrafts are nothing but scum."

I leaned down to look at him more closely. Sometimes I could tell by his eyes how dangerous he was going to be. "It's none of your business who I'm seeing, Martin. Get out of the car please."

"I don't like your attitude today, Officer Tess. You're being mean to me."

Oh brother, I thought, *here we go*, and looked over at the Sarge, who was standing by the patrol car watching the action keenly. I hoped he was good at reading minds because we hadn't had a chance to develop any signals for each other and I wanted him over here. Fast.

But before he could move, Martin threw open the front door of the car onto me, catching me by surprise and knocking me flying. He sprinted from the car and headed off down the street like lightning. He was a fast runner and a regular gold medallist for the sprint races at the clinic's annual athletic games. I was up on my feet and pounding after him before I could even gather my thoughts, ignoring my bruised butt and as angry as hell. I didn't want my prawns to spoil sitting there in the sun.

He ran to a t-junction, flipped his head left, then right and shot off to the right, running across the road without even checking if it was clear. A battered ute screeched to a halt, narrowly missing him, its horn blaring angrily. I held up my palm to stop the ute taking off and ran across in front of it as well. I was running Martin down, not being too shabby in the sprinting department myself, when I heard the siren sound nearby and turned to see the Sarge in the patrol car. I jumped in the passenger seat and pointed down the street where we could see Martin running for his life.

Although the roads leading into it are reasonably steep and windy, Little Town itself is built on a plateau so is flat with streets made wide to allow bullock trains hauling timber to do a full u-turn. It isn't full of small alleys, back lanes and traffic like a city, so in terms of tailing someone, it's a dream come true. We cruised behind Martin, easily following him with the lights flashing, but siren turned off still.

When Martin appeared to flag, the Sarge pulled over and we both jumped out.

"Lock the car!" I yelled over my shoulder. "Otherwise one of those Bycraft

bastards will steal it.”

We ran after Martin and soon had him cornered in the town’s only dead end street, imaginatively called Dead End Street. It was the only street in town not named after a tree and it terminated with the old cemetery. I’d often wondered if the town fathers had deliberately planned it that way as a subtle statement on human mortality.

The cemetery was full of ornate and precariously leaning headstones from the town’s earliest settlement days. A lot of my ancestors were buried there; some of them well before their time, including my mother. It was closed now except for family plots. The new lawn cemetery that replaced it was located two kilometres out of town on the corner of the Coastal Range Highway and Mountain Road, the road that led up to Mount Big.

Martin was very superstitious and would never set foot in the cemetery, so for him to run down this street told me a lot about his strong need to be captured and returned to safety. I’d never asked, but I’d always assumed that he had some kind of authority complex, which was probably why he needed his regular encounters with me.

“Take it easy on him,” I said in a low voice as the Sarge efficiently pushed Martin to the ground and snapped the quick restraints around his wrists, hauling him to his feet gently. Martin began to cry and I don’t mean a few token tears trickling out of his eyes to make us feel sorry for him, but huge gut-wrenching sobs that shook his whole body and echoed down the street. His eyes and then eventually his nose streamed with liquid.

“I-I j-j-just w-wanted to g-g-g-go for a dr-dr-drive,” he wailed, hyperventilating, almost incomprehensible with emotion. He wiped his nose on the sleeve of his t-shirt, leaving a disgusting smear behind.

“I know, Martin,” I said kindly, patting him on the shoulder. “But you’re not allowed to drive. You don’t have a licence. It’s not safe for you to drive. Not for you or for other people.”

He gave a watery snort and appeared puzzled when I mentioned other people. I wasn’t a psychiatrist, but even I could tell that Martin had great difficulty in empathising with other folk. His entire world consisted of him and his needs and desires alone. There was probably some fancy term to describe that, but I didn’t know what it was.

We led him to the patrol car and pushed him gently into the back seat. I handed him a bunch of tissues and climbed into the driver’s seat again and the Sarge into the passenger seat.

“We’d better secure the stolen car first,” I said and he nodded agreement.

“Borrowed,” insisted Martin from the back with another watery snort. I ignored him, did a u-turn and drove back to where Martin had abandoned the little green car. It was gone.

“Bloody Bycrafts,” I muttered to myself and sped off in anger the fifteen kilometres to the south of town where the mental health clinic was situated. I threw the Sarge my mobile and asked him to ring the clinic to let them know we were bringing Martin back, mindful of his ticking off earlier this morning about using the phone while driving. I had the number to the clinic on speed-dial.

He spoke for a few moments and not long afterwards we turned into the tall gates of the clinic and handed over Martin to its relieved and embarrassed director. The Sarge gave him a hard-faced reprimand about allowing a patient to escape so frequently and bluntly suggested that he review the clinic’s security arrangements

immediately. The director nodded the entire time, his face a strange mix of fawning discomfit. *He'd never looked like that when I'd given him a serve about Martin*, I thought sourly. In fact, he'd always had a smutty smirk on his face as he listened, his eyes dropping continuously from my face to my boobs, once even wolf-whistling under his breath when I walked to the door. I quietly resented it when people took a male cop more seriously than me.

Martin safely returned, we drove off back towards town again. I sped past my home though, instead taking the turnoff for Mountain Road, the Sarge raising his eyebrows at me in question. We drove up the mountain in silence. As I suspected, sitting forlornly abandoned in the public carpark adjacent to Lake Big was the little green car, doors wide open and keys in the ignition. It was a little scraped on the front bumper and worse for wear inside, but mostly okay.

"How did you know it would be here?" the Sarge asked, looking at me with guarded respect.

"This is where the Bycrafts abandon all their stolen cars," I told him, instantly dispelling his emerging image of me as a wonder-cop. "They're creatures of routine. And knowing them, they've probably had an orgy in the car as well." I smiled at him brightly. "So which one do you want to drive back to my place?"

I wasn't too surprised when he kicked me out of the patrol car and drove off.

There was a revolting stain on the driver's seat of the little car that I didn't care to examine too closely. I looked around for something to cover it and found a beautiful and expensive pale lilac cashmere jumper carelessly thrown onto the back seat. *That silly psychiatrist*, I tutted to myself. It looked as though someone had wiped something disgusting on it, maybe even a few times, that I also didn't care to examine. I draped the jumper carefully over the stain and drove the little car back to my house. The patrol car was already parked when I returned, but I noticed immediately that the Sarge's Beemer was gone.

I trudged up the stairs wearily as I rang the clinic to let the psychiatrist know she could pick up her car from my house. It had been such a long day. I hadn't had much sleep the night before and I was fast running out of puff. I hadn't even had a chance to think about getting my chickens out of the lockup, and wondered if the Sarge would really start eating them if I didn't move them out fast enough.

In the lounge room, I kissed Dad on the forehead and flopped onto the lounge, closing my eyes. "What a day!"

"Tired, love?"

"Beyond tired, Dad. Beyond exhausted. Getting perilously close to expiration. I swear I will never move from this lounge again."

"Jakey rang. He's coming over tonight," he told me with a sly smile.

I sat up immediately. "Oh goodie! I better go have a shower." I jumped to my feet and hustled my butt to the bathroom with the sound of Dad's chuckles ringing in my ears.

Chapter 5

As I stood under the shower, I thought about Jake. There was a reason I called him my honey-boy – he had honey-brown skin, wavy golden hair, incredible amber eyes and was as sweet as honey. Like all the Bycrafts he was very good-looking and kept himself in top shape. He was mostly even-tempered and good-natured and was smart, the only one in his extensive extended family so far to work out that crime doesn't pay, not that he was an angel by any means.

In my eyes, he was almost perfect and had only one flaw, but it was a biggie – he was a Bycraft. And he was a loyal Bycraft. We'd had a million arguments over his awful family, but he would defend them with his life. Deep in my heart, although I loved him intensely, I acknowledged that we had no long-term future together because of his family.

I loathed the Bycrafts; it was as simple as that. In fact, there hadn't even been a word coined yet to describe the level of hatred I had for the Bycrafts. I would never marry into his family of demons. I would rather die than become a Bycraft. My father would rather kill me than let me become a Bycraft. If I married a Bycraft he wouldn't go to my wedding. I suspect that he would never speak to me again. He had been upset and furious when I'd started going out with Jake in the first place.

But all that was something to worry about in the future. I certainly had no thoughts of getting married yet, even though I'd turned twenty-seven on Christmas Eve last year. Jake, a year older than me, wasn't thinking of getting married either. But that was because he was already married.

He'd married when he was twenty to Chantelle Lebutt (Sharnee and Dorrie's sister), and permanently separated from her after nearly two years of unstable and hot-blooded wedded 'bliss', with a great deal of wild sex, shouting, threatening and cheating on both sides. He'd never got around to divorcing Chantelle and when I asked him about it one day, he muttered some unconvincing answer that left me wondering if he was using his marital status to distance himself from women, including me. Nobody could expect him to get married if he was already married, could they?

I think he also felt some obligation towards Chantelle, a less-than-charming woman who'd boasted about having '*Property of Jakey*' tattooed on her arse during the first flush of married love. I bet she'd regretted that once or twice afterwards. In the six years since they'd separated, she'd had four kids to four different fathers and stacked on fifty kilograms, all of which she blamed on Jake for walking out on her. Her four kids' fathers were Jake's older brothers Red, Karl and Rick and his younger brother Denny. Jake didn't seem to mind though. It was that kind of family. They shared.

He was the only Bycraft who hadn't impregnated any women growing up. This was due to his fanatical use of birth control from the moment he was first sexually active at school, even during his time with his wife. The rumour was that they'd broken up because he wouldn't get Chantelle pregnant so she could collect the government's baby bonus to go on a holiday to the Gold Coast with her sister Dorrie. He really was the smart one in the family.

When she'd tried to blame the first of her kids on him, despite the fact that they'd separated eleven months previously, he'd demanded a DNA test straight away. She had baulked at that and hadn't tried it on again. Any other women over the years who'd insisted that he was the father of her child received the same treatment. He was almost obsessive about ensuring that he didn't become a father. It was psychological – probably something to do with the fact that his own father had spent most of Jake's life in jail and his mother wasn't exactly the patient, faithful, maternal type. It hadn't been a great childhood. But all that was okay with me too, because I wasn't ready to become a mother yet and I would never forgive myself if I was responsible for bringing yet another Bycraft brat into the world. God knows there were enough of the little monsters running around already.

I dried myself off and dressed in a short skirt and body-hugging t-shirt, leaving my hair loose. I sprayed myself sparingly with my favourite perfume, a ruinously

pricey delicate floral scent that Jake had bought me for my last birthday and which I was trying to make do for the entire year. I then added that glamorous final touch as I did with all my outfits – my hunting knife. I probably didn't need too, reasonably sure that I was safe when Jake was near me, but old habits die hard and I'd been wearing it for so long that I virtually felt naked when I was unarmed.

I went to the kitchen and prepared the prawns for dinner, ripping off their heads and shelling them, grateful that the Sarge had remembered to bring them in from the car. The familiar sound of Jake's pride and joy, his distinctive gold-coloured double-cabined ute driving into the yard drifted up the side of the house through the open kitchen windows. For Christmas last year I'd bought him a personalised number plate for it that read: **JAKY-B**. He loved it.

Before long I heard him come in the front door to spend a few minutes chatting to Dad. I was engrossed in the recipe, carefully chopping home-grown red chillies, coriander and mint, when strong, brown arms snaked around my waist, hands moving up to caress my breasts and hot lips pressed themselves against my neck. I threw down my knife carelessly and leaned back against my honey-boy, eyes closed in bliss, surrendering myself to his magical wandering hands.

"Hello Tessie, my darling. You smell fantastic. I love that perfume. What's for dinner?"

"Hello Jakey. A prawn stir fry," I said turning, sliding my arms up around his neck and kissing him properly.

He looked down at me with his gorgeous eyes. "Sounds delicious. What about dessert?"

"I'm for dessert," I smiled up at him.

"My favourite," he smiled back. He had a beautiful smile. He ran his hands through my hair, then down my back to rest on my butt, pulling my hips close against his. "I missed you. I've been thinking about you all week." He often worked week-long shifts, so we didn't see each regularly.

"Me too," I said, although in truth I'd been too busy to think about him except for five minutes lying in bed before I fell asleep each night. He pushed me up against the bench and we kissed slowly and deeply for a while, a lot of tongue involved, hands getting very naughty, nice foreplay. I was burning for him already.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said a voice from the doorway. "I didn't realise you had company." We sprang apart, surprised. The Sarge stood at the door, a bottle of white wine in each hand, his eyes coolly assessing Jake, flicking over me, then over the dinner preparations before returning to me. He held up the bottles. "I thought I'd buy some wine to go with the prawns," he said and walked past us to put the bottles in the fridge.

I adjusted my clothing and smoothed down my hair. I wasn't a person to be easily embarrassed, but I could feel my cheeks pinken as I thanked him and introduced the two men.

Jake looked him up and down. "So you're the man my Tessie's been running around with all day?" he asked as he shook the Sarge's hand heartily. He turned to me with a mischievous grin. "I've had twenty-eight phone calls so far today from people telling me that my girlfriend's been out and about with another man." His mobile trilled from his pocket. He retrieved it and looked at the screen, pulling a face. "Make that twenty-nine. That's Valerie. I'm not answering."

I smirked to myself. Valerie Bycraft was Jake's aunt-by-marriage and one of the acknowledged premier busybodies of Little Town. "She's late with the news. The Sarge and I have been back for ages. That will be killing her, not being the first to

tell you.”

He laughed and kissed my forehead. “I’m off for a shower, babe. I’ve got time, haven’t I?” He was still in his prison officer uniform – white polo shirt with the department’s logo on the pocket, black cargo pants, black boots and black logoed cap – coming straight here from work, and although he looked great in that, he looked even better in his jeans.

“Sure you have, honey-boy,” I replied and went back to work, humming to myself happily, thinking about sex, lots and lots of sex tonight. I couldn’t wait. Sex, sex, sex. Plenty of hot, sweaty, spectacular sex with my gorgeous man. It was just what I needed.

“Can I help with anything?” asked a quiet voice behind me. Startled, my eyes flew up. I’d forgotten about the Sarge the second that Jake had left the room. Oh crap! Sex while my new boss was in the room directly across the hall – probably overhearing everything. I shied at the thought, and then knew it just wasn’t going to happen tonight. Not while he was staying here. My whole evening was ruined in one second.

“No thanks,” I said in a sulky voice, deveining the prawns with a mountain of attitude.

“Can I pour you a glass of wine at least?” he persisted. I looked up at him again and relented in my bad temper. It wasn’t his fault he had to stay with me and I was the one who’d offered the hospitality in the first place. I remembered my manners.

“Thank you, Sarge. That would be lovely.”

He smiled slightly. “My pleasure.” He paused a beat. “Tess.”

I smiled back. “And maybe you could chop some vegies for the stir fry? Only if you don’t mind?”

“Of course.” I directed him to our scant collection of unchipped wine glasses and he poured us both a glass before chopping mushrooms, red capsicum, snowpeas and shallots as efficiently as he seemed to do everything. He was a man used to looking after himself, that was obvious. I wondered again about his relationship status. Single? Divorced? Gay? He didn’t wear a wedding ring, so I presumed he wasn’t currently married, but otherwise it was impossible to tell.

“This wine is wonderful, Sarge,” I marvelled after a few sips. “I feel as though the grapes are bursting on my tongue. What is it?” I wasn’t much of a drinker and didn’t know anything about wine, but the wine he’d chosen was simply glorious.

Pleased, he gave me a brief rundown of him approaching Abe at the tiny bottle shop attached to the pub, seeking a good wine to match the seafood. He commented on how helpful Abe had been in hunting down the perfect wine for dinner, a crisp sauvignon blanc from the Margaret River region in the country’s west.

“Abe would have loved that,” I told him happily. He didn’t get much opportunity to find a connoisseur in Little Town. And by connoisseur, I meant anybody who had the remotest interest in whether the flavour of the wine matched the flavour of the food, and wasn’t just after an alcohol buzz. It appeared as though we had something of a gentleman on our hands in Finn Maguire.

Jake burst back into the kitchen, hair damp and looking insanely wonderful. He cast sharp eyes over the two of us, took a huge gulp of my wine, grimaced comically, snatched a snowpea from the pile of prepared vegetables earning him a frown from the Sarge, and went to the fridge for a beer. He popped the lid and took a long swig, leaning his cute butt against the kitchen bench and draping his arm around my shoulders.

“You from the city, Finn?” he asked pleasantly.

“Yes,” the Sarge replied minimally, busy chopping.

“What brings you to Dullsville?”

The Sarge glanced up at him briefly. “Personal reasons.” That was probably meant to shut Jake up, but it piqued my interest straight away.

“You ever lived in the country before?”

A brief derisive laugh. “No.”

“So why now?”

“Personal reasons,” he repeated.

“Jakey, do you know that the Sarge told me he was going to eat my chickens one by one if I didn’t move them from the lockup?” I pouted indignantly, glaring over at my new boss.

Jake laughed out loud, “Good for you, mate. The way Tessie goes on about those bloody chickens, you’d think they were her kids.”

“They are my girls. He threatened to eat Miss Chooky first!” I insisted, poking Jake in his well-muscled side, becoming heated again as I remembered.

He leaned down to kiss me and laughed even louder. “Good, I hate that chicken! And she hates men. Watch out, Finn, that’s all I can say. She’ll get her revenge.”

“Miss Chooky or Tess?” asked the Sarge in a cool voice.

Jake laughed again. “Who knows? Probably both. My advice is to watch your back.”

I rolled my eyes and loosened up the hokkein noodles in some warm water.

“I’ll deal with either as they come. I’m not sure that Tess has been well-supervised at work recently,” the Sarge said and paused, his eyes sliding over to me. “And maybe her hens also need a rooster.”

Jake almost burst a kidney laughing at that. I was ready to bust some kidneys myself too, but I wouldn’t be laughing while I did it. I didn’t appreciate the implication that I needed a man to rule over me, even if the Sarge was joking. That was *if* he was joking – it was hard to tell from his straight face.

“She hasn’t been supervised at all,” agreed Jake, twirling my hair around his fingers. I begged him with my eyes to not say another word, but he pressed on. “Des was worse than useless, leaving Tessie to do everything. It wasn’t fair. She can’t run a two-person station by herself. She’s exhausted.” He looked at me so lovingly as he said it though that I didn’t kick him like I wanted to. Instead I put my arm around his waist and leaned against him. He kissed the top of my head.

“Tess?” asked my new boss.

“He’s the one complaining, not me,” I said, and let Jake go, busying myself with frying the prawns, vegetables, noodles and adding the sauces at the right time. When I finished I busied myself further by getting out the bowls, chopsticks and cutlery, serving dinner, pouring the Sarge and me more wine and Dad and Jake some beer.

Over dinner which we ate casually at the kitchen table, Jake asked me about the encounter with Martin. I gave the Sarge a resigned look.

“See what it’s like living in the country? There are no secrets in this place.”

“Was he violent again?” asked Dad quietly.

“No,” I assured, frowning as I struggled with the chopsticks to pick up the last few noodles in my bowl. I gave up and picked them up with my fingers instead, popping them into my mouth and licking my fingers clean afterwards. Yum! I caught the Sarge’s eyes on me and flushed slightly, ashamed of my bad table manners. I hurriedly answered. “Martin was more emotional than anything else. I

was glad he wasn't violent because I didn't have my cuffs or my spray on me. Luckily there were some plastic restraints in the glove box. The Sarge brought him down and gave the director a right reaming at the clinic about their security afterwards." I added dryly, "I think the director might even listen this time. At least he paid attention to the Sarge."

Jake took my hand and squeezed. "Must be nice to know you finally have a partner who's willing to help?"

I glanced over at the Sarge and nodded. "Oh yeah, that's a good feeling."

Jake continued indignantly. "Do you know that lazy former boss of hers left her to go out to the secret bikie retreat to serve a Council order? By herself? I went ballistic when I heard about it." Jake wasn't a big fan of Des. "My little girl copper alone with a bunch of bikies."

He got an ungentle elbow in the side for that sexist comment. "Jakey, I've explained to you a hundred times that Des wasn't even at the station when the Council worker came in and asked one of us to serve the order for him because he was too scared to," I reminded him, but not really wanting to stick up for Des. It had been quite a threatening experience. "He was at Foxy's place, investigating an alleged break-in."

Jake and my Dad both gave elaborate eye rolls.

"Right," drawled Jake sarcastically. "The only person in town Des ever bothered personally visiting when they reported a crime. And in fact, weren't you specifically told not to ever investigate any reported break-ins at Foxy's house, but refer them to Des immediately?"

"Yes," I admitted reluctantly. I was a loyal kind of person and didn't like to bad-mouth a boss, even when he'd been as bad as Des.

"So while he was banging Foxy, you were left with the dangerous work?" Jake was building up a head of steam.

"It wasn't that bad," I lied, smiling at him and gently squeezing his hand. "I'm still here, aren't I?"

In fact I had been severely harassed by the six or so bikies present at the time. They'd made inappropriate sexual comments and told me in vulgar detail what they were planning on doing to me. I stared them down and tried not to react to them, but kept my distance and had my hand ready to reach for my gun the whole time I was there. The worst part had been when I left and had to turn my back on them as I walked down the long path back to the patrol car. There was no way I was going to give them the satisfaction of seeing me turn around to check on them, but I could feel their eyes on me the whole way, their crude catcalls ringing in my ears.

I'd had a real go at Des over it when he finally returned from Foxy's place, but as usual he'd just brushed it aside as 'woman's nerves' and even made a few jokes about it. It had taken me a while to cool down after that little incident.

The Sarge appeared thoughtful. "That won't happen again, Tess. I'm a big believer in team work." Then he changed the subject. "Why do you all call it the *secret* bikie retreat? Clearly everybody knows about it. It hardly sounds like a secret."

I laughed. "They try to keep it secret, but it's a bit hard for us to ignore thirty bikes rumbling through town in the middle of the night every couple of months. They usually keep to themselves and don't cause much of a nuisance, surprisingly. But God only know what they're doing inside that place."

We finished dinner and Dad volunteered himself and the Sarge to wash up, leaving Jake and me free. I took his hand when he offered and let him lead me from

the kitchen.

“Your room or mine?” he joked, pinning me to the hall wall with his body. He received free bed-and-board at the prison in exchange for being on-call whenever there was an emergency like a fire or an attempted escape. Guests, especially women, were definitely not allowed. I’d never stayed overnight in his room.

“No! Not with the Sarge here. I don’t want my new boss to hear us getting it on, Jakey. He’s right across the hall. He’ll hear everything. And we’re not exactly quiet.”

“Baby doll, please don’t tease me,” he groaned, kissing my neck and pressing himself up against me. “I need you. I’ve been thinking about you all week.”

“I can see that, honey-boy,” I gasped, feeling his hardness through his jeans. And that was the last thing I got to say for a while as his mouth, tongue and hands got busy again.

My Jake was a wonderful seducer. Everything he did felt like foreplay to me. Ringing me up to ask me if I wanted him to pick up some milk and bread sent a warm thrill down my spine. Complaining that he was too tired to love me only built up my anticipation for the next time. I lived in a constant state of heightened sexual awareness when I was around him.

In bed, he was dynamite. He was only the second lover I’d had in my life, but even I could tell he was head and shoulders over most other men when it came to sex. After a night spent with him, I went around the next day with a silly smile on my face that nothing could budge. Being a Bycraft, he had become sexually active as soon as he hit puberty. Being so good-looking and much more charismatic and nicer than the average Bycraft, he’d had a line of girls willing to experiment with him. I hadn’t been one of them. He had never paid any attention to me anyway, being a year ahead of me at school. Instead I’d been hounded relentlessly by his younger brother, Denny, who had been in the same grade as me.

I hated Denny Bycraft. He had been a pest to me during primary school and was my chief tormenter all through high school, persisting in his stupid belief that if he harassed and insulted me enough, I would sleep with him. Not bloody likely! The ninety minute bus trip to and from high school at Big Town each school day was hell on earth for me. He spread rumours about me, telling everyone I’d put out for him, which nobody believed anyway. It was well-known that Dad and Nana Fuller both kept a fanatically close and careful eye on me, knowing exactly where I was and who I was with, twenty-four hours a day.

To my endless embarrassment, everybody in the whole high school knew that I was a virgin. And the fact that Denny kept haranguing me constantly let everyone know that he hadn’t succeeded in his attempts to get me into bed (or more likely into a stolen car for a quickie up at the lake carpark, which was as romantic as a Bycraft boy normally got). He didn’t keep his message consistent either, one day telling everyone in a loud voice that Teresa Fuller was a stuck-up frigid bitch who thought she was too good for every boy in Little Town, and the next telling everyone that Teresa Fuller was a dirty whore who would sleep with anyone for money, even other girls, even sheep, even her own father. Yeah, Denny Bycraft was a real charmer.

I completely ignored Denny, didn’t speak to him, didn’t look at him and didn’t acknowledge his presence in any way. I stared out the bus window or read calmly as he shouted out hurtful things about me, blanking him on the street if our paths ever crossed. That made him even more obsessed with me, because he was a good-looking boy too and couldn’t believe that I was indifferent to his Bycraft ‘charm’

when every other girl in my year fell for it. I became some unobtainable holy grail for him and he wasn't going to stop until he broke me down or forced me to agree to sleep with him, neither of which was ever going to happen.

There were three things that eased his harassment, none of them permanently though. One night at the end of eighth grade, stressed at being in the middle of exams and after a particularly virulent attack from him on the bus ride home, I sobbed out to Nana Fuller for the first time what had been happening for most of the year. She instantly took me very seriously. The next afternoon as Denny Bycraft stepped off the bus when it dropped us back at Little Town, my ferocious Nana – who stood barely five feet tall in her good heels but who was well-accepted as the most terrifying woman in town with the sharpest tongue you ever heard – was waiting for him. She gave him such an ear bashing about his disgraceful behaviour that she eventually made him cry in front of the other kids. Then she marched to his house, dragging him there by the ear, and gave his mother an equally brutal tongue lashing, pointing out her many flaws as a parental figure in clear and uncertain terms, berating her for her demon children, and eventually made her cry too. It was the talk of the town for the next two months because the Bycrafts were a hard family and they didn't break easily. My Nana was the hero of Little Town. She was my hero too.

The second incident that made Denny back off for a while was the beating I gave him in ninth grade. One afternoon, moody with PMS, I snapped after he tried to trip me as I got off the bus right after he'd made that crack about me sleeping with my dad. I grabbed him by his shirt with my left hand and socked him one on the nose with my right fist. Then we were on in earnest, circling around each other, the blood from his nose dripping onto his crumpled white school shirt. All the kids surrounded us, cheering and yelling out 'Fight! Fight! Fight!' in that primitive *Lord of the Flies* way that kids have. Not many people knew, but from when I was a tiny child my father, with the full support of the normally ladylike and proper Nana Fuller, had desperately and determinedly made sure that I could defend myself. Even back then when I was only fourteen, I was a competent sparrer, had learned some martial arts, was a crack shot and carried my knife with me everywhere. So when other girls went to ballet, gymnastics or horse riding, I was at the rifle range or in the gym in Big Town, punching and kicking bags, learning self-defence. I wasn't afraid to take on Denny Bycraft in a fight.

By the look on his face, I could tell with disgust that the thought of fighting with me, of physically touching me, was turning him on shamefully. He playfully darted around in front of me, fists up, smirking with confidence. While he revelled in my attention and called out smart-arse comments, egged on by his relatives, I was silent, deadly serious and focussed. When he turned his head to diss me to Jake or Rick or someone, I suddenly feigned another right hook making him dodge in panic, but instead I lifted my right leg and drove my foot hard into his stomach. As he doubled over in pain, I raised my knee and smashed it into his face, cracking his nose. He fell to the ground, groaning and bleeding, and just for good measure I kicked him hard in the nuts. It was all finished that quickly. I stepped over him contemptuously, not sparing him a second glance, not saying a word to him the whole time. I walked proudly to the spot where I normally waited for Nana Fuller to pick me up, nursing my fist, which was bruising up. My girlfriends crowded around me, talking a million miles a second in high-pitched excitement and admiration.

I was in big trouble that afternoon from both Nana Fuller and Dad for scrapping on the street like a common person, but I knew that they were both secretly bursting

with pride in my ability to look after myself. Denny missed the next three days of school and when he came back, his nose severely bruised, he continued to watch me but he didn't speak to me for a long time afterwards.

The last thing that lessened Denny's campaign of terror was when I started going out with Abe. Abe, who was in the same year as Jake, one year ahead of me, was carefully vetted by Dad and Nana Fuller and approved to become my first boyfriend. Our families had known each other since we were born, and growing up we often ate at Abe's parents' pub, which he now owned. I liked him a lot, admiring his muscles of course, but also because he had gallantly come to my rescue many a time on the bus ride from hell when Denny became too obnoxious. His regular offer to forcefully expel Denny from the bus while it was moving had always made me look up at him and smile in gratitude, which only made Denny even madder. He hated Abe, but as I said before, you'd think twice before you tangled with him, even when he was a teenager.

However, after eighteen months of dating, Abe's and my relationship hadn't progressed beyond handholding and kissing. And that's the main reason he dumped me for Carole Smyth who was rumoured (and later confirmed by both Jake and Abe) to sleep around willingly and frequently. I'd desperately wanted to have sex with Abe and I'd wanted him to touch me everywhere, a simmering volcano of teenage hormones myself. But I knew that Nana Fuller would be broken-hearted and crushed with disappointment if I became what she called 'one of those girls', so I'd pushed him away and kept my knees primly clamped together whenever his hands went wandering. Abe hadn't been willing to respect that or to wait patiently for me to be ready.

I didn't have another boyfriend at school after Abe, so by the end of high school everybody knew that I was still a virgin. My constant wariness, combined with me carrying my knife everywhere, caused the male teenagers in town to keep their distance. I'd gone to the end-of-school formal by myself, the only girl not to find even some spotty, maladroit, misfit boy desperate enough to take me as a last resort. Against my pleading wishes, Dad and Nana Fuller had forced me to go anyway, not wanting me to miss what they thought was an important rite of passage. I wore a pretty dress that Nana Fuller had spent a long time making for me, my knife carefully concealed underneath. Before he drove me to Big Town, Dad told me I looked beautiful, his voice breaking with emotion, and Nana Fuller couldn't speak, tears in her eyes. Personally, I'd felt so sick with dread that I thought I'd throw up.

It had been one of the worst experiences of my life. I still burn with humiliation ten years later remembering standing by myself in that huge festive school hall, abandoned by my own close girlfriends and their dates. The music thumped loudly, every person milling around me with a partner, excited and laughing, tribal and connected for one evening. After the third well-meaning teacher, noticing how miserable I looked, asked me kindly where my date was, I'd turned and fled. I'd spent the rest of the night sitting on a hard bench outside the hall. In the lonely darkness, I'd listened to the loud chatter, laughter and music inside, wanting more than anything to be a part of it, battling self-pitying tears. But that was the story of my life – my difficult personal circumstances had always made me feel like an outsider.

I'd plastered on a bright smile when Dad picked me up though, claiming I was too tired from all the fun and dancing to even speak when he wanted to know the details about the evening. I'd pretended to sleep the entire drive home to Little Town, but I don't think I fooled him for a second. Neither he nor Nana Fuller ever

mentioned the formal again. I'd secretly ripped up every unsmiling photo that Dad had taken of me that night and shoved that pretty dress to the back of my cupboard, never wanting to set eyes on it again. One day I noticed that it had disappeared, but I never asked Dad or Nana Fuller what had happened to it and they never volunteered any information either. I'd literally jumped for joy when I was accepted into the city's premier university a few weeks later, knowing that I finally had a compelling reason to move to the city and away from this town forever.

I'd been glad to escape to the anonymity of the city and get away from the claustrophobic confines of Little Town. And from Denny Bycraft who had stopped overtly haranguing me, but who instead began following me everywhere I went around town. I loved the fact that in the city people only knew what I chose to share about myself and didn't know everything about me before I even opened my mouth.

And yet here I was, back in Little Town again, willingly tongue-kissing a Bycraft boy and letting him put his hand up my top. It was funny how life worked out sometimes.

"Jakey, no!" I said firmly, pushing him away as his hands wandered under my skirt. "We can make up for it tomorrow night when the Sarge is gone. But not tonight."

He swore under his breath and looked down at his jeans, which were bulging unmistakably at the front. "And what the hell am I supposed to do with *this*?"

"Sorry honey," I giggled regretfully, looking down as well. "A cold shower?"

He squirmed, hands on his crotch, trying to rearrange everything more comfortably, grumbling all the while under his breath.

I watched him for a moment, my nose screwed up. "I'm glad I'm a woman without all those messy dangly bits," I laughed, and leaving him grappling with himself, I went into the living room and flopped down on the lounge, yawning. Having sorted everything out to his satisfaction, Jake threw himself down next to me and put his arm around me, pulling me close to him.

"If you're not going to make sweet music with me in the bedroom, then let's make it somewhere else," he suggested, grinning.

I groaned, knowing what he was referring to. "No Jakey. Not tonight. I'm too tired."

He stood up and pulled me to my feet by my hands. "Come on, lazybones. You'll never improve if you don't keep practicing."

"I *do* keep practicing and I never improve," I moaned, but let him lead me by the hand out of the lounge room to the dining room that we never ate in, always taking our meals at the kitchen table. Instead, I'd converted it into a music room and it was where our old upright piano was located as well as a couple of guitars that belonged to Jake. He was a skilled guitarist. I, on the other hand, was absolute rubbish at it, but he persisted in trying to teach me to play. Currently, we were concentrating on the bass guitar, which I was failing miserably to master.

"Okay, we'll try 'Walking on the Moon' again," he instructed, slinging his guitar's strap over his shoulder, referring to the Police song he'd been trying to teach me for weeks. It had an easy little bass riff that Jake was convinced I could learn to play. So far, I wasn't proving him right.

"It's too fast for me," I complained, reluctantly picking up the bass guitar.

"Babe. It's the slowest music I could find. Give it another try," he coaxed with a winning smile.

I couldn't resist that, so I gave it another try, then another and then another, Jake growing increasingly frustrated with my lack of competence. On my fourth

attempt I stuffed up the beginning again, too slow to come in.

“Concentrate.”

“I am!” I snapped back at him, ready to quit.

“One more time,” he demanded.

I managed to get my timing right on the fifth attempt, but then hit the wrong strings, making Jake cringe. We sure weren’t making beautiful music together tonight. I looked up at that point and noticed both Dad and the Sarge crowding the doorway, watching us. *Oh great*, I thought crossly, an unwanted audience to my utter humiliation.

“How did that sound?” I asked them hopefully when we’d finished, not really wanting to hear their responses.

“Terrible,” replied Dad honestly.

The Sarge agreed. “Cacophonous.”

Jake glanced over at me. “Is that good?” he asked, uncertain.

I laughed, my humour restored. “No Jakey, that’s not good. He means we, or me at least, sound bloody awful. And he’s right.”

“Enough for tonight then,” he decided and gratefully I placed the guitar back on its stand, taking a seat at the piano instead. I lifted the lid and started playing the introduction to a song that Jake and I both loved. I stopped suddenly, noticing him about to join in on the guitar. I grabbed the tambourine off the top of the piano and twisted on the seat, holding it out to Dad, smiling.

“Feel like a song, Dad?” I asked him, shaking the tambourine temptingly. He smiled back as he took it from me. Jake and I communicated with our eyes and started playing together, Dad giving us a bit of beat with the tambourine. We’d all played this song together a hundred times before, slipping easily into its lovely rhythm. I sang the lyrics, with Jake and Dad, who both had pleasing voices, joining in with the chorus. We ended with a flourish.

The Sarge gave us a polite clap. “I hadn’t realised I’d stumbled upon a modern day Partridge Family,” he said dryly. “What a beautiful song that was. I’m not familiar with it.”

Jake answered. “It’s ‘Green’ by Alex Lloyd. One of Tessie’s and my favourites.” We smiled at each other. I had been playing it on my small bedroom stereo when we had first slept together.

The Sarge’s deep blue eyes regarded us all thoughtfully one by one, before resting on me. “You have a lovely voice, Tess. And you certainly play the piano much better than you do the guitar.” A faint smile took the sting out of his words.

“Tessie didn’t have much choice in the matter,” laughed Dad. “My mother was a singing and piano teacher. It was lucky for Tessie that she had some natural talent for my mother to build on, otherwise her childhood would have been completely miserable.” The Sarge raised an eyebrow. “My mother was determined to teach her to sing and play to her very exacting standards. My poor little girl had to spend hours learning and practicing.”

“I didn’t mind,” I chided mildly, pulling down the lid on the piano and standing up. “It was a privilege to learn with Nana Fuller. She was very talented.” Not to mention that it was the sole spark of culture in my relentless timetable of schooling and self-defence training. I’d grown up used to a rigorous routine, which was probably why I’d felt at home at the police academy when other more free-living recruits had struggled with the strictness.

“The Fullers have always been a musical family,” explained Dad. “Tessie’s mother sang like an angel. Better than Tessie even.”

“And Dad plays the violin like a rock god,” I teased fondly.

“Used to play, love,” he reminded me sadly. He wasn’t nimble enough to play anymore. I leaned over to kiss him on the forehead consolingly and took the tambourine from him, stowing it back on top of the piano.

“That’s why I don’t understand why you can’t learn the guitar better, babe,” puzzled Jake. “You play the piano so well, why not the guitar?”

I shrugged. “I dunno, Jakey. I guess I’m only good at specific things. It’s like when you tried to teach me to surf, remember? I’m a strong swimmer, but couldn’t learn to surf for love or money!” I paused deliberately. “But there are plenty of things I’m very good at, aren’t there, honey-boy?” And our eyes locked in one of those loaded secret couple glances that make everyone else in a fifty metre vicinity gag uncontrollably.

“There sure are, baby doll,” he agreed, his nostrils flaring and pupils dilating, and then repeated mindlessly, “There sure are.” Instant but unsatisfied sexual desire crackled around the room, as live as electricity. *Oh, for an hour alone with my honey-boy in my bedroom right now*, I thought longingly. Scrap that, all I’d need would be twenty minutes with him on the lounge. Hell, I’d even settle for ten minutes on the floor, here in this room, with both our phones ringing and someone knocking on the door.

Reluctantly dragging my focus away from below my belt, I suddenly remembered that we weren’t alone. I glanced over at the Sarge. Thankfully he’d managed to hold his dinner down but was regarding me silently again with those unfathomable eyes.

“We really need another guitarist or a drummer. We’re forever having to adapt songs to compensate. I don’t suppose you play the drums, do you?” I asked him optimistically.

“I’m afraid not,” he said, not entirely regretful.

“Thank God for that,” exclaimed Dad under his breath, making me giggle.

The Sarge continued. “Unfortunately my musical gene must be defective. I’ve no talent for any instrument at all. And neither do my parents, as far as I know.”

“Never mind,” I soothed. “You’re probably very good at something that none of us are. Besides guitar playing and surfing, I’m also completely hopeless at dancing.”

“You sure are,” agreed Jake, grinning. Dad nodded his head in teasing concurrence, grinning hugely as well. “She’s embarrassingly bad at dancing. Every time I see her dance I think of Elaine in that *Seinfeld* episode.”

I thumped him gently, remembering that episode and Elaine’s awkward, jerky movements. “I’m not *that* bad!”

Jake merely grinned again and I spent the next five minutes trying to tickle him into a retraction, both of us laughing madly. Realising that we were alone, the other two drifting away during our high-jinks, I moulded myself against Jake, looking up at him.

“Do you want to stay the night anyway, honey-boy?”

“Better not, beautiful. Otherwise you’ll wake up in the middle of the night to find me on top of you and inside of you.” He kissed the top of my head.

“That sounds like a good plan for tomorrow night,” I smiled up at him. “Where will you stay?”

“I’ll go to Mum’s place. I haven’t seen her for a while. It’ll be nice to catch up with everyone.”

I didn’t comment, moving away from him. There was nothing I could say about

his family that wouldn't start an argument. Even if I said something innocuous like asking him to give his mother my regards, it would only make him accuse me of being a sarcastic bitch. He'd be right too. I hated his mother and the feeling was mutual. It was best to stay silent sometimes.

We joined Dad and the Sarge in the lounge room and spent a pleasantly quiet evening watching a police procedural on TV that made the Sarge and me chuckle with amusement. Police officers and detectives on TV were always so glamorous – it was far removed from my reality. None of the characters on that show ever had someone throw up on their boots or had to fend off randy dogs. I was keen to see the end of the improbable plot, where the crim confessed easily when confronted with the convoluted, high-tech forensic evidence. But the lack of sleep the night before and the two glasses of wine caught up with me. Comfortable leaning against Jake, inhaling his familiar masculine scent and enjoying his gentle stroking of my hair, I fell asleep at a ridiculously early hour, sprawled gracelessly across the lounge.

I struggled to consciousness some time later, Jake gently shaking me and calling my name. "Wake up, Tessie. Time for bed. I'm going now."

"I wasn't sleeping," I mumbled in protest. "I was just resting my eyes for a second."

"Sure you were, babe. Come on. Up you get." And he hauled me up into his arms. I leaned against him and closed my eyes again. He led me to the front door, eyes still shut and propped me up against the hall wall, kissing me awake in farewell.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Jakey?" I said sleepily.

"Course you will, Tessie darling. Sweet dreams, babe."

I didn't even wait to wave him goodbye, but stumbled to the bathroom and brushed my teeth with my eyes shut, leaning against the wall. I forced my eyes open to rinse, spit and gargle, and noticed the Sarge reflected in the mirror, patiently waiting at the door for his turn. He courteously moved to one side to let me exit, grabbing me gently by the arm as I passed him. I stopped and looked up at him in weary surprise.

"Your boyfriend told me you've been working for over a month straight. Is that right?"

Damn Jake. I sighed wearily. "Yeah. Des was kind of occupied."

"That won't happen again either," he said seriously, then released me. We stood there for a moment, our eyes fixed on each other. I didn't know what to think. It sounded too good to be true.

"Thanks Sarge," I said finally and escaped. I kissed Dad goodnight and slipped into my nightie before falling into bed, patting my knife comfortingly and sleeping solidly until seven the next morning.

Chapter 6

I had a great sleep and woke up refreshed and looking forward to my jog. It felt disloyal, but I was secretly glad that Jake hadn't stayed over because I never got much sleep when he was sharing my bed, even if he did leave me with a smile on my face that lasted all the next day. I pulled on my jogging clothes and runners and headed off down the stairs only to find the Sarge stretching, ready for a morning run himself. I did the polite thing and invited him to join me, deciding that morning to head away from the beach towards Mount Big. It was longer, harder jog than Beach

Road, uphill for a significant proportion, but I decided that I needed the effort. That fun run was drawing closer.

Thinking of that, as we walked towards the gate I gave the Sarge advanced warning that I needed to take the weekend of the fun run off and explained to him why. He agreed, reminding himself that he wanted to discuss rosters with me at some point soon. *Rosters!* I thought hopefully. That sure sounded more promising than me being on duty every single day.

I threw his BMW a lingering covetous glance as we walked past it. "Nice car," I complimented.

He looked over at it in surprise, as if he barely even noticed it anymore. "It gets me from A to B."

"I'll never refuse an offer to take me for a spin in it one day," I hinted. "In fact, I'm positively drooling at the thought. You might even let me drive."

"Not a chance. Especially with the way I saw you spin out the patrol car yesterday." He sounded serious as he said that and I cut him a sharp look to see if he was joking or not. Once again, I couldn't tell. He had a great poker face.

Romi was waiting patiently for me at the front gate. I introduced her to the Sarge and hid my smile as she fell instantly into a massive teenage crush. I glanced up at him. I guess he was sort of handsome in a brooding dark way, not like my Jake's easy golden beauty. Romi was a keen reader and was studying Romantic literature at school at the moment. He was probably Lord Byron, Heathcliff and Mr Darcy all rolled into one for her.

We jogged off and by the time we returned we were all entirely knackered. The incline on Mountain Road was steeper than I remembered and my calves were complaining loudly.

"Tessie, I like Beach Road better," gasped Romi, hanging over the stair railing. I had collapsed on the grass, my chest heaving with effort. The Sarge was sweating up a storm, but was still upright, doing some after-stretches.

"I think the planet's moved or something," I complained breathlessly. "Mountain Road never used to be that steep before, I'm sure. It must be climate change."

"This fun run?" panted the Sarge. "Is it an endurance event by any chance?"

I spared some oxygen to laugh, staring up at the beautiful blue sky, enjoying the cool dampness of the dew on my back. "No. It's an easy eight kays on flat terrain. I just want to beat my last time."

"How are the rest of the team going?" asked Romi, doing some stretches too, watching and imitating the Sarge.

"Who knows? I don't think they're well-prepared. I might be the only one who finishes," I laughed again. After a while, I managed to sit up and invited Romi to breakfast. She accepted quickly, her eyes on the Sarge the whole time. He finally noticed her.

"You did well to keep up with that slave driver," he said, complimenting her and insulting me.

She blushed and thanked him prettily. He looked down at her with a nice smile. A genuine, friendly smile that lasted longer than a second. I was annoyed about that for some reason and stood up suddenly, stalking off up the stairs to the house.

We let Romi have the first shower. She always brought along some clothes to change into, usually staying to have breakfast with Dad and me. While she showered, I busied myself in the kitchen. I had planned on making omelettes for breakfast and was busy chopping up mushrooms, ham, onion and parsley.

“Can I help?” asked a quiet voice from the kitchen door.

“You can jump into the shower after Romi,” I said cheerfully to the Sarge, dicing onion with a passion. “Then I can have a shower and we can get the omelette station moving. I’m starving.”

“Me too. That girl is taking a long time in the shower,” he replied, stretching his arms over his head. His running shirt rose up and I caught a glimpse of his taut stomach. I was immediately distracted by that flash of masculine skin and cut my thumb.

“Shit!” I cried out, wincing with pain as onion juice seeped into the cut, dropping my knife. The blood spurted from my wound. He looked over at me, questioning. “Cut myself,” I explained briefly.

I rushed to the bathroom and banged on the door. “Get out, Romi! I need some first aid,” I yelled. She exited the bathroom hastily, fully dressed, hairdryer in hand. “Finish your hair in my bedroom,” I directed as I rushed past her and rummaged through the bathroom cabinet until I found the plasters. I grabbed one and rinsed my wound under the tap, then used a tissue to mop up, before whacking on the plaster. Then as if nothing had happened, I went back to chopping, not before pushing the Sarge towards the shower. In my own home, I was an absolute dictator.

Romi and I chatted while she sat at the kitchen table and applied some makeup at eight-thirty on a Sunday morning, her hair freshly washed and beautifully styled to fall in loose curls around her shoulders. I felt sweaty and dishevelled near her, but my heart wrenched at the trouble she was taking with her appearance. Teenage crushes – I remembered how simultaneously exhilarating and devastating they were.

Dad rolled into the kitchen then and offered to keep chopping while I had a shower once the Sarge was done. I think my overwhelming body odour was making it easy for him to be so generous with his help. To give the Sarge credit, he was speedy in the shower but still looked well-scrubbed, his hair damp and the scent of an intriguing deodorant or cologne lingering behind him in the bathroom. I liked it – it was masculine but elegant, a word I didn’t get to use a lot around these parts. I felt a bit diminished that I didn’t recognise the scent. It was probably something famous and popular. Something designer. He seemed keen on designer brands, judging from his clothes at least.

Ten minutes later I was clean and dressed in a dark blue ankle-length floaty cotton skirt and tight black singlet top, barefoot and hair loose, with my knife snug in the belt around my hips. I made my way to the kitchen, only to find absolute chaos. I closed my eyes briefly in temper before opening them again, not before catching the observant eye of the Sarge.

“What are you two up to?” I asked Dad and Romi in a friendly voice, wading into the middle of the mess. There were eggs everywhere, a whole dozen in the bowl, drenched in fresh herbs. I took a deep breath. “Okay, this is what we’re going to do. Romi, you’re going to be responsible for coffee and tea. Start boiling the kettle. Dad, you’re going to set the table. Now would be good. Sarge, you’re going to enjoy being a guest and sit at the table waiting patiently for breakfast. You can even bang your cutlery on the table if you’re inclined to be obnoxious.” I gave him a half-smile over my shoulder when I said that, but if he did as I suggested I’d probably fling my knife into his skull. I guess he read that in my face too because he sat at the table obediently, hands in his lap, watching me carefully with those lovely eyes.

I turned all my attention to sorting out the mess of having twelve half-beaten eggs to turn into four omelettes. By the end of thirty minutes, I thought I’d acquitted

myself pretty well and finally sank into a chair, the last omelette before me. It was tasty, light and fluffy – I'd done a good job after all. But I was so hungry by then I would have eaten a cardboard cutout of an omelette and enjoyed it as much. When finished, I carried my dirty dishes to the sink and started cleaning up, Dad and Romi long distracted by a chess game in the lounge room. A hand landed on my shoulder.

In a split second, before I could even think, I spun around, my heart thumping. I pressed my left forearm across his throat, pushing him backwards forcefully towards the nearest wall, my knife out and nudging his stomach, lips snarling and eyes fierce. It was just the Sarge, I finally registered, his eyes huge with alarm, his palms up in a signal of unconditional surrender. Exhaling heavily with relief, I relaxed and let him go, re-sheathing my knife.

"Best not to startle me," I warned.

"Okay," he said, regarding me with wary curiosity.

"I'll never get used to you being here," I admitted, shaking my head and laughing at my own over-reaction, turning back to the washing up.

"You won't have to. I should be moving into the police house tonight," he replied, his voice carefully neutral. Diplomatically, he didn't comment on what had just happened between us, but his eyes betrayed his desire for an explanation of my unexpected aggressive behaviour. I wasn't in the habit of explaining myself to anyone though, and I wasn't going to start now.

"Look, if it doesn't go to plan, then you're very welcome to keep staying here," I offered nicely, the perfect hostess, as if I hadn't just tried to knife him in my own kitchen.

"I know. Thank you," he responded with an admirable level of politeness. *But who would want to stay at a crazy, paranoid woman's house one second longer than necessary*, I thought to myself dryly. Instead of running screaming for the front door though, he shoved one of my shoulders gently with his palm. "Go join your father. I'll wash up."

"Okay," I agreed immediately and scooted. I didn't watch the game though, but headed outside to give the patrol car its weekly wash. And I had to clean my disgusting boots as well. And I wanted to visit Des and Maureen before they finally left Little Town for good. And there were all those boxes at Miss G's place to think about. It was going to be a busy Sunday, I sighed with resignation. There was nothing for it but to set to work. Sometimes it seemed as though my life was nothing but work, work and more work.

By the time the Sarge had finished in the kitchen and realised that I hadn't done what he'd suggested, I was chamoising the patrol car, wiping the last streak of water from its shiny surface. I'd virtually cleaned the inside the day before, so gave it only scant attention this morning. I turned when he clattered down the stairs and smiled at him.

"There you go, Sarge. One sparkling clean patrol car for you. I guess you'll be looking after it from now on?"

"You guessed correctly."

"I'll miss it," I said regretfully, glancing over at its shining whiteness. "I can't do burnouts in Dad's Land Rover."

He cut me a scathing look.

"I'm joking!" I assured him.

I tipped the dirty water onto the lawn and put everything away neatly. Then it was time to tackle my vomit-covered boots. *Yuck! Thanks for nothing, Des.* I went to the front door where I had left them, only to find them gone. Puzzled, I peeked in

my room where they were scrubbed clean and buffed to a nice shine, sitting neatly in my cupboard. Incredibly grateful, I went into the lounge room to kiss Dad on the top of his head and fondly ruffle his thinning dark brown hair, thanking him for being so sweet. It was a job I hadn't been looking forward to at all.

I pulled up a chair and watched Dad and Romi play chess for a while. Dad was going easy on her, teaching her how to play properly. She was a very smart girl and a fast learner and it wouldn't be long before the student out-mastered the teacher. When the Sarge also came in to watch though, her game fell apart and she became flustered and distracted. Dad and I winked at each other over her head and he beat her easily after that.

To overcome her dismay at failing in front of her new hero, I suggested we go down to Des and Maureen's place and watch them move out. It was a big event because Des had been the town's sergeant for over twenty years and half the town would turn up to watch the spectacle of him moving on. The Sarge offered to drive us there in his car and both Romi's and my eyes lit up at the thought. But I had to turn him down.

"Sorry Sarge," I told him, genuinely regretful, "but I have to take the Land Rover. I don't think Dad's chair would fit in your little car." I noticed Romi smile to herself in secret delight. She was obviously thinking that she'd be alone with him. "You can come with Dad and me, Romi."

"Thanks Tessie, but I'll drive with Finn," she said, turning to smile up at him sweetly.

"No, you'll come with me," I insisted firmly. "Abe wouldn't be happy to learn that you were driving around with a man by yourself." I looked over to my boss. "No offence, Sarge."

Romi's lips tightened and she opened her mouth to protest, but the Sarge spoke up first. "None taken. I'll just catch a lift with you as well, Tess, if you don't mind. We can go for a spin in my car another day."

"No problems. We'll head off soon, will we?" I said to him thankfully, pleased to avoid a teenage tantrum, no matter how mild and well-mannered it would be.

Romi recovered her normal good temper when she realised that she'd be sitting in the back seat with the Sarge. *Hmm, this crush could prove to be problematic*, I thought to myself. I'd have to have a quiet word with Abe about the situation when I had the chance.

The Land Rover was usually parked out the back of the house, near the ramp that we'd had installed for Dad, replacing the back stairs. He wheeled down the ramp, positioned himself next to the open passenger door and slowly hoisted himself up into the seat. It was getting harder for him to do that, but he was too proud to accept any help. Yet.

I pushed his chair back inside the kitchen, locked the house and jumped in the driver's seat. At the Sarge's questioning look, I told him that we kept a fold-up chair in the back of the vehicle for outings. It wasn't as comfortable for Dad and he couldn't sit in it for long periods of time, but it was handy and more portable than his permanent chair.

I drove carefully into town – I never hooned when Dad was with me. You couldn't hoon in the Land Rover anyway. It was ancient and like a tank. There was no such thing as a three-point turn in the old beast. It hadn't been new when Dad had bought it fifteen years ago, but it was reliable and a good work horse. And now that the Sarge was taking the patrol car away from me, it was my only set of wheels. The cute little silver Toyota hatchback I'd previously owned had been stolen about

two months after I returned to town and driven into the water-filled abandoned quarry up near Big Town. The crime remained unsolved, but I knew it was one of the Bycrafts, most probably Chad. Who else?

My insurance company had eventually coughed up the money to replace it, but I'd never found the time to buy a new vehicle, instead using the patrol car for all my personal needs contrary to every official directive. Guess I should go car shopping soon. Only problem was that I'd already spent the insurance money on replacing some of the house's rotten timber stumps and buying the dishwasher. I'd also bought a new fridge after the antiquated one that Dad's parents had bought him as a wedding present finally died. We'd had to live without a fridge for seven weeks during the hottest part of the year before that godsend insurance lump sum was deposited into my bank account. And I hadn't felt the slightest bit guilty using a lot of that money to replace the fridge, just so I could have a glass of chilled water again.

The brutal truth was that I didn't have even one cent to buy a new car. That was probably a blessing in disguise though, because the Bycrafts would only just steal any new car that I did buy anyway. Or vandalise it. They especially loved to scratch obscene words into the paintwork of any vehicle I owned. The Land Rover had more graphic graffiti on it than a public bathroom at a train station. But there was no way I was going to waste good money to get it resprayed though, so Dad and I had little choice but to put up with it. And after a while we'd grown indifferent to driving around town in a profanity-ridden vehicle, complete with X-rated etchings. The townsfolk now jokingly referred to the Land Rover as the 'Fuck-Off-Fuller Wagon'. I noticed the Sarge's eyebrows lowering as he took in the graffiti when he climbed into the back seat next to Romi, but he didn't say anything.

Romi, on the other hand, had everything in the world to say and chatted and giggled excitedly non-stop the entire drive to the police station. We all silently breathed a sigh of relief when I pulled into the station carpark. It was full, even the one parking space reserved for the disabled taken. That made me angry, especially when I saw that the car hogging that space was owned by someone whose only disability was that he'd been born a Bycraft. I left our vehicle idling and jumped out of the driver's seat, stalking over to the gang of Bycrafts lazily lounging against the wire fence, smoking, swearing, a few even drinking despite the early hour. My Jake was smack bang in the middle of them.

"Oi!" I shouted at them, careful not to get too close. "Rick Bycraft! Get your arse over here right now and move your rust-bucket or I'll book you for parking in a disabled spot."

"You wouldn't dare, piglet," he swaggered in front of his family. They all sniggered.

"Wanna bet?" I said, fuming. No Bycraft called my bluff. I turned around, jogging up to the Land Rover, leaning over Dad and rummaging in the untidy glove box for a ticket pad. I stood next to Rick's car and commenced writing out a penalty notice. The Sarge climbed out and stood beside me in support, arms crossed, watching with interest. I appreciated that. It was good to have someone on my side for once. Especially someone so big and muscular.

"All right, all right," Rick grumbled, sauntering over, hitching up his jeans. He couldn't afford to get a ticket, being as dirt poor as the rest of his family. "You're such a sour bitch, piglet. I dunno what our Jakey sees in you."

"Shut your cakehole and move this piece of shit now," I ordered coldly.

He slowly climbed into his car, staring at me insolently the whole way. He

revved the engine loudly a few times, spinning his tyres, kicking up gravel all over the Sarge and me, reversed with a skid, barely missing our Land Rover and fishtailed out the gates, flipping me his middle finger out the driver's window. His family cheered and hooted him in encouragement. And yes, that included my Jake.

I jumped back in the Land Rover and quickly parked it, pulling the wheelchair out of the back, opening it and positioning it for Dad to manoeuvre himself into. He wheeled himself over to the police house on the cement path that ran between it and the station, heading towards a group of his friends, Romi at his side ready to help if asked.

"Who are they?" the Sarge asked me quietly, looking over at the Bycrafts.

"That's the Bycraft family, the town outlaws. Anytime there's a crime in town, think of them first and foremost," I informed him, unsmiling.

"Isn't that your boyfriend with them?"

"Yes, he's a Bycraft. The only decent one in the whole bunch. Maybe one of the only few decent Bycrafts ever."

"That must make your relationship interesting," he commented neutrally.

I gave a short, bitter laugh. "You can say that again."

"With that golden colouring they all have, they look like a pride of lions," he said thoughtfully. I glanced up at him with an admiring smile.

"That's very good, Sarge. I like that. You've put your finger right on it. They're as lazy as lions too, but just as dangerous when they strike."

The Bycrafts jeered the two of us when they noticed us staring at them.

"Who's your new boyfriend, piglet?" yelled out Tracey Bycraft, Jake's cousin. She had a baby on her hip, a cigarette in her other hand and a toddler clutching her leg, crying. She was only eighteen and heavily pregnant with her third kid. But she didn't let an inconvenience such as that interfere with her drinking, smoking or her career as a shoplifter. "He's kinda cute. I'd let him pork me."

"He'd be the only man in town who hasn't, Tracey Bycraft," I yelled back at her as I stalked up to Des' house. They all heckled me then and I slyly gave them the finger as I pretended to scratch my nose. Jake didn't join in the heckling of course, but he didn't try to stop it either. That was the relationship we had – he would never get in the way of his family's God-given right to harass me.

"Piglet?" queried the Sarge, catching up to me.

"That's what they call me. Adorable, isn't it?" I said sarcastically. "The Bycrafts and I have a love-hate relationship. I hate them, they hate me and we all love to hate each other." I glanced at him. "A word of advice, Sarge. Do *not* be tempted by a Bycraft woman. They are beautiful and wild, but they are witches. And fertile. You only have to look at them and they get knocked up. You don't want one of them to sink her talons into you. You'll be paying child support for the rest of your life."

"Advice noted, thanks."

"And it wouldn't go down well with the townsfolk for you to be involved with a Bycraft either. They are a one-family crime wave and plenty of people in this town have suffered because of them, including my family. There're a lot of folk in town who don't like the fact that Jake is my boyfriend and they're not shy about telling me."

"Anyone else I should avoid? Not that I'm looking for anyone."

"Stay away from Foxy Dubois too."

"Foxy?"

"Her real name is Barbara White. She took Foxy as her stage name. She used to

be a stripper in Big Town . . . Oh sorry, she prefers the term ‘exotic dancer’. She’ll have her eye on you in no time.”

“She’s the one your former sergeant, er, ‘investigated’ frequently?”

I laughed. “Oh yeah. Des ‘investigated’ her at least once a week.”

Speaking of the devil, we noticed Des standing on the veranda, barking orders to the removalists from Big Town who were beavering away, loading furniture into the truck that had been backed up to the stairs. We pushed our way through the crowd that had gathered to watch and dodged the brawny removal men as we ran up the stairs.

“How’s it going, Des?” I asked. Mr Sparkles waddled over to me, carnal intent clear in his eyes. “Don’t even think about it, Sparkles,” I warned him in a mean voice. He barked at me with irritation and changed direction, heading towards the Sarge instead. “Sparkles! I’ll sell you off to be turned into cat food,” I threatened and he gave me a surly look before retreating back to a corner of the veranda, glaring at us resentfully.

“The move’s going well, Tessie love. Nearly finished. The guys came early in the morning and you can see that they’re hard workers.” He looked up at the Sarge and had to keep looking a long way as Des was somewhat shorter than me. “The house will be ready for you late this afternoon, mate. Maureen and her helpers are cleaning it as each room is emptied.”

“Those Bycrafts giving you any grief?” I asked him.

“Caught one of them young buggers trying to steal one of Maureen’s Jesus figurines from out the truck the second my back was turned. Can you believe it? Gave him a right kick up the bum.”

“Who was it?”

“Chad or Timmy or Mikey? I don’t know. They all look the bloody same to me. Why the fuck would he want a Jesus figurine?”

“I think they just do it for the thrill half the time,” I replied, looking back over at lounging Bycrafts. I sadly noted Jake happily sharing a laugh with his oldest brother, the revolting Red, puffing on a cigarette even though he normally didn’t smoke, relaxed and comfortable in the middle of that nest of vipers. He became a different person when he was with his family, and not one that I liked too much.

I would never have gone out with him if I’d met him again in the company of his family or on his own, but he had approached me with his two best mates – who weren’t bad blokes – at a nightclub a few weeks after I returned to Little Town from the city. I had been in Big Town for a hen’s party for one of the female cops there and we’d all gone out to the nightclub afterwards. The three of them came up to me, made themselves known again and begged me to remember them, which of course I did. I hadn’t been away from town *that* long. And as if I’d ever forget a Bycraft.

They invited themselves to join me and my friends and offered to buy me a drink. I refused the offer, always careful to buy my own drinks when I went out, wary of drink-spiking. Had Jake accosted me on his own at the nightclub that night, I probably would have stabbed him with my knife. But in the company of his two mates who I didn’t mind, I found him far less threatening. In fact, his affectionate bantering with them, funny asides and friendly, appealing charm helped me see a side of him that I would never have otherwise been close enough to him to notice. So instead of telling them to shove off like I should have, I chatted to them for the rest of the evening, enjoying their gentle teasing of me and obvious and competitive attempts at flirting.

Where his mates were happy to flirt with any of the girls in my group, Jake

didn't bother to hide his clear interest in me nor his genuine disappointment when I refused, several times, to dance with him. Quite a few of my girlfriends were trying to catch his eye, but all of his attention that evening was on me. When I went to the bathroom or up to the bar for another drink, his eyes followed me all the way there and all the way back. When I returned from one trek to the bar, he had swapped places with his friend and was now sitting right next to me, the sulky look on his friend's face telling me that it hadn't been a voluntary move.

That type of intense attention from a Bycraft should have switched my senses to red alert, but rather than seeming creepy and threatening, I found it somehow endearing instead. Perhaps it was the sincerity I sensed from him that made the difference. And then again, perhaps it was just the alcohol I'd drunk or the fact that I hadn't had any sex for over a year that did the trick.

Jake and I hadn't seen each other for more than ten years, not since he left high school after tenth grade and moved first to Big Town and then to the city. He had only moved back to Little Town to take a job at the prison about six months before I moved back home myself. I'd forgotten how good-looking he was and how beautiful his amber eyes were. His devastatingly gorgeous smile and easy-going charisma weakened my defences and managed to overcome my natural abhorrence of all things Bycraft.

By the end of that evening, after I'd had a few drinks and egged on by my girlfriends who'd been trying to find me a boyfriend since I'd returned, I agreed to let him visit me back home in town the following day. His touching gratitude at that small indulgence made me feel like a princess. He'd grabbed my hand and squeezed it, smiling at me happily when I left the nightclub with my girlfriends to catch a taxi back to their place where I was crashing for the night. We'd giggled about him the whole way home.

Sober, I'd regretted my offer the next day though, because a Bycraft had only ever set foot in the Fuller family home once before, with catastrophic results. I was terrified about what Dad would say to me and had worried about it all the drive back to Little Town. I was right to be anxious because Dad went completely ballistic when I told him about the invitation I'd given. He did something that he'd never done before in my entire life – he yelled at me angrily until I cried. I would have rung Jake up right then and withdrawn my invitation, feeling worse than terrible about upsetting Dad so much, but I'd stubbornly refused to take his phone number the evening before or to give him mine.

So Jake came over to our house that afternoon, nervously clutching a glorious bouquet of flowers, which I thought was sweetly old-fashioned. He was polite and respectful towards us both, tactfully overlooking my red eyes and subdued manner. But he couldn't fail to notice Dad's undisguised and silent hostility towards him nor the shotgun that Dad had leant up against his wheelchair that he kept his hand on the entire time that Jake was there.

Surprisingly not discouraged by that unpromising first visit to the Fuller residence, Jake continued to pursue me courteously but relentlessly afterwards. I kept pushing him away, and not nicely most of the time I'll admit, unable to understand why he was so keen on me when he had never even noticed me at school and could surely have his pick of women. And when I was a Fuller and he was a Bycraft.

"Teresa Fuller, don't you ever look in a mirror?" he'd responded once with impatience as we sat together on my lounge one afternoon. He had his arm stretched out behind me on the back of the lounge, but didn't quite dare to put it around my

shoulders as he knew that I'd only immediately shrug it off. "You've grown to be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. I fell in love the second I laid eyes on you again at that nightclub so *of course* I'm interested in you. So are all the other single men in town and probably most of the married ones as well." He paused to stroke my hair, which I let him do because I really enjoyed that particular caress and the gentleness of his fingers.

"Babe," he continued with fond exasperation, "you don't seem to realise that you're an incredibly stunning woman. Don't you notice men staring at you all the time? Because I do." *Bullshit alert*, I told myself cynically. I *had* noticed men staring at me all the time, but that was because I was a whacko with a knife. I wanted to roll my eyes, but his lovely eyes had mine trapped in stillness. He stopped talking long enough to lean towards me in an attempt to kiss me. I dodged his lips as usual and his shoulders slumped in frustration as usual. "And I *did* notice you at school, but you were always Denny's girl."

"I bloody well was not!" I insisted hotly, jumping up suddenly and stalking away a few paces. I turned back. "Don't you dare say that! He made my life miserable."

"Sorry Tessie. I meant that he was obsessed with you – still is obsessed with you. He wouldn't have taken it well for me to show any interest in you. He's . . ." he hesitated for a moment, glancing up at me uncertainly. "He's not quite right in the head, our Denny."

Duh! I thought.

"You were such a pretty little thing at school, so serious and with those big gray eyes," he went on, smiling at the memory. "I really admired how you handled Denny being a dick all the time. You were always so cool and calm, so dignified, even that day you beat the shit out of him. You didn't even speak to him once during the whole fight. God, you whooped his arse without even breaking a sweat!" He laughed to himself. "We all thought you were a stuck-up bitch though. You wouldn't give a Bycraft the time of day."

I still wouldn't, I thought.

"You drove Denny crazy by ignoring him, poor bugger. We kept telling him to forget about you, find some other girl, but he refused. He just wasn't interested in anyone but you. I couldn't understand it at the time but now I do, because I'm not interested in anyone any more either," he said sincerely, reaching out to gently clasp my hand, blasting me again with those beautiful eyes. I felt myself weaken, but I ushered him to the front door then, just as I always did.

No matter how much I told Jake to get lost and that he only was wasting his time, he continued to ring and visit me for months. One day I realised that I hadn't seen him or heard from him for nearly a week and I felt an aching emptiness in my heart that shocked me. I knew then that I genuinely missed him and his gentle teasing. I wanted, even needed, to see him again. So for the first time I rang him, my hand shaking as I punched in his number. *What if he hung up on me or laughed at me*, I thought with terror. I'd had a devastating experience in my previous relationship that had shattered my self-confidence with men, not that I'd ever had that much to begin with.

But when I heard how overjoyed and grateful Jake was that I had rung, well, that was that and we started going out, despite strongly expressed opposition from Dad. We kept our relationship very quiet for the first few months, knowing that reaction to the news was likely to be intensely negative. We spent that time getting to know each other better, emotionally and physically. When we were comfortable

in the depth of our feelings for each other and certain that our relationship was strong and stable, we made our first public appearance as a couple at the annual primary school fete, arms around each other's waists.

Disappointingly, the reaction from the townsfolk was as we expected – whispered disgust, shocked disbelief and open anger, especially from Jake's family and my friends. Abe, in particular, took it very badly and caused an ugly public scene that almost ended in a fight between him and Jake. It was only me literally stepping in between the two men that stopped the altercation going any further. Eventually though, the furore about us died down, because out of all the Bycrafts, everybody in town unanimously agreed that Jake was the only decent one – he was honest, industrious, cheerful and friendly. Being my boyfriend raised his profile with the better people in town, and they all begrudgingly admitted that he was a pretty nice guy, all things considered.

He worked overtime to charm everyone and I appreciated the effort he made on my behalf. He craved acceptance as my boyfriend and put up with a lot of shit from people along the way. My heart broke for him at each snide comment and Bycraft joke made at his expense, but his determination to stay calm and positive in every circumstance just made me love him even more, and drew him reluctant respect from the townsfolk. We weren't quite there yet with widespread acceptance even after two years together, but Jake had won Dad over after an intense charm campaign and that was the most important thing to me. Dad's acceptance also helped sway other important people in my life, like Abe and Fiona, over to our side.

I hadn't made any headway into being accepted by his family though. I guess the history was too deep between our families, and also the fact that I kept arresting Bycrafts didn't help my cause, but to tell the truth, I'd given up caring.

When we first went public, the Bycrafts thought they had me in their pocket – their own little tame girl cop smitten with their Jakey. They were sadly mistaken. When the first one approached me, asking me to make a speeding ticket disappear, I told him bluntly to piss off. And I said the same to the next one and the next one, until they got it through their collectively thick heads that I wouldn't be doing them any favours at all. Not even a little one. Not now and not in the future. And when I arrested Tracey Bycraft soon afterwards for pocketing three lipsticks in the pharmacy, after four previous cautions for similar offences in the same store, I was as popular with the Bycrafts as dog shit on a shoe. And nothing had changed since then.

Chapter 7

Once I had assured myself that Des and Maureen were truly on the move, I had no interest in watching their furniture shift from the house to the truck, unlike half the town. I left Dad behind gasbagging with some of his mates and reunited Romi with Abe and Toni. Abe promised to drive Dad home for me and I kissed him on the cheek for that kindness, pretending not to notice the longing glance he threw me in return.

I asked the Sarge what he was planning on doing for the rest of the day. He told me that his furniture wasn't arriving until the following day and wanting to have time to unpack then, he thought he might do some work today. He planned on going to Miss G's place to start searching through the boxes. I offered to drop him off, not volunteering to help though because I wanted to go to Big Town to do some grocery shopping. If I didn't do it today, I might not get the chance for the rest of the week.

I sensed he was disappointed that I didn't offer to join him, but I had to have some time to do ordinary things now and then. I also had plans to catch up with a couple of the women in my running team for lunch and I needed to check on their progress, or more likely, their lack of progress.

I quickly ducked up the back of the station to feed and water my girls and the Sarge and I walked back to the Land Rover, ignoring the Bycrafts who were still calling out insults and harassing me as they did every time they saw me. I glanced over at Jake who was sitting on the fence, golden hair glinting in the sunlight, white teeth bright in his brown face as he laughed. Dorrie Lebutt was hanging off his arm and his every word. Bitch. Jake had dallied with every woman in town at some point in his life and there were more than a few who wouldn't mind another chance with him, girlfriend or not.

He looked up, noticed me and our eyes locked together. He gave me a beautiful smile, took out his phone and texted busily. Then he went back to his family bonding and I climbed into the Land Rover with the Sarge. My phone beeped a second later. I retrieved it from my handbag and read the message. It was from Jake.

Him: *u look beautiful. i luv u. what u doing 2day? hanging with sgt serious?*

Me: *i luv u 2. on my own 2day. big town 2 shop & lunch with girls*

Him: *drive safe. c u 2nite. cant w8*

Me: *me 2. whats dorrie want?*

Him: *me!*

Me: *ill run the bitch over if she dsnt get away from u right now*

He laughed when he read my text and replied: *i rlly want 2 c that!*

Me: *i rlly want 2 do it! bye honeyboy. c u 2nite*

I put my phone away and did up my seatbelt. As I drove through the gates to the street, passing close to the Bycrafts, I tooted the horn at Jake and received a friendly wave back from him and an interesting range of vulgar hand and finger gestures from the rest of them.

"They really love you, don't they?" the Sarge said dryly.

I smiled to myself. "As long as the one and only important Bycraft loves me, I don't really give a toss what the others think about me."

He changed the subject. "I want to take you and your father out to dinner tonight to thank you for giving me somewhere to stay and for feeding me. Where's the nicest place in town to eat?"

"Thanks Sarge. That would be lovely." I was genuinely grateful at his thoughtfulness. I hadn't expected to be thanked for ordinary country hospitality, especially after our inauspicious first meeting. Dad and I didn't eat out very often and it would be a rare treat for the both of us. "There are only two options here in Little Town. There's the Chinese restaurant, but it mostly does takeways. They do have a small dining room attached, but it's very plain and casual and not really somewhere you'd want to take people. The only other place is Abe's pub. He runs a bistro that's quite nice. It's not five-star dining or anything, but offers good fresh pub-style cooking. There are a couple of nice restaurants in Big Town, but we usually only go to those for very special occasions."

"Sounds like the bistro then."

I was excited thinking about going out to dinner and spent the rest of the drive to Miss G's place deciding on what to wear. I didn't get much opportunity to dress up around here. Bumping up Miss G's drive though, all those thoughts were driven from my mind when we both noticed at the same time that the door to the house was wide open. We exchanged glances as I pulled to a stop near the stairs. Damn!

Another time when we were without any of our normal safety equipment.

He was about to get out of the Land Rover when I put a hand on his arm and pulled out my mobile phone. I rang Miss G's number and listened while it rang out. We could hear her phone trilling through the open door, unanswered.

"Just wanted to check if she came back home early," I explained. "She might have fallen out with Bessie or something. Didn't want to give her a scare by barging in unannounced."

"Doesn't sound as though anyone's home," he said and looked down at my hand, which was still holding his arm. Embarrassed, I withdrew it quickly. "Let's go in."

We headed for the stairs, carefully avoiding the rotten third tread. As we approached the open door, the Sarge held me back behind him with a restraining arm, cautiously going in first. A thousand emotions swept across me at that small action and I wasn't sure how to feel about it. Was he being protective, domineering, patronising or questioning of my ability? I guess I was out of the habit of working with a partner. By myself I would have just barged straight in – all I could think about was Miss G's safety.

"Police!" he yelled in his loud voice, not touching the door with his hands. He did a quick reccy of the entry, then proceeded down the hall, me snapping at his heels. "Police!" he called out again. We stopped briefly, listening for any scuffling or hurried footsteps trying to escape. There was nothing, just the loud buzzing of crickets in the heat of the morning outside in the garden.

We searched the whole house methodically and slowly, finding nothing out of the ordinary until we reached the library. It was chaos – boxes thrown everywhere, documents carelessly discarded over every centimetre of floor, forming a new carpet.

"Someone moved in fast," said the Sarge quietly. "We're definitely not talking about a peeper anymore."

I felt sick when I saw the mess. "Thank God Miss G wasn't here when this happened."

He looked at me sharply. "Hold on, let's think about this. Was it an opportunistic break-in? Doubtful, considering the library's been trashed but nothing else seems to be taken. Or was someone watching when we left with Miss Greville and took advantage of her absence to go through her things?" He nudged a heap of papers with his well-shod foot. "Rather messily too."

"So it's someone in town?"

"Not necessarily. Our peeper was here on Saturday. He might have hidden somewhere, watching us while we searched the yard and moved in as soon as we all left."

"I hate the idea of being watched like that!" I said, with more heat than the situation probably warranted.

He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment. "Who's peeping on you, Tess?"

I was embarrassed at my outburst, so just shrugged noncommittally. I wished I had never mentioned my own special peeper to him. "It's nothing. It's personal. I can't stop it, so I just try to ignore it."

"Why can't you stop it? Tell me who it is. We'll arrest him and make him stop. You shouldn't have to put up with that."

"Can we talk about it later? We have a job to do now," I said irritably, pushing past him to the hall and into the lounge room. I didn't want to discuss my private life with him.

I stopped suddenly when I reached the door of the lounge room. It had been trashed. Thoroughly. Furniture had been smashed, paintings pulled from the walls, drawers pulled open and flung away, their contents strewn across the floor, the lounges slashed open, their filling spilling out. *Dear God*, I thought looking around, *vandals?* Or someone having a temper tantrum when they didn't find what they were after?

"Sarge? Lounge room," I shouted. He came jogging in.

"Okay," he said, after quickly assessing the destruction. "So we have a break-in, but only two rooms hit. The rest of the house appears as it did yesterday. Someone looking for something?"

"Yeah, I guess," I conceded. "But what? There's nothing here to steal. She's not well-off. Everybody knows that."

"Somebody doesn't. You said she has no direct family, but what about more distant relatives?" He paused. "She's elderly. What happens when she dies?"

I shrugged. "I dunno. I think we urgently need to speak to her lawyers."

"You're right. Ring them. Find their home numbers. I want us to speak to them today," he ordered.

I wanted to complain to him because I had planned to shop and to have lunch with my girlfriends in Big Town. I didn't want to work today. I needed a break. Instead, I bit it back and managed to find Miss G's address book in the mess and looked up Murchison. There were two numbers for a Stanley Murchison. I dialled both. At one I got the business voicemail for Murchison and Murchison, advising of office hours and inviting me to leave a short message. I hung up and rang the other.

"Hello?" asked a suspicious and crotchety elderly voice, as if everyone phoning him was automatically going to request some impossible favour from him.

"Is that Mr Stanley Murchison?"

"Yes. Who is this?"

"This is Senior Constable Tess Fuller from Little Town. Oh, pardon me, from Mount Big Town, I mean."

He chuckled. "I know about Little Town and Big Town, Senior Constable. What can I do for you?" My small stumble had broken the ice for him, making him feel instantly superior, which was exactly how Big Town folk usually preferred to feel towards those of us who lived up in the mountains.

"My partner and I are at Miss Mabel Greville's home and she's been experiencing some problems with intruders and now a break-in." That piece of news prompted a flurry of conversation from the other end. "No, no, she's safe, Mr Murchison. She's with Bessie Goodwill in Big . . . er, in Watling Bay as we speak." He spoke again. "Yes, that's right. We took her there yesterday. We think this is all something to do with the Greville properties and fortune and Miss G suggested we speak to you about the details. We were hoping you might find some time to see us today, if you don't mind? It is urgent."

The Sarge frowned at my politeness. I gathered he would have demanded that the lawyer find time for us today regardless, but I just couldn't do that. It felt right to be approaching Mr Murchison my way. I could tell from speaking to him that he was an old-fashioned man.

He talked for a while and I laughed as I listened. "Oh Mr Murchison, stop it please! You're flattering me. I'm much older than you're thinking. But yes, Sergeant Maguire will be with me. He's the senior officer . . . That's right. Maguire." I spelled out both our names and looked up at the Sarge, smiling briefly. Mr Murchison was being a right old sexist git, but I suppose that was his generation,

after all. Women police officers had been the tea-makers, secretaries and prime comforters in his day, and never had the chance to be much more. "Okay, that would be wonderful. Thank you so much, Mr Murchison. We'll see you soon. Goodbye." I hung up and turned to the Sarge. "I think we need to get into uniform. This guy's old-style."

We had just over ninety minutes to get to Mr Murchison's place and it took ninety minutes to drive to Big Town. We didn't waste any time but secured Miss G's house and scooted back to my house where we scrabbled into our uniforms. The Sarge's had been scrunched up in his luggage, so I quickly ironed it for him while he sorted out his utility belt and hunted through his clothes for his socks, cap and boots.

"I hate rushing like this," he complained grumpily, slipping on his still-hot shirt, cursing under his breath as it hit his skin and fastening the buttons quickly. I was momentarily transfixed by the sight of his bare torso when he threw off his t-shirt. He had great muscles. He had to prompt me twice to wake me up and get me moving again. I finished getting ready at warp speed to hide my embarrassment, tying my laces speedily, twisting up my hair and fixing on my utility belt.

With a minute to spare we jumped down the stairs to the patrol car where both of us headed for the driver's door. Awkward moment. I was used to driving everywhere.

"I'll drive today, Senior Constable," he said officiously, pulling rank.

"Of course, Sarge. Your prerogative as the senior officer," I replied coolly, climbing into the passenger seat, but not happy about it. I liked driving the patrol car and knew the roads better than him. His eyes slid in my direction as he turned the car on and we drove off in silence.

I decided to spend the trip on my phone. First I rang Fiona and then Eliza to cancel our lunch date and harangue them about their training for the fun run. That took up forty-five minutes by the time they told me all of their news. Then I rang Jake and told him that the Sarge was taking Dad and me to dinner, inviting him to meet us at the bistro later this evening.

He was naughty and flirty on the phone. I suspected he'd had a few drinks with his repulsive brothers, but he was so charming and amusing that I giggled for a good fifteen minutes talking to him. I was desperately aware that the Sarge could overhear every word I said and was pretty sure that he was getting the general idea that Jake and I were indulging in some phone foreplay.

"Jakey," I complained reluctantly. "Stop it! I have to go now. I'm working . . . Stop it! I'm going. You're being so cheeky . . . No! I'm not saying that. Not right now! I'm not alone. I have to go, I'm working . . . Jakey! No! God, I'm going to have to sort you out tonight, my honey-boy, aren't I?" I listened and laughed. "In your dreams . . . Okay . . . Yes . . . I know. Me too . . . Love you. See you tonight."

I hung up with a dreamy smile on my face, humming happily for the rest of the drive. Jake always had that effect on me, but obviously not on the Sarge though because his face was grim and humourless.

"Can you stop that bloody humming? It's driving me insane," he said, voice as cold and sharp as a snowstorm. "I was hoping we could talk about strategy for our meeting with Murchison during this drive instead of you spending the time gossiping on your phone."

"I'm not supposed to be working today," I reminded him snippily. "I had plans. I needed to sort them out." I paused, looking out the window. "I'm sorry I have a life."

"I don't appreciate the attitude, Fuller. We all make sacrifices for the job," he snapped in an exceedingly snooty voice.

Screw you! I thought angrily, arms crossed, staring stonily ahead out the windscreen. We didn't speak for the rest of the drive.

He was lost as soon as he hit Big Town and I refused to guide him until he was forced to ask for my help, swallowing his annoyance and his pride. I then barked out directions until we pulled up in front of a stunning architecturally-designed house, perched on the headland overlooking the bay.

I flung myself out of the car, slamming the door and headed determinedly to the front door, pressing on the doorbell with unnecessary violence. A disembodied voice speaking through a hidden intercom made me jump in fright. "Yes?" I couldn't tell where it was coming from.

"Mr Murchison, it's Senior Constable Fuller and Sergeant Maguire to talk to you about Miss Greville," I spoke up into the air, waving around my badge, not knowing which direction to speak to.

"You're right on time. Come in. I'm in the study," he said, and there was a buzz. The front door clicked open and I turned the knob, stepping inside, the Sarge close behind. We found ourselves in a grand entry room, double-storied in height, light streaming in through large windows that reached up to the ceiling. The furniture appeared to be antique and valuable, the rugs opulent and original oil paintings and watercolours filled the walls. I gazed around, impressed at the restrained ostentatiousness that positively screamed that we were dealing with a very wealthy individual.

We walked down the hall looking into every room until we found the study and Mr Murchison. I noticed two things about him immediately. The first was that he was formally dressed in a three-piece pin-striped suit at home on a Sunday; the second was that he was in a wheelchair.

"Oh," I said, without thinking. "Nice chair! I bet it's got everything on it. Just look at it!"

The Sarge glared at me sharply, silently berating me for my unprofessionalism, but Mr Murchison grinned proudly and did a little dance with his chair to show off.

"It's top of the range," he boasted.

"I can see that. Wow! That must have cost a bundle," I exclaimed. "I would love to get something like that for my father."

After that little confession, we discussed chairs for a while and I told him about Dad and he told me about his MS, which had become steadily worse as he had aged, finally rendering him unable to walk. The Sarge stood to one side, fuming about the waste of time. I glanced over at him and noticed his thunderous features.

"I'm sorry, Mr Murchison, here I am rabbiting on and taking up your valuable weekend time when Sergeant Maguire wanted to ask you about the Greville family," I said conciliatorily.

Mr Murchison flapped away my concerns with his hand, said something nice about his pleasure in chatting to a pretty young girl and settled himself behind his desk again, his serious face returned. And in a voice that was one hundred percent lawyer, he invited us to sit down. We sat next to each other on a dark green leather lounge that was as hard as a rock. I pulled out my notebook and a pen and flicked to a blank page.

"How can I help you, Sergeant Maguire?" he asked in that supercilious tone I found common in Big Town folk. And lawyers. I hated it, but seeing it wasn't directed at me for once, I didn't bother to bristle. But I could tell that Mr Murchison

got up the Sarge's nose straight away, though he presented an even-tempered professional face.

"We're after any information you might be able to give us about why somebody would be peeping on Miss Greville and taking advantage of her absence to search her lounge room and library," the Sarge explained to the elderly lawyer.

Mr Murchison didn't speak for a while, just made a temple with his fingers and pursed his lips, casting his eyes to the ceiling. "There are long-standing rumours of a hidden stash of treasure in the house –" he started cautiously.

"A rumour that Miss Greville assures us is false," the Sarge broke in. "And that the Senior Constable assures me everyone in Mount Big Town knows is false, having known Miss Greville's father and his spendthrift ways."

"Hmm, that's probably correct," he conceded, giving me a patronising smile. I think if I'd been anywhere near him, he'd have bestowed a pat on my head as well. "It's possible that someone from Wattling Bay is responsible, but I assume you've investigated all the local men known to have a proclivity for voyeurism?"

I wasn't sure if he was trying to psych us out by using big words, but personally I was capable of handling words of more than one syllable and, from his posh voice, I believed the Sarge had been well-educated as well. We both blinked at him blandly.

"It's unlikely that Miss Greville would be a target for a peeper with the nudist community just down the road," asserted the Sarge, cutting me a quick glance to let me know that he hadn't forgotten that had been my argument.

"True," the lawyer conceded again. I realised then that he wasn't being very helpful to us at all. The Sarge and I hadn't had any time to define our working style, but I hoped he wasn't one of those cops who expected their junior officer to keep quiet.

"Mr Murchison," I said bluntly. "It's clearly not a peeper, so let's not waste any more time on that line of thought. Miss G's house was broken into and tossed. Somebody was searching for something. Do you have any idea what that could be, because Miss G doesn't."

I wasn't prepared to waste my Sunday on someone who wasn't going to prove useful to us. The Sarge glanced at me coolly, his features neutral. It was hard to tell what he was thinking from his expression.

Murchison turned his eyes on me and his former friendliness evaporated instantly. "I have no idea, Senior Constable," he said coldly.

I persisted. "Miss G wasn't able to tell us about the Greville family's current land holdings around Little Town. She knew that some land had been sold off over the years, but wasn't sure what has happened to the money. Can you fill us in on the details of that, please?"

He wheeled himself out from behind his desk and over to a huge picture window which overlooked the bay. It was a beautiful view – very calming and tranquil. He didn't appear to be taking it in at all. "The money received from selling the remainder of the Greville family's holdings has been placed into a trust that pays Miss Greville a small annuity." He spun around to face us again. "It's what she lives on."

"Does the family still have any holdings left to sell?"

"No. The last one was sold in the late 1990s to the government for the development of the prison. With careful investment, that money should be enough to pay Miss Greville an income until her, er, passing."

"So you're saying there's no hidden treasure, no land holdings and Miss G

survives on a small pension from a trust that your firm administers.” He nodded in agreement. “Then why would someone have broken into her house? They were definitely looking for something. And judging by where they looked, it was a document of some type.”

He stared at me blankly. “As I said before, Senior Constable, I have no idea.”

“Is it possible that there could be further land holdings or other valuables that you don’t know about? With another law firm maybe?”

“Absolutely not!” he spoke up angrily. “Murchison and Murchison has served the Greville family since they arrived to settle at the foot of Mount Big. There has *never* been another law firm for them.”

“Sorry Mr Murchison, no offence meant. I was only throwing around thoughts,” I retreated.

“We won’t take up much more of your time, Mr Murchison,” the Sarge stepped in. “A few more questions. Who in your firm is responsible for managing the trust that provides Miss Greville with her income?”

He paused for a moment as if thinking about how to answer. “That is me personally, Sergeant,” he said, not without a small touch of pride. “I’ve been managing that trust for over forty years now.”

“And it’s all properly audited as required, I presume?” the Sarge asked.

Mr Murchison took great affront to that question. “Yes, it is! How dare you insinuate otherwise?”

I was glad it was the Sarge who asked that question, not me, because he copped a vitriolic five minute spray on the inefficiencies of modern policing, the uselessness and stupidity of police officers in general and several personal attacks on the Sarge’s own intelligence and moral fibre. He listened politely then stood up when Murchison, his face red from anger, stopped for a much needed breath.

“We’ll show ourselves out, Mr Murchison. Thanks for your time today,” he said icily and we took our leave.

Chapter 8

“Boy, was he mad at you!” I laughed as we made our way back to the patrol car.

“He certainly was. Interesting, isn’t it? So much heat over what is surely a very simple question,” he mused in reply.

“You think he’s fiddling the books? Dudding Miss G out of her fortune?”

He shrugged. “Who knows? Can we search the Titles Office from the station here?”

“Probably. They have all the databases on tap here. Big Town cops are spoiled rotten,” I said with undisguised resentment. I didn’t even have a computer that worked.

I gave him directions to the large and modern Wattling Bay police station, located just outside of its CBD. It was a four-story brick building, all glass and landscaping, with a flash reception area and stylishly furbished offices. We parked the car in one of the visitor spaces and headed inside. Being mid-Sunday, it was reasonably quiet, so we were noticed by the counter staff straight away.

“Well, looky here! Visitors from the country,” drawled the duty sergeant, a chubby idiot with an ugly straggly moustache, in a loud voice that drew everyone’s attention to us. “How’s it going, bumpkins? Found somewhere to park your donkeys?”

“Blow me, Phil,” I suggested, moving to the counter.

“Tessie my beauty, anywhere, anytime, and that’s a promise. Who’s your new man? Is he your cousin? You gonna marry him?”

I rolled my eyes and turned to the Sarge. “See what I have to put up with from these morons?” I introduced the two men and they nodded at each other.

“Has Tess been showing you all the renowned local sights in that hillbilly heaven where she lives? The chickens in the lockup, the Bycrafts, umm . . .” He pretended to think. “Nope, can’t think of anything else.”

“Shove it, Phil, or I’ll tell your wife what you got up to with Foxy Dubois at Des’ retirement party.” I was just bluffing with that threat, but when he paled and glared at me, looking around nervously to see if anyone had heard what I’d said, I smiled evilly to myself.

“No need to do that, Tessie love. I was just helping her with a little problem she was having. It was all very innocent.” He stared at me. “Did she say differently?”

I raised my eyebrows and smiled at him, leaning closer to him and lowering my voice to a confidential whisper, “Your secret’s safe with me but only if you let us use a computer for an hour or so. We need some info and can’t be bothered going back to Little Town for it.”

“Computers broken again, huh?” he sneered, but opened the door to the counter and let us out the back. He directed us to a vacant desk where an almost new computer sat, unused and neglected. It even had a cobweb stretched between the monitor and hard drive. I immediately began plotting how I could steal it without anybody noticing.

I plonked down in the chair looking up at the Sarge who perched himself on the edge of the desk. “What are we looking up, Sarge?”

“I want a list of all Greville properties sold since records started. We’ll run it past Miss Greville and see if she notices any anomalies.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I called up the Titles Office database.

“You don’t mind threatening people to get your own way, do you?” he asked, looking down at me quizzically.

I shrugged one shoulder and kept tapping on the keyboard. “A girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do. I get sick of being patronised all the time. A bit of revenge gets me through the day.”

I typed for a while.

“I’m surprised how comfortable you are using the computer,” he commented casually, watching. “You know, for a country cop.”

I stared up at him, my fingers frozen on the keyboard. “What did I just say about how sick I am of being patronised all the time?”

He reddened. “Sorry Tess. I didn’t mean to.”

“How about a word of advice, Sarge? Every time you want to say something about me that’s going to end in the words “you know, for a country cop”, then don’t say it. It’s guaranteed to be patronising.” I smiled at him to take the sting out of the words, but I meant them.

“Point taken. I’ll endeavour to remember that in the future.”

I turned back to the screen, finished typing in my instructions and waited while it searched the database. The data it finally spat out ran for a couple of pages, and we had a quick squiz at it on the screen before I sent it to the printer, where four pages glided out silently and effortlessly. So different to the printer back at our station, which took a full five minutes to think about each and every page it printed, before screeching and groaning as it forced out the pages, every second one dog-eared and smudged and every dozen pages there would be a paper jam. I’d used

every swear word I knew on that printer in the two years I'd lived with it and even made up a few new ones in its honour. Every time I'd complained about it though, Des just said that you couldn't hurry things in the country. I'd never been entirely convinced he even knew what a printer was.

"Anything else you want me to look up while we're here?" I asked. "What about a Google search of Greville properties or of Stanley Murchison himself?"

"Good thinking," he said and I called up the Google homepage. I tried 'Greville Mount Big Town' and had a few hits, mostly reports from the *Wattling Bay Messenger*, reporting on sales of properties to various bodies. I printed all of those out as well. Then I typed in 'Murchison and Murchison' and got a few hits, the first one directing me to the law firm's own website. Finally I typed in 'Stanley Murchison' and received a few hits as well, more stories from the *Wattling Bay Messenger* about his charity work and some about a couple of his successful and newsworthy trials in his younger, more mobile days. Interestingly, there were a few articles about various developments he'd been involved in over the years. I printed off those stories as well.

Then just for the hell of it, I searched the police database for Stanley Murchison and was surprised when it called up his name in relation to a major fraud case that had been investigated by the Big Town detectives about five years previously. He had been interviewed as the lawyer to a company accused of acting fraudulently, but hadn't been accused of behaving unlawfully himself. I printed off what I could from that case, and gathered all our paperwork.

"Let's get some lunch. I'm starving," I said to the Sarge and we scrounged up a plastic wallet for our print-offs. We were on our way out when I was accosted.

"If it isn't little Constable Tessie come visiting? What an honour," called a voice from behind me. I pulled a face and groaned out loud when I heard it. "You come all the way to the big smoke just to mooch some stationery off us, have you? Why don't you hold a cake stall to raise some money for your crappy little station? A pretty girl like you would be good in the kitchen. As well as some other rooms, I bet." Said with a leer.

"You're never likely to find out, are you, Bum?" I snapped.

There he was, larger than life. And he was pretty large – an enormous man, an obsessive bodybuilder with terrifying and unattractive muscularity, an overwhelming mistaken belief in his fatal magnetism to women and an obnoxiously thick and swaggering personality. Detective Constable Burn Grunion, or Bum Bunion as we all called him to his never-ending chagrin. You'd think after being called something your whole working life, you'd eventually become resigned to the fact that people were going to call you that whether you liked it or not. Not Bum Bunion though. What he lost in intelligence, he more than made up for in stubbornness.

I didn't call him on the constable crack – he knew perfectly well that I was a senior constable. He just liked to get a rise from me. He just liked to get any reaction from me, being a bit like Denny Bycraft in that respect. In fact, he was just as annoying as a bunion on your bum would be, so he was well-nicknamed. Unfortunately, we had known each other a while, since we studied together at the police academy where I had bested him in every subject. And I was promoted before him as well.

"I gave your little friend Jenny a ride she won't forget the other night," he boasted loudly.

I grimaced. *Yuck!* What the hell was Jenny thinking? She must have been drunk

out of her brain. I would have to have a stern talk to her. No woman was ever that desperate and I wanted her pouring her carnal urges into her running training. Besides, the gossip from the female cops in Big Town was that Bum Bunion was all talk and little action. And his equipment didn't live up to his conceited promises either.

"Poor Jenny," was all I said, before I turned away and continued heading to the exit. I was really hungry.

"Don't turn your nose up at me, Tessie Fuller! You'd be better off shagging a decent cop like me than one of those Bycraft bastards!" he shouted after me. There was a general murmur of agreement around the room. Geez, that made me angry! It was nobody's damn business who I slept with.

"*Nobody* wants to shag you, you ugly, knuckle-dragging, small-dicked meathead. Now fuck off and do some work for once," shouted a husky, sexy voice from the stairs. Bum scooted away without a word, terror on his face. Then the voice turned its fury on me. "Teresa Fuller, where the hell do you think you're going, you Bycraft-fucking whore? Get back here now!"

The Sarge tensed, eyes wary, ready to jump in and defend me physically, if necessary. That was surprising.

I spun around again. "Always charming as ever, ma'am," I laughed and gave her a huge hug. I hadn't seen her for a while.

She looked up at me. "You lying little bitch. You tell me you can't make lunch today because you have to work, so I agree to fill in for that useless turdball Jerry. He says he's got a bad back from gardening, but everybody knows that he hurt it wearing out his dick in a marathon wanking session last night. And now I find you waltzing around town with fucking . . ." She took a breath and turned to scrutinise the Sarge. Her demeanour didn't change, even when she glanced over his tallness, well-balanced muscularity and nice eyes. She wasn't easily impressed. Her eyes flicked back to me. "Who the fuck is this?"

"This is my new sergeant, Finn Maguire. Sarge, you may be surprised to learn that this person is my friend, the foul-mouthed harridan better known as Detective Inspector Fiona Midden. She's also on my running team, if she's managed to fit in any practice between all of her cigarette breaks."

"Fuck off!" she laughed. "Jesus, you're such a dictator. You'll be growing a moustache and making us all goosestep together next. Anyway, I smoke while I train, don't I?"

I don't know how old Fiona was exactly – in her mid-fifties was my guess, she wouldn't tell me – but her skin was so leathery and brown from years of smoking and sunbaking that she looked like a well-loved handbag that your grandma owned. She was small and rail-thin with a shock of short blonde hair and an ugly-pretty pixie face with a pointed chin, cute little nose and sharp pale blue eyes. Unexpectedly, she was quite a good runner and was a much better bet for finishing the eight kilometre race than either Jenny or Eliza who were much younger than her. It wouldn't surprise me in the slightest if she smoked through the whole race though, she was such a nicotine addict.

"Well, keep up the good work and I'll talk to you soon. Take care and give my love to Ronnie," I said. As I reached the door, I turned around to her. "Get those other two motivated as well. We've only got a few weeks to go."

"What do I look like?" she shouted at me over her shoulder as she started climbing the stairs again, loud enough to make everybody on the entire floor, including members of the public, turn and listen. "A fucking life coach? Do it

yourself, you lazy slut. I've got to work for a living. And I don't have hot Bycraft cock to come home to like some lucky bitches."

And while that instantly dried up everyone's criticisms of my relationship with Jake, I cringed with embarrassment at her blunt talking as we left the building.

Back in the car, the Sarge turned to me. "Okay, *she* is abrasive, with a real mouth on her."

I laughed. "That's what most people say when they first meet her. I'm used to her though, having known her most of my life. She's been a real mentor to me."

He turned his head to me in disbelief. "Really?"

"Yes, really. She's the inspector in charge of the detective team in Big Town, as tough as a commando and she doesn't take any rubbish from anybody. The male cops are terrified of her, suspects confess after five minutes with her, and we female cops love her to bits. She's a hardcore role model, and doesn't care what anyone thinks. She's one of the main reasons I decided to become a cop in the first place."

I looked out the window for a moment only to see Mark Bycraft walking down the street, his arm around Dorrie Lebutt. They stopped and exchanged spit for a while, his hand up her top, hers down the front of his jeans, ignoring the disgusted glances from the decent citizens scurrying past them. *Holy hell, Dorrie was playing with fire!* Seeing Rick, seeing his cousin Mark and trying to come on to my Jake, all at the same time. I don't know what she was playing at, but it was going to end in tears. Or worse. Mark and Dorrie must have assumed they were safe from prying eyes up here in Big Town.

I told the Sarge what I'd just seen, in case it turned ugly later on back home. I wasn't the only person who visited Big Town on a regular basis, and Mark and Dorrie weren't exactly being discreet. Rick would find out soon enough. And then *his* girlfriend, Stacey, would find out about him and Dorrie. There would be blood spilled in Little Town in the near future. And truth be told, there was nothing scarier than Bycraft versus Bycraft. They usually stuck together in times of trouble, but they fought one another like wild animals when they crossed each other. I only hoped that Jake didn't become involved. He would be backing his brother Rick over his cousin Mark any day.

The Sarge took it in but didn't say much, as usual. "I'm thinking that Little Town runs a lot deeper than I ever expected."

"You thought you were being forced to go to a quiet country detail where you would die of boredom, didn't you?"

He smiled faintly, but didn't answer. *Probably didn't want to incriminate himself*, I thought.

"Can we have some lunch soon? I'm starving. My day off's not going the way I planned." I didn't mean to sound whiny, but I'm pretty sure that's how it came across. But instead of heading into the nearest fast food place for a quick feed like I would have done, he pulled into the carpark of a small Mexican restaurant.

I wasn't thrilled. "I need to eat fast, Sarge. I'm fading away," I hinted. "Fried chicken or burgers are fast."

"No Tess. You shouldn't eat food like that. We can get some quick healthy food here."

Sullenly I followed him into the restaurant, sure I would be waiting an hour to be fed, when every cell in my body was screaming at me to eat *right now!* We were seated immediately and our order was also taken quickly. I was convinced it was the uniform that sped everything along. In my experience, cops eating somewhere in uniform always provoked one of two responses – either the restaurateur was thrilled

to have us there and lavished us with attention, or they couldn't wait to get rid of us, trying not to cause any offence, but rushing us through the meal. This felt like a rush job, but that just might have been because the restaurant was busy in the lunchtime peak hour and the staff were rushing everyone.

We spent the time between ordering and the food arriving re-reading the information we'd printed out, but it wasn't long before our meals turned up. To my shame, I gobbled mine down like a hyena at a fresh antelope kill. It was delicious but didn't really fill me up. I'd gone for the cheapest thing on the menu, a bean enchilada with a small side of fresh salad, his contempt for fast food echoing in my ears. He'd gone for a huge platter himself that included a taco, a burrito and rice and salad sides. Then I realised that maybe he'd been as hungry as me. We'd had quite a jog that morning and he wasn't a small man. Maybe I should be grateful he was looking out for me by keeping me away from junk food? I wished I knew more about him.

When the bill came, he made moves to pay for it when I stopped him vehemently. I insisted that we each pay for our own meals, especially as he had offered to take Dad and me out to dinner that very night. I would have offered to pay for both of us, but I knew that I didn't have enough on me to cover the entire meal. Unfortunately, I hadn't expected to eat out today, thinking I'd be lunching at Fiona's house, and when I'd changed into my uniform at the last second in a rush I'd forgotten my purse. I had to dredge up every dollar coin and every fifty, twenty, ten and five cent piece I had at the bottom of the small moneybag I stashed in the patrol car for emergencies. I was desperately embarrassed, but determined to pay for my own meal. I just managed to scrape enough together. Just. Well, to be honest, he had to throw in a couple of dollars for me in the end.

His eyes were scathing as he scooped up the mountain of loose change I'd placed on the table and headed off to the cashier to pay. I watched as he shoved that coinage into his pockets and paid the bill with his credit card. When he returned to the car, he pulled out all my coins from his pocket and threw them into the holdall between the front seats.

"I'll pay you properly when we get back home," I insisted, squirming with discomfort at the clinking of the small change falling into the holdall.

"You've paid me, Senior Constable. This is now my money, I believe," he said dismissively. "I'll decide what I do with it, thanks."

Feeling as though I'd been firmly put back in my box after that experience, we headed to Bessie's daughter's house to check on Miss G and to drop off the list of properties. They weren't home, so I scribbled a message on the papers asking her to let us know if she noticed anything out of the ordinary, shoved them under the front door and we buckled up and sped off back to Little Town.

Chapter 9

Back home, we dropped in at the station, making it just in time to watch the removalist van pull out of the driveway of the police house. It was followed by Des and Maureen's car, the back seat crammed with possessions too precious to trust to the removalists. There were parts of Jesus poking out of every window, which I couldn't help but feel was a little irreverent. The Sarge parked in the station carpark and we sauntered up to the house, waving goodbye to them as they left. Most of the sightseers were long departed, but there were still a few stragglers left behind, nothing in their dull lives a match for the respectable boredom of Des and

Maureen's departure.

I was surprised to see Rick Bycraft still around, sitting on the ground, leaning up against the fence. He was slugging on a stubby of beer, surrounded by what seemed to be a whole carton of empties, tired and very drunk by the look of him. All the adult Bycrafts had deserted him and there were only a few of the whippersnappers around to keep him company.

I pointed him out to the Sarge.

"He couldn't have found out already about that woman and his cousin, could he?"

"God only knows. News travels fast around here."

I detoured over to him. In my eyes he was one of the least objectionable Bycrafts and Jake was very close to him as they were only a year apart in age, so I didn't loathe him as much as I did some of the others. When I crouched down next to him, I could see that he was even drunker than I suspected and had been crying, his face streaked with tears. There was a faint smell of vomit emanating from him.

"Rick," I said gently, "how you going?"

He rolled dreary, bloodshot eyes towards me. "Fuck off, piglet." He didn't sound too friendly.

"How about Sergeant Maguire and I take you home to your mum?"

"I said to fuck off."

I exchanged a glance with the Sarge and tried again. "Rick, we'll take you to Lola's place and she can look after you tonight, okay?"

"*Fuck off, you nosy bitch!*" he screamed suddenly, lurching up and grabbing me around the neck. He was an angry man, had a vicious grip and he'd taken me by surprise, so I was choking for air straight away. When you're in that position, you get real proprietorial about oxygen, believe me. I lashed out at him in the stomach with my foot in a fierce side kick, throwing him violently backwards. He hit the fence hard and slumped drunkenly, before turning on his side to vomit. The Bycraft minors stood in an interested semi-circle around us, filming Rick's attack and defeat on their stolen smart phones. None of them offered to help me or him. I wouldn't have expected it.

The Sarge didn't waste a moment though. He pushed through the audience to join the fray immediately, but it was all over by the time he got there.

"What are we going to do with him?" the Sarge asked, remembering the chickens in the lockup.

"Take him home. Let his family deal with him," I recommended, rubbing my poor throat. I hoped it wouldn't bruise.

Nodding agreement, he manhandled Rick into the back of the patrol car, stopping to let him vomit again, while I followed, shooing away the young ones. The Bycraft minors yelled out insulting comments to us before jumping on their stolen bikes and riding off to warn Rick's mother about our imminent arrival.

We drove in silence, the only conversation me directing him to Jarrah Street where the Bycraft family lair was situated. When we pulled up outside the unkempt timber house, a coven of Bycraft women, tipped off by the young ones, swarmed outside to the curb, crowding the patrol car, banging on its roof and swearing at us. The Sarge opened the door and told them all to stand back in his loud, authoritative voice. They obeyed, which frankly stunned me. The Bycraft women made it a point to never let men tell them what to do – unless it was to open their legs and then they were all ears, so to speak.

We pulled Rick out of the back of the car, decidedly worse for wear. The

women immediately crowded around again and accused us of roughing him up and mistreating him. I wanted to yell back at them that we were trying to *help* him, but it was pointless. They'd never listen to me and I'd only be wasting my breath even trying to explain.

"Back off!" I warned Rosie Bycraft, Rick's and Jake's older sister, who was shoving against me and getting in my face.

"Make me, piglet bitch," she sneered, trying to grab Rick's arm off me. I pushed her overly-generous chest backwards with my open palm a few times to force her to move away from me and thought longingly of my baton. There would be nothing that would make my day brighter at that moment than cracking a few Bycraft skulls.

Rosie took exception to my gentle pushes though, and without warning rammed into me, knocking me off balance. I fell heavily, bringing down both Rick and the Sarge with me. Rick landed on me and was far too drunk to have speedy reflexes, so he thrashed around on top of me with little effect except grinding me painfully further into the dirt. I gagged at the smell of his vomit breath on my face.

The Sarge struggled to his feet and hauled Rick to his, but wasn't fast enough to stop the onslaught of Bycraft feet opportunistically making contact with my body as I lay prone on the ground. He battled to hold up Rick, whose bones had seemingly turned to jelly, while the Bycraft women repeatedly kicked at me so viciously that I curled up into as small a mass as possible and desperately reached for my baton. I swung it wildly as I lay on the ground, whacking them hard and indiscriminately on their shins and calves as their feet headed towards me. I was causing them significant pain too, judging by the curses raining down on my head.

The Sarge let Rick fall to the ground in order to get out his baton, wading into the melee and yelling at the Bycraft women to back away. Between the two of us we managed to give me enough breathing space to stagger to my feet. Panting and hurting, I held the baton up, one palm out in warning, ready to smash in someone's head given the slightest provocation.

The Sarge moved in close, pushing me behind him again with one hand and swapping his baton for his OC spray in the other. Stupid Rosie Bycraft took a step towards me, blinded by her own hatred, wanting to take another swing at me. He warned her to step back. She ignored him and so copped a full blast of the spray in her face, rendering her instantly helpless. She cursed the Sarge with language that would have made me blush if I hadn't heard it all before out of her own kids' mouths towards me. She shuffled inside her mother's house, crying, accompanied by her sister and cousins to wash out her eyes.

"Bring out this man's mother now!" the Sarge bellowed after them. A minute later, tiny Lola Bycraft, spawner of numerous evil Bycrafts as well as my beautiful Jake, reluctantly came down the stairs. She was moaning about being torn away from *Oprah* repeats, a cigarette dangling from the side of her mouth. I'd never seen her without one.

"What did you do to my Rosie, pig-bitch?" she demanded abrasively, her cigarette jiggling up and down as she spoke.

"She got what she deserved."

She shrugged then because, despite having ten kids, she didn't really care about most of them, only a few. Red was her favourite, being her first born. Jake was another favourite, because everyone in the family adored him. She looked down at one of the unlucky ones, lying on the ground, snivelling in front of us all. "What about my Ricky? What did you do to him?" she asked automatically, without much

feeling. But I still saw red at her attitude.

"We've brought him home for his own damn safety, you old bat. We found him drunk and crying at the police house. Next time I won't bother. I'll just chuck him in the lockup until he sobers up," I spat out at her.

"He's not a fucking chicken, piglet," she scorned, blowing an awful fugue of cigarette smoke over me.

I turned and addressed the Sarge, "Let's get away from this ungrateful bunch of arseholes. Last time I do any of them a favour."

"The only favour you could do for me is dying, bitch," retorted Lola viciously. "And the sooner the better."

I stalked back to the patrol car in a right temper as the Sarge hauled Rick to his feet again. I was feeling sore from where that pack of witches had attacked me. In a fair world, we would have arrested all of them for assaulting a police officer, but with nowhere to put them and no way of transporting so many of them to Big Town, there wasn't much we could do except walk away. Again.

"Stacey's broken up with me, Mum," Rick cried pitifully, leaning drunkenly on Lola's shoulders and sobbing. "She found out about me and Dorrie. She's kicked me out of her house."

"There, there, poor Ricky," Lola soothed, patting him absently on the back as she took a long draw on her ciggie, shooting venom at me over his shoulder. "Stacey Felhorn's an ugly, fat slut anyway. You can do better than her. You stick with that Dorrie. She knows how to look after a man." She flipped me the finger as we drove away and took out her cigarette to yell out at me, "Stay away from my Jakey, you motherfucking pig-arsed whore!"

Unprofessionally, I flipped the middle fingers of both hands right back at her through the window. Oh yeah, I could totally see her as my mother-in-law.

"That family is nothing but a pack of obscene animals," said the Sarge in disgust. "I've only been here two days and I hate them already."

I laughed briefly. "Welcome to my world. I grew up with them."

"I know it's none of my business, but I just can't understand why you would go out with one of them. Especially with the way they treat you."

I replied evenly, "You're right, it's none of your business."

"I understand why they hate the police, but it seems to be almost personal with you," he persisted.

"I guess it's just my charming personality," I said and smiled at him with a fake sincerity usually reserved for campaigning politicians. I'd probably tell him one day about me and the Bycrafts but it was too early in our partnership to do so just yet. That's assuming he stuck around long enough to remain my partner. After witnessing the Bycrafts at their worst, that scenario probably just became a lot less certain.

"Okay," he sighed. "I can tell when I'm being fobbed off. I'll take you home. And my advice? Take a bath. You're going to bruise up."

I shrugged nonchalantly, but I was sure he was right. I would be in a whole world of pain tomorrow. I was feeling it already. He drove up my driveway, considerately parking near the stairs so I didn't have to walk too far. As I was about to step out, he put his hand on my arm to stop me.

"Tess, you need to get those chickens out of the lockup. I want those cells available for holding people. I don't want those Bycrafts to think that they can get away with treating you like that anymore. We have to bring some order to this town."

I regarded him gravely and nodded. I was coming around to his point of view that we did need a lockup in town. "As soon as I can. Hey, can you do me a favour and check to see if Des took his old chicken run with him? It was in the backyard. It's a bit of a ruin, but it would save me buying a new one. I could get Jake to help me fix it up if it's still there."

He nodded. "Don't forget about dinner. I'll pick you and your father up at about seven. Okay?"

I smiled. Something to look forward to, for once. But I tried not to sound too enthusiastic, returning with a cool, "Sure, thanks."

He was about to let go of my arm, when suddenly he pulled it closer to him, peering down at it intently. He grabbed my other arm and looked at that as well.

"Tess?" he questioned, running a gentle finger down the long jagged scar I had on my left inner forearm and the shorter one on my right. "What are these from? They look as though they were serious wounds."

I snatched my arms out of his hold and crossed them defensively. "They were. I got them when I was a little kid, so I don't remember anything about them." I was deliberately being evasive and scrambled out of the car to avoid any further questions. "See you tonight, Sarge."

Dad was reading in the lounge room and I rudely interrupted his concentration when I burst into the room and dived onto the lounge, loudly complaining about my day all the way. He didn't mind though, putting his book aside, listening with patient graciousness and reacting with heart-warming anger when I admitted, not without a little humiliation, that I had let myself be kicked by the Bycraft bimbos. But when I told him that the Sarge was taking us out for dinner tonight, he reminded me that it was his turn to host his regular footy group, which meant a couple of his friends were coming over to watch the game on telly and sink some beers with him.

I sat up. "Oh Dad, I forgot. I'm so sorry. I'll ring the Sarge right now and cancel." I staggered to my feet, heading for the phone. "Maybe he might offer to take us another night?"

"Don't cancel, Tessie love," Dad said immediately. I stopped and turned to him, finger poised to press the speed-dial button to the police house, eyebrows raised. "You go with him. I don't mind. And he might not offer again. You never go out much and it will be good for the both of you to get to know each other on a casual date a bit better. I'll just be in the way."

"You'd never be in the way." I thought about what he said and added, "And it's not a date."

He smiled. "Isn't it?"

"No, it isn't," I insisted, frowning.

"A man and a woman dressing up and going out to dinner together? Sounds like a date to me," he teased.

"Well, it isn't," and with his chuckles ringing in my ears, I took myself off to the bathroom to have a very long bath, hoping to relax my already aching muscles in the hot water. While I soaked in bubbles, I studied the scars on my arms pensively. I hadn't thought about them for ages, or the one on my back or the one on my chest either. I hadn't lied to the Sarge really, because I *didn't* remember anything about being wounded, but of course I knew every last detail about what had happened that awful day. I could have told him about it, but I just didn't want to. It was too personal and I usually found that it also made people uncomfortable around me once they knew.

I took some care preparing for dinner. I chose one of my prettiest dresses, a

feminine floaty little summer number in silvery-blue that flashed a bit of boob, but not an indecent amount, that I matched with a frivolous pair of strappy, high-heeled sandals. After spending most days in uniform or jeans, I liked to remind myself now and then that I was a woman. I left my hair loose, giving it a light bounce with my curling wand, applied my makeup and gave myself a generous spray of that delicate floral perfume. I was fixing my knife to my thigh underneath my pretty dress, when I heard a car pull up outside. I looked at my watch. He was right on time.

I opened the door promptly to let him in. He was casually elegant in a dark gray suit with a midnight blue shirt with no tie. His clothes looked expensive and fitted him like they'd been made especially for him. His shirt probably cost more than my whole outfit, including panties, shoes, handbag and jewellery. His suit probably cost more than my entire wardrobe of clothes. I suddenly felt awkward and out of my league and wished that I hadn't agreed to go out to dinner with him. I was hopeless in social situations, especially with people I didn't know well.

When I explained to him that Dad wouldn't be joining us, there was no change in his expression. He wasn't disappointed to be dining alone with me and he wasn't excited either. Good. Either emotion would have made me feel even more uncomfortable.

I stepped into the lounge room to say goodbye to Dad, giving him a kiss on the forehead.

"You look simply stunning tonight, Tessie," he complimented, squeezing my hand. "Doesn't she, Finn?"

"Yes, she does," he said politely. Well, what else was the poor guy going to say, put on the spot like that?

I shot Dad a poisonous glare to let him know I was well aware of his little tease. He smiled at me innocently in return. I screwed my face up in mock-anger, but after a moment I smiled back. His charm was considerable and irresistible. It was no stretch to imagine how he had sweet-talked my city-living mother into giving up everything to marry him and come to live as a farmer's wife in this boring little town. He was still a fine-looking man even now when he was older and much debilitated by bad health.

"You behave yourself tonight, Dad," I warned, kissing him again on the forehead. "I won't be too late." And the Sarge and I left, closing the front door quietly behind us.

"I thought we'd be driving in the Land Rover for your father's sake, but as he's not coming, would you like to ride in my car instead?" he offered, as we walked down the veranda stairs.

"Of course I would! Do you really need to ask?" I replied eagerly. "Can I drive?"

"No," he said simply, and opened the passenger door for me and closed it once I was seated, which I couldn't remember anybody ever doing for me before. It was a lovely car with a luxurious interior, including genuine leather seats. I wondered where his money came from. I knew how much a sergeant was paid and it wasn't enough to afford a car like this.

Soft, sweet music floated from the car speakers, accompanied by a husky-voiced female singer. I was suddenly shy and tongue-tied, torturing myself to think of something funny or witty or interesting to say. Nope. My mind was a complete blank. Luckily he stepped up to the plate.

"The chicken coop's still there in the backyard, but it's in terrible condition. It will take a lot of work to get it up to the high standards your chickens have come to

expect.”

I laughed and immediately felt more relaxed. “I don’t have much choice. I can’t afford to buy a new one.”

“I’ll give you a hand fixing it up. I’m a reasonable handyman. My tools will be turning up with my furniture tomorrow.”

“You don’t have to do that. I can ask Jake to help me. He’s very handy himself.” *In more ways than one*, I thought to myself, smiling.

“I insist. I like a challenge and it will ease my guilt at being the villain who evicted your chickens in the first place.”

“You’re not really feeling guilty about it,” I accused.

“No, not really,” he admitted, with that brief smile. “But I will help.”

“I suppose I could pick up the coop tomorrow and bring it back home to start working on straight away. It’ll need to be repaired and repainted.”

“Sure,” he agreed.

“This will be kind of fun. I’m going to make it the best chicken coop in Little Town.” I sat back in the seat, smiling happily to myself, planning busily in my mind.

“So you’ve forgiven me for evicting them? You were pretty angry with me. I thought you were going to belt me one at one stage.”

“I wasn’t that angry,” I lied. “A little angry maybe, but I can see your point about the lockup. I would have loved to shove Rosie Bycraft in one of those cells today and left her there to rot forever.”

“Which one was she?”

“The one with the dragon tattoo on her neck and the fake boobs. The one you sprayed.”

“Oh, her. Yes. She was . . . er . . . very noticeable.”

“Yep. Her boobs are gigantic, aren’t they? She keeps having them made bigger and bigger every year. The talk around town is that she uses the child support from her ex-partner to pay for it. My bet is that by the middle of next year they’ll be so big that they’ll spontaneously explode one day.” I giggled wickedly at the thought. “Hopefully taking out a few Bycrafts when they do.”

“Tess,” he reproved in an amused voice as he pulled into the carpark of The Flying Pigs. I had opened my door and stepped out before he even had a chance to hustle his butt to my side of the car, but hey, welcome to the twenty-first century, Finn Maguire.

We walked into the entrance of the pub where there were four choices of direction – straight ahead was the garish gaming room, full of loud, dazzling pokies; to the left was the public bar and to the right was the nicer lounge bar which led onto the bistro and the pub’s sole function room. The staircase took you up to the second floor where there were three reasonably priced ensuited rooms available for bookings and Abe’s own living quarters.

Right at that moment, Foxy Dubois came teetering out from the public bar, her bleach blonde hair piled with sexy carelessness on top of her head, lips plastered with startlingly red lipstick. Foxy was forty-something and liked to pretend she was now a better type of woman, but she spent every Sunday afternoon and evening getting sozzled in the public bar before her striptease in her own lounge room each Sunday night. It was the highlight of the week for many of the older, unmarried male residents of Little Town, and some of the married ones as well. She spotted the Sarge and came to a staggering halt, beautiful green eyes wide, an interested and calculating smile spreading across her lips.

“Uh-oh,” I whispered to him, smiling. “You’ve been noticed by Foxy.”

“Tessie Fuller,” she slurred, coming up to throw her arm around my shoulder, leaning on me heavily. “Who is this *incredibly* elegant man you’ve been hiding from me?”

I shrank back, overwhelmed by the gin fumes on her breath. “I haven’t been hiding him, Foxy. He only arrived in town yesterday. This is Sergeant Finn Maguire, Des’ replacement. Sarge, this lovely lady,” and I grabbed her arm to stop her falling off her heels as she suddenly stumbled to the right, “is Foxy Dubois.”

She held out her red-nailed hand to the Sarge and he took it reluctantly. He was right to be hesitant, because she gripped his hand and forcefully yanked him towards her, planting her lips onto his and clamping her other hand around the back of his neck to stop him from escaping.

“Foxy!” I reprimanded sharply, prising her fingers off his neck. “Let go of the Sarge now! That’s *very* rude behaviour from you! You ought to be ashamed.”

He pulled back, eyes round with shock, hand to his mouth, his lips smeared with her bright lipstick.

“Welcome to Little Town, Sergeant Finn Maguire, you gorgeous hunk of man,” Foxy trilled, not in the least bit remorseful. She swung her hips in an exaggerated movement as she headed for the door, waving nonchalantly. “Toodle-oo!”

The Sarge stared after her, an indescribable expression on his face.

“I think she likes you,” I laughed.

He scrubbed at his lips furiously. “She had her tongue in my mouth! Where’s the bathroom?”

I pointed him in the right direction and told him I’d be in the lounge bar waiting. Sunday night was one of the bistro’s busy nights so Abe was tending the lounge bar, leaving his staff to barkeep in the rowdier public bar. I stopped to exchange pleasantries with an older couple who lived near Dad and me and before long the Sarge had joined me, more composed, and I introduced him to them as well.

“Hey beautiful! Look at you!” Abe yelled from the bar, then wolf-whistled loudly, making everybody in the entire room look at me. There would be gossip flying all over town tonight. Jake would cop an earful. I waved at Abe and followed the Sarge over to the bar.

“You two have met already, haven’t you?” I asked, remembering that Abe had given the Sarge advice on buying the wine the previous evening. Both men agreed that, yes, they had indeed already met. The Sarge and Abe then proceeded to have a friendly discussion about wine while I idly looked around the room, noting the curious and speculative glances the good citizens of Little Town were discreetly and not-so-discreetly throwing their two police officers. I suddenly wished that Dad was here with us to dispel any silly notions that we were on a date or something. Maybe I shouldn’t have worn this dress? Maybe it was too flirty?

“Tess? Tess?” I turned, realising that the Sarge was calling my name.

“Sorry, I was daydreaming,” I smiled, embarrassed. He carried two glasses of wine over to a low table and we made ourselves comfortable on the plush armchairs.

“I have one rule for tonight,” he said in a serious voice. “No talking shop, okay?”

Crap! He’d just removed the only topic of conversation I felt comfortable with initiating. I wasn’t sure if we had much else in common, but I guess if we did, now was the perfect time to find out. But again, as I struggled to think of something to

say, he came to the rescue.

"Tell me about the fun run and your team," he said, and we talked about that until Abe joined us for a while, taking a break from the bar. Soon enough we had both finished our wine and it was time to eat.

"Do you want to come for another jog with me tomorrow morning, Sarge?" I teased as Abe showed us to a table in the bistro, sure he wouldn't be interested after the flogging I had given him this morning.

"Stop calling me Sarge all the time. We're not at work," he said sharply as he held out my chair for me. I parked my rear end and took the menu that Abe was offering.

"Sorry, it's just habit. Finn." I felt uncomfortable calling him that – I think I preferred Sarge. I waited until he was seated as well. "So Finn's short for Fintan?"

He didn't seem to want to answer me, probably because it was a stupid question. I'd already seen his driver's licence and we both knew it. "Yes."

"Fintan Maguire," I said experimentally. "That sounds Irish."

"It is."

"Do you have Irish ancestry?"

"Yes."

"Have you ever visited Ireland?"

"I was born there."

"You don't sound Irish."

"I left there a long time ago." He obviously didn't like talking about himself and I let it go because I could understand that – I didn't either. He changed the subject.

"I might want to jog with you. What time do you normally head off?"

"On weekdays I set off at six, on weekends at seven. If you want to run with me, meet me at my gate by then. Romi usually runs with me a couple of times a week, otherwise I just run by myself."

We ordered and if I had been worried about it being an awkward evening, then I needn't have bothered, because we barely got a second alone anyway. Romi, who wasn't working that evening, must have heard that the Sarge was around because she came haring downstairs and sat with us while we ate, gazing at him avidly, her chin on her palm. Abe chased her back upstairs to finish her homework, apologising for her bothering us. Then, without any self-awareness of the apparent irony, he joined us at the table himself until Jake arrived. He cheerfully greeted Abe and the Sarge, plonking himself down next to me.

"Wow, Tessie! You are sizzling hot tonight, baby doll! I *love* that dress," he said with undisguised admiration, staring openly at my boobs. He kissed me on the mouth, then on the neck. "Mmm, you smell wonderful too. I've had over fifty phone calls about you dressed to kill, out on a date with your new boss."

"It's not a date," I insisted, glancing over at the Sarge, embarrassed. "Besides, Abe's been chaperoning me the whole time, haven't you, sweetie?" I winked at Abe who looked embarrassed himself that he'd been caught out being so obvious.

Jake laughed and slid his arm around my shoulders. I leaned against him, one hand resting on his thigh. He stole the spoon from my other hand and wolfed down the rest of my dessert.

"This is good," he said to Abe, his mouth full. "Tell the chef I give it two thumbs up." Then he drank my coffee and ate the chocolate mint that came with it, before munching on some of our uneaten breadsticks. The Sarge regarded him silently, his face expressionless.

"What have you been doing today besides watching Des and Maureen move

out?" I asked Jake, reaching up to wipe some crumbs from the side of his mouth. He grabbed my hand in his, brought it to his lips and kissed it, smiling at me.

"I've been hanging with Two Dogs and Harry, babe. Harry was off-roster and Two Dogs took a sickie." His best friends since primary school, the mates he'd gone to the nightclub with on that night we had met again. Two Dogs, so named because when he was a kid he had two identical pet dogs that only he could tell apart, was tubby and balding and worked for the Council in the payroll section. Harry was tall, lanky and freckly and worked at the prison with Jake. As I said before, they were both really nice guys and Jake was a rare creature in the Bycraft family for having friends who weren't also his relatives. "We went for a surf and played a few games of soccer with some of the young ones. Then I had dinner at Mum's. Heard the girls gave you a hard time today. You okay?"

"I'll live," I replied, a little frosty.

"Babe," he remonstrated mildly, running his fingers through my hair. I almost purred with happiness. "Don't be like that. I've got no control over those girls, you know that. Besides, you should see their legs. Bruises coming up everywhere where you whacked them."

"Good. I hope they're in a lot of pain. I'm going to be covered in bruises tomorrow too where they kicked me. And where Rick tried to strangle me."

He leaned in close to me, gently brushed my hair aside and whispered in my ear, "I'll kiss all those bruises better tonight, my beautiful Tessie. Will that help?" He kissed me on the neck again. He held my eyes and I nodded, my pulse suddenly shooting up to the sky.

Abruptly remembering that we were not alone, I changed the subject and told him that the Sarge and I were planning on fixing up Des' old chook house. He frowned.

"No need to bother someone else with that kind of stuff. I'll do it for you. I've got tomorrow off, remember? I'll pick it up in my ute and have it fixed and painted for you by the end of the day. Your dad can help me."

"Thanks Jakey," I smiled up at him lovingly.

"It was no imposition," the Sarge said quietly. "I was glad to help."

"Thanks anyway, Finn," Jake said, friendly but firmly, looking across the table at him. "But it's my job to sort out my girlfriend's problems. That's one of the reasons a woman keeps a man around, wouldn't you agree?"

"Of course," the Sarge replied, impassive. I guess he took the hint – Jake wasn't exactly being subtle.

"Great! I'll come by very early tomorrow morning to get it, if you don't mind. That will give me all day to work on it."

The Sarge said, "Help yourself."

"Thanks." He stood up. "I'd better get this lovely one home. She'll need a good rest after taking on my relatives by herself," Jake said, looking at me with those striking eyes in a way that left me in no doubt that a good rest was the last thing I'd be getting tonight. A thrill shot up my spine.

"I wasn't by myself," I reminded him as I stood up too. "The Sarge was there. He gave Rosie a face full of spray." I laughed at the memory.

"I know. I heard all about it, believe me." He turned to the Sarge. "You better watch your back when she's around, mate. Rosie's gunning for you now."

The Sarge shrugged his broad shoulders. "She can bring it on. I'm ready."

"At least it might take her mind off trying to kill Tessie for a while," he laughed and held out his hand to the Sarge. "Thanks for taking care of my girlfriend tonight,

Finn. I bet she had a great time.”

“I did,” I confirmed. “Thanks so much for the lovely dinner, Sarge. Sorry to run off on you.”

He stood up and shook Jake’s hand. “Don’t worry about it. I should hit the sack early anyway. The removalist van will be at the house first thing tomorrow morning.”

A thought hit me. “Sarge, what are you going to sleep on tonight? You don’t have any furniture. Maybe you should come back to my house? At least there’s a bed for you there.”

He smiled at me and it stayed on his lips a few seconds longer than normal. Jake was squeezing my shoulder tightly in a silent scream of despair, seeing his chance of some good loving evaporating for the second night in a row.

“I have a blow-up mattress and a sleeping bag to do me. I’ll be right. Thanks for the offer though, Tess. I appreciate it,” he said finally, and Jake relaxed his iron grip on my shoulder. Jake shook hands with Abe and I gave Abe a quick peck on the cheek for looking after me and hand-in-hand we left the pub for the drive back to my place in his ute.

Dad and his mates were still going strong when we arrived home, loudly swapping fishing stories so full of bullshit I could have fertilised my herb garden for a year with them. After a quick hello to them and a warning to Dad about not staying up too late that he brushed off scornfully, Jake and I retired to my bedroom for the night. And from the moment I shut the door and turned to face him until we both finally fell asleep hours later – naked, entwined in each other’s arms, utterly exhausted, our bodies pulsing with over-satiation – every thought about anything except him and me was forcefully driven out of my mind with the sheer pleasure of his wonderful lovemaking.

Chapter 10

I slept heavily and only woke up when Jake began stroking my breasts and kissing my neck. I rolled over to face him and kissed him sleepily. He kissed me back, his tongue snaking its way into my mouth. I reached down to find him as hard as a steel rod again.

“Didn’t I wear that out last night?” I teased as I kissed his shoulder.

“Yes, you did,” he murmured, his mouth busy with my breasts. “But this is a new one. I always bring a couple with me when I stay over at your place because I know how greedy you are.”

I giggled and let him have his wicked way with me once more. Finished, we lay on our backs, clasping hands, panting.

He sat up to peer down sadly at his deflating self. “Oh no, look. You’ve broken another one.”

I giggled again and hit him with my pillow. He hit me back with his pillow and we wrestled on the bed together for a while, laughing. He soon overpowered me and I was trapped underneath him as he sat on my legs, holding my arms down.

“I’ll only let you go if you answer three questions,” he said, trying to keep his face serious.

“Okay,” I agreed, smiling with relaxed satisfaction.

“First question: who is the best-looking man you’ve ever met?”

My smile widened. “You, Jakey.”

“Correct answer. You’re ready to move on to the second question. Who is the

best lover you've ever had in your whole life?"

I giggled. "You again, Jakey. Hands down. Or pants down, maybe."

He laughed and leaned down to kiss me slowly. "Another correct answer. What a clever girl you are! Now you're ready to move on to the third and final question. Are you ready?"

"Yes," I said, trying to look solemn, but failing miserably.

"Who is the man you love more than anybody?"

"That's an easy one," I smiled. "Dad."

He tickled me pitilessly until I squealed for mercy. "That's not right. Try again."

"What was the question again?" I laughed.

"Who is the man you love more than anybody?"

"Oh, I know. That really cute guy in that TV show about the doctors . . . you know, what's-his-name. I'm completely in love him."

"That's not the right answer either!" he thundered and I had to suffer through another tickling, giggling uncontrollably and nearly squirming myself off the bed. "I'm going to ask you one more time. Who is the man you love more than anybody?"

"Is it you, Jakey?" I laughed. He leaned down so that our noses were touching.

"I don't know, Tessie darling. Is it me?" he asked, serious all of a sudden.

"Yes, it's you, you goose," I said and kissed the tip of his nose. He rolled off me and lay back next to me on the bed, smirking smugly.

I leaned on his smooth, muscular chest and traced around the intricate phoenix tattoo that spread across his chest and stomach with my finger. He'd had that done just before we met up again a couple of years ago. I always hoped it symbolised his deep desire to rid himself of his Bycraft heritage, rising up to leave it permanently behind in a new life. But maybe that was wishful thinking on my part because he'd professed ignorance of its mythological importance, only ever admitting to me that he'd liked the design when he'd seen it in the tattooist's artbook.

His one other tattoo was the word 'LIBERTY' inked across his shoulder blades in gothic script. He'd had that done straight after he'd walked out on his wife for good and you sure didn't need to be a psychologist to work that one out. When I'd first seen it, he'd told me with a crooked self-deprecating smile that the tattooist had suggested the word, tactfully noting that the word he'd originally wanted – 'FREE' – might indicate to the world that he was a cheap root. I'd laughed at his story, but I'd also felt deep sadness inside – this wasn't a man who wanted to be tied down again anytime soon. Especially as he'd gone to the bother of permanently marking his skin with his philosophy.

"I'm hurting everywhere because of your awful relatives," I complained, sitting up in pain at a twinge in my side.

"Poor baby. Show Dr Jakey." I pointed out where my greatest hurtings were, and he confirmed that I was bruising up nicely over my torso. He took the time to kiss them all better. "You're such a tough cookie, aren't you, my little Tessie?" he sympathised proudly and we kissed lazily for a while before separating. I lay on my back, my hands behind my head, one leg thrown carelessly over his and yawned.

"You weren't very subtle with the Sarge last night, were you? He was only trying to help."

"I don't want him getting any ideas about you. It must be frustrating for him to come here and find that he'll be working with such a smart and beautiful woman, only to learn that she's already taken." He leaned over to kiss me. "And taken by

someone who loves her madly and thinks that she's the best thing that ever happened to him and will never let her go."

"That's so sweet, but you're on the wrong track completely. He thinks I'm a yokel," and I told him about the Sarge's surprise at my proficiency on the computer.

"That was a stupid thing for him to say. Everybody uses computers these days." He paused a beat. "Even yokels like you," jumping out of bed before I could thump him.

He always lorded over me that he'd been born in the city, not Little Town, his mum going into early labour with him while she was visiting her husband in the maximum-security city jail. Consequently, Jake was the only Bycraft not born in Little Town and I'd sometimes wondered if that little accident of birth was what made him so different to everybody else in his family.

As I sat up yawning again, noting it was time to get ready for my run, I saw a shadow at my window. Jake noticed the line of my glance and saw the shadow too. He stalked over to the window angrily and pulled the blind up. There was the unmistakable sound of someone pushing through the foliage, their feet crunching on the gravel I'd deliberately laid under every window in our house so I could hear anyone trying to break in.

"*Piss off, Denny!* I won't tell you again to stop looking through Tessie's window! I'm going to thump the Christ out of you if I catch you again," he shouted out the window as his younger brother made his hurried escape down the side of my house. "Jesus, that shits me!" he fumed. "How many fucking times do I have to tell him?"

"Do you think he saw anything?" I asked, disconcerted, arms across my breasts, feeling vulnerable. I didn't want anyone, let alone a Bycraft, watching Jake and me during our private time together. He turned to me and his anger disappeared. He came over and put his arms around me, drawing me tightly to him.

"No," he said soothingly, stroking my hair. "The blind was down. I'm pretty sure he only got there too. He might have heard us talking. That's all."

"I wish your family would leave me alone," I mumbled into his shoulder.

"We don't seem to be able to," he said with a sad smile. "There's just something about you that gets all our blood boiling, one way or another, for good or bad." And he touched his lips on mine, and we kissed slowly for a long time until I felt better about everything.

Needing oxygen, I pushed him away. "I'm going for a jog. Do you want to come?"

"Nah, I might go around to Finn's place and collect the coop. Now I'm awake, I might as well make an early start on it."

"Okay, I'll make you some breakfast when I get back from my run." I turned to start gathering my running gear.

"Tessie," he said, serious again.

I looked up, "Hmm?"

"Take your spray or even your gun with you today."

"I can't run with that stuff on!" I scoffed. "I'm not scared of Denny. He's never tried to hurt me before. And I'll have my knife with me as usual."

"At least take your mobile. Please Tessie."

I sighed and humoured him. "I always do, honey-boy. There's no need for you to worry. Romi will probably join me and the Sarge said he might too."

"What?" He was immediately riled. "I'm getting sick of that man already. It's bad enough that Abe's always sniffing around you. I don't want another man doing

the same,” he complained, pulling on his jeans.

“Don’t be stupid, Jake. That’s a horrible expression. He’s not ‘sniffing’ around me. He’s just coming for a jog,” I said irritably, twisting myself into my sports bra.

Anger rising, he said, “Don’t you call me stupid.” He was very insecure about what people thought of his intelligence, and I guess that people did tend to dismiss him because of his great beauty and because he was a Bycraft. It was a sore point with him that I’d been to university and he had dropped out of high school after grade ten to start a carpentry apprenticeship that he’d never finished. “And don’t you get too friendly with him, Tess,” he warned.

“Don’t you start telling me who I can and can’t be friends with, Jacob Bycraft,” I retorted, instantly in fine fettle.

“Oh, you’re going to be like that, are you?” he snapped.

“Yes, I am,” I snapped right back at him.

“Well, maybe you can fix the fucking chicken coop yourself then.”

“All right, I will. I don’t need your help,” I said defiantly, and to twist the knife some more I added, “I’ll ask the Sarge to help me instead.”

He glared at me, hurt by my comment, threw on his t-shirt and stalked out of the bedroom and the house, slamming the front door behind him. The sound of his ute revving up broke the morning peace and he roared off down the driveway.

Men! I thought angrily as I did up my shoelaces. After a quick visit to the bathroom and a drink of juice, I jogged slowly down to my gate and spent the next few minutes stretching while I waited. I had a lot of pain from my bruising and didn’t think that the jog was going to be pleasant. I watched as the Sarge’s car came driving down the long straight road, but I could see that he wasn’t alone. Romi was sitting in the front seat, a huge, ecstatically happy smile on her face. If it had been any wider, her head probably would have split in two.

He turned into my property and parked off the main driveway on the patchy, neglected lawn. Romi rushed over to me, floating on air. “My bike got a flat tyre and I thought I’d have to push it all the way to your place and then Finn came along like a white knight and rescued me and gave me a lift here and the BMW is so nice and did you know that the seats are real leather and he listens to some really cool music and we passed Jakey on the way and he looked really angry when he saw us and he didn’t even wave back at me and . . .” She finally paused for a breath, sucking in some much needed oxygen.

“That’s nice,” I said dismissively, in a stropmy mood. “You ready to go?” I greeted the Sarge tersely, unfairly feeling that he was to blame for my fight with Jake. I jogged off straight away back towards the intersection for Beach Road.

Normally I was a sociable jogger, happy to chat or more typically merely listen to the endless stream of self-absorbed teenage consciousness that issued from Romi’s mouth. This morning though, I fervently wished that I was by myself so I jogged harder than the other two, pulling ahead, leaving the poor Sarge to cop the whole earful of Romi’s starry-eyed chatter. She was a beautiful girl and I loved her like a little sister, but she was an idealist with overly romantic views of life and people. She thought Jake and I were Romeo and Juliet. And this morning I could have cheerfully strangled her.

Evidently the Sarge thought so too because after a while with her, he also accelerated. Though I tried to run even faster to get away from him, I was aching everywhere from the bruising and was suffering a great deal of pain to run at all, let alone at the rate I was pounding the street. He finally caught up to me.

“How are you feeling today?” he panted.

"I'll live," I said, trying to speed up again, but I couldn't. Romi, fuelled by her teenage crush, had caught up to the both of us and none of us talked for a while because I was setting such a cracking pace.

The beach part was tough and I ran on the soft sand even more than usual to the groans and complaints of the others. I ignored them both and bent on pushing all my emotional angst into physical pain, I drove myself to breaking point. The others didn't have to follow me. I wasn't making them.

When we returned to my house, we were all exhausted.

"Tessie, you're like a demon today. What's the matter with you?" asked Romi thoughtlessly.

"I didn't force you to come with me!" I turned on her. She flinched at my unexpected anger, which made me feel like a monster. I rubbed my face with my hands, walked over to her and hugged her tightly. "Sorry sweetie, I didn't mean to yell at you. I had a fight with Jake this morning," I whispered in her ear, girl-to-girl, no one else to know.

"Oh Tessie, you two will work it out. What did you fight about?" she exclaimed in a very loud voice which the Sarge was sure to hear. Now I wanted to strangle her even more. She obviously didn't understand the concept of girl-to-girl. I was going to have to have another long discussion with her. Abe was an admirable guardian, but he was nowhere near a mother figure.

But instead I plastered on my bright face and offered to make them breakfast. They both accepted and on automatic, I went to the kitchen to make a fruit salad and piles of toast. I had run out of eggs, which made me think of my little chooks. Which made me think of the chicken coop. Which made me think of Jake again.

I wasn't sure if he was coming back but planned on making enough for him anyway. Romi went off for her shower while the Sarge offered to help in the kitchen. I set him to chopping fruit while I thought about the angry words Jake and I had exchanged. I couldn't tell you if the Sarge spoke to me once then because I was totally lost in my own thoughts. Jake and I didn't fight much and it wasn't like him to get angry so easily. Usually he was the calm, easy-going one of the two of us. I just couldn't work out what had made him so heated so quickly. I felt sick in my stomach with emotion and wasn't sure if I could even eat.

When I heard Jake's ute driving up around the back and his familiar steps walking up the ramp to the kitchen door, I abandoned my preparations, flinging my knife carelessly on the bench and ran to the back door to throw it open. He stopped in the middle of the ramp and I stood at the door. He smiled up at me.

"Tessie."

I released my held breath and closing the door behind me, met him on the ramp where I hugged him fiercely. "I didn't know if you were coming back, honey-boy."

He pulled away and looked at me. "Of course I came back. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, babe. You were right, I was being stupid. Did you have a good run?"

"I worked Romi and the Sarge like slaves. They both hate me now."

"That's my girl." He gave me a mischievous smile. "Guess what I've got in the back of my ute?"

"The chook house!"

"Just as I promised. And by the time you get home tonight, it will be ready for your girls to move in."

"It has to be the best chicken run in the whole of Little Town, Jakey. And Big Town too," I insisted.

He sighed patiently. "Yes Tessie. I'll make sure. You know how much I love Miss Chooky."

"That's what I'm worried about. If I left it to you to find the perfect accommodation for her, she would end up in a covered pot simmering on the stove with some onions and carrots." He smiled, but didn't deny it. I relented. "Okay then, come for breakfast. You must be hungry."

"Not yet," he said and pulled me off the ramp, jamming me up against the wall of the house and kissing me hard. We were there for a while and eventually I mustered up the willpower to push him away. "I love you, Tessie," he said seriously, his amber eyes burning into my gray ones.

"I love you too, babe," I said lightly, kissing him on the nose and smiling. "I'm supposed to be making breakfast now." I rushed back to the kitchen to find the fruit salad beautifully chopped and assembled in a bowl in the fridge and the bread burnt to charred squares sitting in the toaster. "Sorry everyone," I said sheepishly and threw the charcoal in the bin, put more bread in the toaster, forced Romi to make tea and coffee and asked a freshly woken and badly hungover Dad to get out the butter and spreads.

"Lots of coffee for Dad please, Romi," I teased, kissing him on his forehead.

"Those old bastards wouldn't go home last night," he complained, wincing in the morning light. "They kept making me have another drink, then another and another."

Amused, I asked, "Oh, so they forced you to drink too much, huh?" He was adamant that they had and that without their evil presence he would have retired the previous evening at a virtuously early hour, like the saintly creature that he was. I didn't bother to smother my disrespectful snort.

Jake gobbled his breakfast, in danger of choking, not speaking to anyone, wanting to get started on the coop straight away. He asked Dad if he wanted to help, slightly hesitant. Their relationship still remained somewhat tentative, though they were growing closer every month. Although my father despised the Bycrafts, and with good cause, he had admitted to me on more than one occasion that he liked Jake personally and acknowledged that he was a good man and a loving boyfriend who made me very happy. And really, there couldn't be a person on earth who wouldn't grow to love Jake the more they knew him – he was just that kind of guy.

Dad agreed willingly. "Sure, Jakey. It might help take my mind off my pounding head." Jake beamed at him with happiness.

"Poor Dad," I sympathised and fetched a couple of paracetamol tablets for him to take with his coffee. We both knew that he shouldn't be overindulging at this stage of his cancer, but it was fatal and I often thought, *what the hell, let the poor guy have some fun while he still could.*

The Sarge had been quiet all morning and took his leave then, politely offering to give Romi and her bike a lift home, an offer that of course she happily accepted. He turned to me and raised his eyebrows in question, checking if that was okay with me, and I nodded to him in agreement. I was sure Abe wouldn't mind now that he'd spent some time with the Sarge and knew him a bit better. Personally, I had no problem with him giving Romi a lift, instinctively trusting him for some reason that I couldn't understand because I usually found it took me a long time to start trusting people. I promised to drive the patrol car to the station, then quickly cleared up and jumped in the shower, groaning with dismay when I saw the purplish marks appearing over my torso. I hoped I would be healed by the time of the fun run.

Later, dressed in my uniform and ready to head off to work, I popped out the

back to say goodbye to the two busy men. I stopped for a minute to watch them first, taking pleasure in witnessing their camaraderie and mutual respect as they worked together. Jake had never had a decent father figure in his life. I think he enjoyed time spent with Dad and was always deferential and helpful. In return, Dad had a taste of what it would have been like to have a son. He took great joy in instructing and guiding him, Jake respecting his life experience and carefully soaking up all his advice. Sometimes I thought I sensed a deep hunger in Jake for some kind of a mentor and worried in my less self-confident moments if he valued Dad's company and opinion more than mine. Dad was possibly the first adult male in Little Town who had engaged him for any length of time in conversation without instinctively telling him to clear off simply because he was a Bycraft.

"I'm going to work now, guys. Have fun today," I smiled, kissing Jake on the lips. "And don't you work too hard, Dad." I kissed him on the forehead and with a last wave, headed off to work.

Chapter 11

After parking the patrol car, I slipped around the back of the station to the lockup to feed and water my chooks. I had ten eggs, including the ones I'd set aside from the previous day and carried them carefully up to the police house. It was a relief to walk up the stairs without having to worry about Mr Sparkles' lustful attention.

I knocked on the door and waited. The Sarge opened the door, surprised to see me again so soon, his hair still damp from his shower. He wasn't in uniform, but wearing another expensive looking t-shirt and jeans.

"I brought you a house-warming present, Sarge," I said, offering him the eggs. "Have you eaten many fresh-laid eggs?"

"Only the ones you've cooked for me," he admitted.

"They're so much tastier than the store-bought ones, aren't they?"

He regarded me with his dark blue eyes. "Thanks Tess. That's really nice of you, especially considering that I threatened to eat your chickens."

"I knew you were just bluffing," I lied.

"Was I? Are you sure? I do like chicken."

"Yes," I said, less certainly. "Anyway, I hope you enjoy them."

"I'll only take a couple. There're too many for me. Take the rest of them home for your father."

"Okay," I agreed without arguing and pushed past him without being invited, leaving the five freshest eggs for him on the bench in the bare kitchen. With reprehensible nosiness, I looked in each room of the empty house as I departed, noting his sleeping bag on the floor of the main bedroom and his toiletries in the bathroom. "It's so weird seeing the house without Des and Maureen's furniture and all of her Jesus things everywhere. What time are the removalists coming?"

As I spoke we both heard the rumble of a big truck negotiating its way up the drive.

"Now?" he smiled briefly and headed out to supervise and direct.

I left him to it and went to open up the station. I usually tried to be in the office on Monday mornings to deal with things that had to be done in person, such as the few locals out on parole who had to report in on a weekly basis. Then there were people who needed various documents certified and the old-fashioned kind of folk who wanted to submit applications for things such as gun licences in person, either

not trusting or not owning computers.

And then there was Young Kenny. I don't know how old Young Kenny actually was, but his wrinkled face, almost toothless mouth and shock of white hair made him look positively prehistoric. His long-dead father had been known as Old Kenny so he had naturally been known as Young Kenny his entire life. He was the town's only homeless person. He didn't need to be homeless because his niece and her husband lived in a comfortable house on Pine Street, near Miss Greville, and were more than willing to accommodate him, but he chose to be homeless for whatever reason.

Every Monday he would come to the station and sit in the counter area for the morning until I closed up. I always made him a few cups of tea and gave him three plain sugared biscuits at morning tea time. I'd tried to give him different biscuits a few times, even some chocolate biscuits once, but he had left them on his plate untouched and shot me a reproachful glance when he shuffled away, making me feel bad for the rest of the week. So I always made sure I had his favourite kind on hand – Arnott's Nice biscuits. I'd substituted home-brand sugared biscuits a few times when I was totally skint and he'd eaten them politely, but given me a sorrowful look as he left.

He never wanted anything and rarely spoke to me, but seemed content to sit on the bench for the morning, watching the comings and goings of the townsfolk. He never came any other day, but was there without fail every Monday. I didn't mind and it was now at the point where I would have missed him and worried about him if he didn't turn up one Monday morning. He was quiet and didn't disturb anyone so there was no harm to him at all.

His only problem was that he was rather stinky. He didn't seem to bathe much, being homeless, and was always wearing the same clothes – muddy brown pants shiny at the knees, a dirty green and white plaid shirt and a disreputable and filthy grey overcoat that he wore constantly, even during the worst heat of summer. I usually had to open all the doors and windows of the station to air it out after he'd been visiting for the morning. When I say that, I mean the windows that would actually open of course, which ruled out about half of them straight away.

I had barely opened the station door when Young Kenny came shuffling up the ramp, his odour preceding him.

"Morning, Young Kenny," I said cheerfully. "It's a lovely day today, isn't it? Although I reckon it's going to get real hot in an hour or so."

He nodded at me, not making eye contact, and shuffled inside to settle himself comfortably on the wooden bench seat. I went behind the counter, locking the hatch behind me, and into the back room where I filled up the kettle and flicked it on. While the water was boiling I fired up the ancient computer sitting on the Sarge's desk, knowing that it would take at least fifteen minutes to load. At least his still worked though – mine had given up the ghost a while ago. I didn't know anyone who could fix it and we had no budget to buy a new one for me.

I'd have to do something humiliating like go to the primary school or the Council and ask if they had any old ones they were getting rid of that they could donate. The two computers we were currently blessed with had come from the prison, courtesy of Jake. They had been used by the prisoners for study and recreation but had been replaced with brand new shiny computers. Jake had saved them from the scrapheap for me to use, and no, the irony of that whole situation was not lost on me.

The kettle announced it was finished boiling the water with a loud ting so I

made Young Kenny and me a cup of tea each and thought about what task I should start with this morning. The mountain of paperwork on my desk was an obvious choice, but I rejected it. That was a job that needed a good quiet day to sort through, and I'd never had such a day the whole time I'd been working in Little Town.

I splashed milk into the mugs, jiggled and discarded the tea bags and carried Young Kenny's tea out for him. I had bought him his own mug after Des had refused to drink out of any of the mugs that Young Kenny had used, complaining that he could taste Young Kenny in his tea afterwards. So the next time I was in Big Town I managed to find a brown mug that had *Kenny* written on it in gold letters. The glorious toothless smile that Young Kenny had given me when he saw it made me glad that I'd gone to the trouble.

This was the first cup of tea that I made him, but I also made him another one around ten-thirty or so when I gave him the biscuits. I put the mug on the counter and left it there for him, returning back to the computer. Still loading. Sighing, I rifled through the papers and was about to make a reluctant start on at least sorting them into action piles, when the counter bell rang.

Saved by the bell, I thought gratefully and went out to find one of my regular reportees patiently waiting.

"Morning, Dave," I said.

"Morning, Officer Tess," he said, as I reached under the counter to pull out the tattered ancient attendance book. I turned to the current page and wrote the date, time and Dave's name down and turned it around for him to sign.

"Been behaving yourself since last week?"

"Yes, Officer Tess. I had a real quiet week. Mum's been a bit crook."

"Aw, that's no good. What's the matter with her?"

"Just her angina playing up on her again."

I signed the book as well and jotted down a brief comment about his behaviour during the week. Of course I didn't take his word for it that he'd been behaving, but I hadn't heard anything to the contrary, and the townsfolk did tend to keep their eye on the parolees and the ones on probation like Dave. Someone would have told me if he'd done anything out of the ordinary. Not that Dave ever did.

He was a quiet strawberry farmer who lived with his elderly mother on a property down south near the mental health clinic. He'd been caught one afternoon by a parent with his pants down and his wanger out in the park next to the primary school. I'd immediately taken him into custody due to the seriousness of the situation and for his own safety, considering the mob of angry parents gathered who would have happily lynched him on the spot, given half the chance.

He was clearly drunk and in a tearful interview I had with him back at the station, told me that he'd been drinking in The Flying Pigs all afternoon because it was his birthday. He was walking across the park to go to his friend's place where he was planning on crashing for the evening, when he'd been struck by a sudden need to pee. He had just finished his business behind a tree when he'd been tackled to the ground by the vigilant mother who'd spotted his wanger from one hundred metres away.

I believed him because you couldn't fake the level of mortification he was showing at people thinking he was some kind of kiddie pervert. He'd been charged with indecent exposure and had gone to court in Big Town, dying a thousand deaths when the local news team showed up to film his poor elderly mother entering the courthouse on the day of his hearing. Obviously the judge had believed his story too, taking into account his guilty plea and his spotless record and the testimonials

from some of the leading citizens in Little Town, including Abe. He'd slapped a twelve-month probation period on Dave, with the requirement that he report in to the local police every week. Dave hadn't missed a week and would be finished his probation in a few months. Unfortunately though, his reputation might never recover.

"Okay then, Dave. We're all done here today. Give your mother my best wishes and I hope she's feeling better soon."

"Thanks, Officer Tess. And give my regards to your dad. See you next week. Bye, Young Kenny." Young Kenny nodded farewell.

I replaced the attendance book under the counter. People like Dave made my life easy. I wished there were more like him, but unfortunately the other three current reportees we had were all on parole and were all Bycrafts. They were much more casual about turning up, even though it had a detrimental effect on them if they didn't. In fact, I was meant to go arrest them if they failed to show. I couldn't count the number of times I'd had to ring them or go to their houses to remind them to attend. Of course none of them ever thanked me for my effort and I really don't know why I bothered. It was probably some deep-seated need to somehow make them a better family for Jake's sake.

I went back to the computer. It was still loading. Bloody hell! At this rate it would be midnight before I could start writing my reports on Martin and Miss G. The phone rang. It was a wrong number, the person on the other end hurriedly hanging up when I helpfully told them they'd reached the Mount Big Town police station. By some quirk of fate we had the same phone number, except for two transposed digits, as an illegal brothel in Big Town. We were forever receiving phone calls for them and it really freaked people out to ring a brothel and reach a police station instead. I guess the reverse applied as well and they probably received a few of our phone calls too.

I looked around me again and gave a huge sigh. There was nothing for it – I was going to have to tackle the paperwork. The bell went again, but just then the log in screen for the computer came up.

"I'll be there in a sec," I yelled out unprofessionally and took the time to log into the computer. That authentication process always took a good five minutes and I wanted to be ready to start working when I'd sorted out my new customer.

I went out to find Rick Bycraft and Dorrie Lebutt. She was sitting on the counter, legs spread wide; he was standing between them and she had her legs wrapped around him. They had their tongues down each other's throats and he was dry-humping her, his hand up her top. They were oblivious to Young Kenny who was watching them with wide-eyed interest.

"Yuck! Save it for the bedroom, you two," I said in disgust. "And get your butt off my counter, now."

They reluctantly separated and Dorrie sullenly slid off the counter, regarding me with cold, hard eyes. We'd been good friends at school once but then she'd started sleeping with Denny Bycraft and had changed before my eyes, buying into the Bycraft hatred of me and shunning me. After a while, she became one of my biggest tormentors herself. Since then she'd hung around the fringes of the Bycraft clan, sleeping with all the Bycraft men she could, including my Jake and even Red, her own sister Sharnee's boyfriend. She'd even had a kid with him a couple of years ago, which understandably had strained the relationship between the two sisters for a while.

Rick was one of my reportees, out on parole for armed robbery. He and his

cousin Greg had held up a 7-Eleven in Big Town after a massive drinking session one afternoon, armed with a crowbar and a shifting spanner. They were arrested immediately, Rick stupidly and drunkenly crashing his car into a low brick fence a mere hundred metres away trying to escape. Their grand haul was five family-size fruit and nut chocolate bars, two packets of salt and vinegar chips and the princely sum of \$146.75. It had cost Rick six times as much as that to repair his car. All of us cops had laughed our arses off about that for weeks afterwards.

Greg was let off with community service as it was his first offence (well, the first one he'd been caught for anyway), but Rick had already been on parole at the time for a botched bottle-shop holdup and was sentenced to one year's jail. He had only been released on parole again a month ago.

I hauled out the attendance book and wrote the details in quickly, turning it around to get him to provide his illegible scrawled signature. I turned it around and countersigned it.

"I'm going to write in here that you assaulted me yesterday," I said steadily, looking up at him.

"Bitch."

"If you don't want me to also write that you've used offensive language, then you best be keeping your mouth shut," I suggested coldly.

"Slut," said Dorrie, taking up the slack.

"God, looks who's talking," I shot back. "Is there anyone in town you haven't slept with?"

"Piglet whore," she continued, regarding me with hatred.

"You keep that up and I'll be forced to tell everyone what I saw in Big Town yesterday," I threatened.

She stared at me, totally still, and paled. She grabbed Rick's hand and pulled him towards the door. Luckily for her, he was too thick to pick up on anything less subtle than a sledgehammer blow to the head. "Let's go, Rick. It stinks in here of bacon and old man piss."

Young Kenny looked up at that, offended.

I put the book back in its place and was just about to go back to the computer when there was a ruckus from the carpark. I looked out the window to see Rick and Dorrie running headlong into Stacey Felhorn who had just arrived in her twenty-year-old clapped-out burnt orange Toyota.

Stacey flew out of her car to confront Dorrie and there was an immediate heated exchange of words. A few choice expressions flew around, turning the air blue. To his credit, Rick tried to drag Dorrie away into her old clunker, but she was having none of that. She was right in Stacey's face, taunting her about the hot sex Rick and her were having and how Rick had complained to her that sleeping with Stacey was like screwing a corpse. Stacey responded with a stream of obscenities and pushed Dorrie in the chest. Then it turned into a free-for-all.

I opened and closed the counter hatch and ran outside, down the steps, my baton out ready for action.

"Hey! You are not doing this in my carpark!" I shouted. "You can piss off somewhere else to have your scrag-fight."

I forcefully pushed myself into the middle of the two fighting women and copped a scratch on the cheek from Stacey's inch-long talons and a bite on the shoulder from Dorrie's bared teeth.

"Rick! Sort your woman out or I'll arrest her," I shouted, appealing to the male Bycraft pride (totally delusional) in being able to control their women. He shot me a

look of pure hatred, but that trigger never failed to hit the right button with a Bycraft man and he grabbed Dorrie by her arm and dragged her backwards. She resisted him all the way, kicking, punching and screaming.

I had Stacey in front of me, and with my palm out and baton up, I ordered her to calm down immediately. To my surprise she did, and then starting crying, collapsing against the bonnet of her car.

"I *loved* you, Rick. I gave my whole heart to you. You told me we were going to be together forever. I had your name tattooed on my *tit*, for fuck's sake!" she sobbed, eyes and nose running, mascara smeared all over her cheeks.

Oh God, I thought wearily. *What was worse – violence or hysteria?*

"Well, that's just too bad," taunted Dorrie, "because he's never loved you. He was only using you so he had somewhere to stay. He loves me! We've been fucking each other for months."

All that just prompted another round of wailing from Stacey. I'd had enough of the whole soap opera. "Rick and Dorrie, I suggest you get in your car and get out of here now."

Stacey was a right mess by then. She reached into her oversized fake leather handbag for a tissue, but instead she pulled out a little gun and waved it around in a dangerously careless way. It probably wasn't loaded, I reasoned to myself, but when Dorrie made a run for it to her car, Stacey squeezed the trigger. Fortunately she aimed widely, the bullet smashing into the side of Dorrie's car, leaving a hole in the metal. Dorrie stopped in her tracks, face white with fear.

"Stacey, you are *not* going to fire that weapon again! What you're going to do is place it gently on the ground, turn around and put your hands behind your neck. Do you understand me?" I directed in a loud, clear voice.

She turned to me and the gun followed that movement, so it was now aimed in my direction.

"*Don't point that gun at me!*" I shouted at her. Upset, she turned back to Dorrie, who was cowering against Rick. And he was looking as though he wished he was somewhere else. Anywhere.

Surreptitiously, I replaced my baton and removed my own gun from its holster. *Just perfect for a Monday morning*, I thought sourly, *a showdown in the carpark*. Stacey was floundering, with no clue about what to do next, having escalated matters to this alarming situation without any forethought or plan.

"Put the gun down, Stacey, before anything happens. You don't want me to arrest you. Think about your kids." I covered her with my Glock. "Who's going to look after them if you're in jail?"

She wavered and was on the brink of obeying, when Dorrie opened her big obnoxious mouth again.

"She hasn't got the balls to shoot anyone," she mocked.

"Dorrie! Shut your mouth right now!" I yelled at her, over my shoulder. Stacey straightened up and held her gun up again. She had a small tussle in her mind over who to shoot – *Rick or Dorrie? Rick or Dorrie?* – before deciding on Dorrie. I couldn't fault her logic. I wanted to shoot Dorrie too.

She was concentrating hard on what she was doing and wasn't paying any attention to me, so without any warning, I rushed her and knocked her flying just at the moment that she pulled the trigger. The bullet flew wild and smashed through the police station window, narrowly missing Young Kenny who was peering out.

I sat on Stacey's legs, cuffed her hands behind her and retrieved her weapon. The Sarge and the removalists were on the veranda of his house, watching with

concern. I waved above my head to let him know that it was okay and everything was under control.

I hauled Stacey to her feet and pushed her towards the station. She could cool down in there for a while. Dorrie revved her car and gravel sprayed up everywhere as she quickly reversed. *Good*, I thought as I marched Stacey to the stairs. I was glad they were finally taking my advice and leaving.

I heard the men shouting at me from the veranda of the police house, saw the Sarge sprinting down the stairs and spun around to see Dorrie's car heading straight for us. I just had time to push Stacey to the side and jump aside myself, before the front of the car clipped me on my right hip, sending me flying, sprawling into the gravel. Dorrie quickly reversed all the way out of the carpark through the gates to the road and sped off.

Stacey struggled to her feet and made a run for it. The Sarge detoured from me to bring her down, firmly holding on to the cuffs. The two removalists crouched down next to me. I was winded and shocked, and my body just flat-out refused to move. My hip was screaming with pain, and I fervently hoped it was okay, because I had that bloody fun run coming up.

Cautiously, carefully, I pushed myself up to my hands and knees and, with the help of the two burly men, managed to get to my feet, testing everything to make sure it all still worked.

"She deliberately tried to run you over!" exclaimed one of the men in disbelief. "I've never seen anything like it in my life." The other man shook his head in stunned agreement.

"Happens all the time," I said casually, wincing as I took a few steps. "They usually miss me though." I looked up at the window to see Young Kenny still watching and turned to the three shocked men. "I really need a cup of tea."

Chapter 12

I limped towards the station, shaking the gravel out of my uniform and dusting myself down. The Sarge followed, pushing Stacey in front of him. I glanced up at the police house.

"Sarge, there're some Bycraft boys trying to steal your furniture."

The three men raised their heads to see two young Bycrafts – Chad and Mikey by the looks of them – jumping down from the removalist truck, carrying a side table between them.

The Sarge stared in disbelief. "Oh, for fuck's sake! We've only been gone a minute." He bellowed in his loud voice, "Hey, you boys, put that down. Now!" The two removalists ran towards the truck, shouting at the boys who dropped the table carelessly and legged it down the driveway.

Walking up the stairs was painful and I winced all the way, clinging onto the handrail for extra support. Inside the station, the Sarge was surprised by Young Kenny's presence, his nose twitching as he caught his unpleasant odour.

"What are we going to do with her?" he asked, pushing Stacey through the open counter hatch.

"I'm going to make her a cup of tea, she's going to sit here quietly until she's calm and then I'm going to let her go."

"Thank you, Officer Tess," she said, almost inaudible. I didn't mind Stacey – she wasn't a bad person and was much nicer to me than most of the other women who hung around the Bycrafts. It wasn't her fault that she had trusted a Bycraft with

her heart.

"I'm confiscating your gun though. I bet you don't even have a licence for it."

She shook her hanging head, staring woefully at the floor.

"You could have killed someone today, Stacey," I lectured. "You only just missed poor Young Kenny. How would you have felt if you killed him?"

She cried gently, fat tears plopping onto her jeans. I turned to the Sarge. "You can uncuff her, Sarge. She's not going to do anything stupid."

I filled up the kettle and flipped it on, then went to the small safe and placed Stacey's gun inside. I wrote her a receipt for it that she shoved indifferently into her handbag while rummaging for a tissue. Silently I handed her the box that was sitting on top of the filing cabinets. While she blew her nose noisily, I limped out to the counter to fetch Young Kenny's mug, only to find him sitting on the bench in forlorn tears, the shattered remains of his mug carefully collected and neatly placed on the counter.

"Aw, Young Kenny," I sympathised. "You dropped your mug?" The bullet had probably frightened him.

He shook his head and pointed to the little bullet-sized hole in the window.

"The bullet smashed it?"

He nodded, tears streaming down his face. I handed him some tissues from the box I kept out the front and patted him on the shoulder.

"I'll just have to buy you a new one, okay?"

He nodded again. I chucked the pieces in the bin and limped back to make some tea.

"You broke Young Kenny's special mug with that stray bullet, Stacey. He's out there crying about it." That only made her cry even more. I stuck the knife in deeper. "I don't know if I'm going to be able to find a replacement for it either."

"Sorry, Officer Tess," she sobbed.

I twisted the knife hard. "Don't say sorry to me. You better say it to Young Kenny instead. He's never hurt anybody in his life and now the only thing he had of his own is smashed because of you." She stumbled out to the counter, sobbing, to apologise to the old man.

"You need a doctor. Who do you go to?" asked the Sarge.

"When I need to, I see a doctor in Big Town and she doesn't do house-calls. There's nobody here in town."

"Let me look at your hip then."

I glanced at him with sardonic amusement. "Excuse me, Sergeant Maguire, but did you just ask your junior officer to drop her trousers in front of you? Because she's not going to."

He reddened. "I wasn't asking for any prurient reason."

"That's your story," I retorted, before softening. "Do you want a cup of tea?"

"No, I better get back to my house if you're sure everything is okay here." I nodded. "And who can I call to come and look at you? You need to be checked, Tess. For God's sake, you were just hit by a car!"

"I'll live," I dismissed. "It was only a clip. I can walk. I'll get Jake to take me to the doctor at the prison tonight." I gave a humourless laugh. "They know me well there."

"Okay, but I'll take you there this afternoon when I'm done with the removalists. Then we'll be paying a visit to our hit-and-run driver. She'll be spending the night in custody."

He took off and Stacey returned to the back office and sat down quietly. I made

three cups of tea, placing three Nice biscuits on a plate for Young Kenny, and carried his morning tea out to him. I then eased painfully down onto my chair to drink my tea, offering Stacey a Tim Tam from my precious packet.

But before I could even take a sip of my tea, the bell rang. Breathing in deeply and gripping the armrests tightly, I pushed myself up from the chair, grimacing in pain. At the counter was Mrs Villiers, the town's representative on the district's super-Council that was based in Big Town. She was fierce and stout with an impressive ships-brow bosom, each strand of her blonde hair always perfectly sprayed into place in a Margaret Thatcher hairstyle.

She was wearing a royal blue linen skirt suit with a pristine white blouse and a twin set of perfect cultured pearls. Her elegant nose wrinkled when she smelt Young Kenny. A quick turn of her head confirmed her worst suspicions.

"Ugh!" she said expressively and stared at me with her protuberant pale blue eyes. "You're bleeding, Senior Constable." I peered into the little mirror I kept under the counter and noticed that there was blood trickling from where Stacey had scratched me.

"Had a little altercation this morning," I explained, taking a tissue from the box on the counter and wiping off the blood.

"I heard that Dorrie Lebutt tried to kill you by hitting you with her car."

"She did." I didn't even wonder that word had spread so quickly. It was that kind of town.

She raked me up and down with her eyes. "You look all right to me."

"She didn't succeed, obviously," I said dryly. "Now how can I help you, Councillor?"

"I wish to report a . . ." she was discomforted, a strange expression for such a confident woman. "I wish to report a peeping tom."

"Really?" I asked with undiplomatic disbelief.

"Yes, Senior Constable. I don't dally at the police station for laughs, you know," she said in a huff.

"I'm sorry, Mrs Villiers. I just meant that yours is not the first complaint we've had. I'm surprised we have a peeper in town with the nudist community so close by."

I really shouldn't have brought up the nudists because she held very conservative views and I had to listen to a five minute diatribe on the evils of nudity in modern life. While she sermonised, I let my mind wander back to my previous night of immensely satisfying nudity with Jake.

"Senior Constable Fuller, were you listening to me? Because you have a silly smile on your face," she accused.

I pulled myself back to the here and now. "Of course I was, Councillor."

"Then why weren't you taking any notes?"

"Modern policing, ma'am," I lied. "We're now encouraged to keep it all in our heads. To save on paper. It's a new environmental initiative of the Police Commissioner." She wasn't sure whether to believe me or not. I continued, "When the new sergeant is free, we'll come to your place and investigate. Is that satisfactory?"

"Thank you," she said, mollified by the mention of the Sarge and took herself off with an air of importance about her, casting her eyes disparagingly in Young Kenny's direction as she did.

I went back to my cup of tea and had it to my mouth about to take my first sip when the phone rang. Sighing, I put the cup down and reached over to the phone.

“Mount Big Town police station.”

“Tessie, what’s this I’m hearing about Dorrie Lebutt trying to kill you with her car and Stacey Felhorn trying to shoot you? What the hell’s been going on over there this morning? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay, Jakey. A bit sore, that’s all. The Sarge is going to take me to Dr Fenn later for a check up.” I quickly filled him in on what had happened.

He swore under his breath. “I’m going to kill that woman next time I see her.” He was seething with anger, which wasn’t like him. “And where the hell was Sergeant Serious when all this was going on?”

“He was moving in his furniture.”

“So much for him having your back.”

“That’s unfair, Jake. The second he turned his back, your little brother and cousin were trying to steal his stuff.”

He never liked me pointing out inconvenient truths about his family, so we hung up and I returned to my tea. It was lukewarm by then and I ended up throwing half of it out. When Stacey had finished her tea, stopped crying and was completely calm again, I told her she could go home. To my surprise, she gave me a quick hug and thanked me for pushing her to safety when Dorrie drove at us. And it was amazing how much a rare and simple act of gratitude like that could lift my spirits, especially in this town. But when I went to return the Tim Tams to the fridge, I noticed that she had eaten all of them except one, and it had been a full packet. The greedy bitch!

The rest of the morning passed uneventfully. I rang the two no-show reportees and left messages gently suggesting that they better get their butts down to the station by noon or I’d be recording them as absent. How hard was it for them to take ten minutes from their busy days of drinking, fighting, screwing around and playing computer games to check in with me once a week? It wasn’t as though either of them even had a job.

I pottered around, spent another age waiting for the computer to log in again after it had gone into sleep mode, answered a few wrong numbers for the brothel and tried to ignore the screaming pain from my hip.

The bell rang and I went out to the counter. It was my two reportees, arriving together, as cocky and disrespectful as usual.

“Gentlemen. Good to finally see you,” I lied and pulled out the attendance book. I looked at the first one, Jake’s cousin Garth Bycraft, barely twenty, on parole after eighteen months in jail for break-and-enter and destruction of public property. He’d broken a window at the primary school in a drug-fuelled frenzy, climbed in, spray-painted the walls with obscene graffiti and whizzed over all the library books, before smashing the computers to pieces. I hadn’t heard anything bad about him this week, so gave him a tick for behaviour, collected his signature and then turned my attention to the other man – the loathsome Red, my absolutely least favourite Bycraft.

He leaned on the counter and smiled at me with lazy insolence, his eyes deliberately dropping down to my boobs. His tongue flicked out and slowly licked along his top lip. I resisted the urge to cross my arms.

“Officer Tess,” he drawled, “don’t you look simply edible today?” Those menacing snake eyes on my face again.

I stared at him, face stonier than a gravel path.

He smiled. “You still showing our Jakey a good time?”

“What have you been up to during the week, Red? Apart from roughing up

Sharnee?”

“You still sucking our Jakey off hard, Officer Tess? Still fucking him good? He told me you’re the sweetest, tightest little pussy he’s ever had and our Jakey’s tried a lot of pussies.” He was lying – Jake would never discuss our sex life with anyone, especially Red. “I believe him too, because you are one hot little whore. When our Jakey gets bored with you, he’s promised to hand you on to me.” Another lie. “It’s not fair if he’s the only one who gets to play with such choice pussy. And you know better than anyone how much Bycrafts love Fuller pussy more than any other.”

I clenched my teeth together but otherwise remained serene, ignoring his crude and cruel taunting. “I’m recording that you’re using offensive language towards me, Red, just like I write every week. I’m also writing that you were drunk and disorderly on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings and had to be forcibly ejected from the pub both times. I’m also writing that you were involved in an altercation with your sister Rosie in public on Friday, where you physically assaulted her and that I was called to your place Saturday morning. Anything else you want to confess?”

“Only my endless longing for you, lovely. I can’t wait for you forever.” He lifted his face and sniffed the air dramatically a couple of times. “I can smell that sweet pussy from here. So tantalising.”

“Sign here,” I insisted coldly. He took the pen from me, making sure to brush my hand as he did. I tried hard not to react, but couldn’t completely repress the shudder of revulsion that swept over me at his touch. He laughed and suddenly grabbed my hand, lifting it to his mouth and running his tongue along the length of the back of my hand, from fingertip to wrist.

“Damn you taste good, Tessie. Just makes me want some more.”

I snatched my hand back in disgust and he laughed again loudly as he sauntered from the station, Garth in tow, sniggering at my discomfort. I put the book away and went straight to the bathroom to scrub my hands three times, wondering yet again how that repulsive family had managed to produce someone as wonderful as Jake.

The rumble of the empty removalist van negotiating down the police house driveway drifted in through an open window and ten minutes later the Sarge turned up at the station in uniform. He stopped in surprise when he saw that Young Kenny was still sitting in the front area, presumably thinking that I was being slack in serving the customers.

“Sarge, this is Young Kenny. He likes to keep me company every Monday morning. Young Kenny, this is Des’ replacement, Sergeant Maguire.” Young Kenny looked up at him, nodded and looked down again.

The Sarge came out the back with me. “What’s the number for the prison? I want to ring them to let them know we’re coming over.” I rattled it off and he dialled the number.

The bell rang and a booming baritone voice announced, “Mail.”

I went out to the counter to take the mail and leaned on it chatting for a while with the town’s mailperson, a friendly woman who always made a point of bringing the station’s mail up to me instead of leaving it in the letterbox. She and her husband ran the town’s small post office/newsagency and had the contract to deliver the town’s mail as well.

“The doctor can fit you in but we have to leave right away and –” said the Sarge, stopping both talking and walking when he got to the counter.

I turned to smile. “Sarge, this is our mail-lady, Joanna. Joanna, this is Des’ replacement, Sergeant Finn Maguire.”

“Nice to meet you, Sergeant. Welcome to Little Town,” Joanna said heartily,

holding out her huge beefy hand. The Sarge took it warily, his eyes not leaving Joanna except to cut to me for a startled second. I suppose that I was used to her now, but I guess Joanna would come as a shock if you weren't expecting to see a six-foot-five, large, unusually hairy woman wearing a pretty yellow summer dress complete with white straw hat and white sandals, in full makeup, delivering your mail. At first glance, she did look awfully like a man in drag.

Joanna had unfortunately been born with the overly-muscular physique and manner of a pro-wrestler, teamed with an ultra-feminine fashion sense. Despite being a big strapping woman, happily married with four big sons of her own, she favoured dainty, lady-like apparel that would have suited a petite Southern belle far better than her own hulking mass. The more unkind people in town hinted that perhaps she hadn't been born with her two X chromosomes and that she probably even left the toilet seat up. But of course nobody ever said that to her face. You wouldn't dare.

"We have to go," the Sarge insisted, quickly recovering from his shock.

"I have to see the doctor," I explained to Joanna.

"Because Dorrie Lebitt tried to kill you with her car?" she asked sympathetically. I nodded ruefully. "She's a wild one, that girl. You should arrest her. You just can't go around running over the police. It's not right."

I agreed. "You can say that again."

"I don't know who is worse sometimes – those Bycraft bastards or the brainless women who run around with them. They're all nothing but a pack of stupid and vicious animals."

I laughed when she said that. She twigged to what she'd actually said and blushed a deep, unbecoming red. "Sorry Tess. I didn't mean you and Jake, of course."

"I sure hope nobody's lumping Dorrie and me together in same category," I said lightly before chasing both Joanna and Young Kenny from the station and locking up. At the patrol car, I eased my aching body down onto the passenger seat and did up the seatbelt.

I spent the drive to the prison filling the Sarge in on my morning. We puzzled over Mrs Villiers' peeper, wondering if it was connected to Miss G's peeper.

We turned into the prison. It was a complex for low-risk prisoners who were nearing the end of their terms and had displayed exemplary behaviour throughout their sentence. Less well known was that it was also the cushy place that politicians, sports stars, TV stars, anyone famous, spent any incarceration time that their expensive lawyers weren't able to make disappear with their fancy weasel words.

For a prison it was a very agreeable place, with modern buildings, landscaped gardens, a sports complex with a pool and well-equipped gym, spacious, well-appointed cells and decent catering. Jake loved living and working there. It was hard for someone like me not to look at it all without a touch of bitterness, thinking of our small, cramped station and ancient technology.

I was well-known around the place, being Jake's girlfriend and turning up as often as I could to watch the regular prisoners versus prison officers footy matches, as Jake was captain of the officers' team. He was a popular colleague, being good-natured and friendly and always willing to assist by taking over a shift or giving a helping hand when somebody moved. My Jake was a great guy like that.

We flipped our IDs at the reception area, the desk staff not even bothering to glance at them. I introduced the Sarge to the staff, stopping for a minute to lean on the counter for a friendly chat. They questioned me about Dorrie's hit-and-run, and

the Sarge marvelled at how quickly news spread in the town.

"We've got phones out here, Sergeant," teased one of the desk staff.

"Really?" he responded, deadpan. "I thought it was all done with morse code and carrier pigeons in these parts."

Leaving them unsure of whether or not he was joking, I led the two of us down the familiar route to the medical centre. As we waited in the consulting room, a couple of Jake's workmates popped their heads in to say hello to me. We were chatting when Dr Fenn arrived, an older man with wild steel-gray hair and a contrasting well-groomed gray moustache. He had a gruff manner, probably the result of years of dealing with malingering prisoners. He nodded at me brusquely.

The prison nurse, a tall, thin man with neatly plaited waist-length brown hair, entered the room behind the doctor. "Tess, haven't seen you here for a while. Heard you've been auditioning as a hood ornament," he said.

"Ha ha, Lindsey," I said unappreciatively. "Still as big a smartarse as ever, I see."

He smirked in response and pulled out my thick file from the cabinet. He clapped his hands together, an anticipatory expression on his face. "Righto Tessie, get your gear off then and let the Doc and me have a squiz at you."

I glanced around the examination room. There were five men in there with me, all of them watching me avidly. They didn't see a lot of women out here.

"I want everyone to leave except Dr Fenn. And that means you too, Lindsey. I don't need a nurse." They all groaned, except the Sarge, but dutifully turned to leave. "And I'm turning that security camera off as well." They groaned even louder, their entertainment cruelly snatched from them. I had no doubt that any footage of me in my bra and panties being examined by the doctor would have been circulated widely among the prison officers and probably even the prisoners as well.

I watched carefully while the doctor turned off the security camera, checking myself that it was off before I stripped down to my underthings.

He tutted in disapproval. "Tess, you have bruises all over you."

"Jake's female relatives ganged up and kicked the hell out of me yesterday," I told him.

"Right. And then Dorrie Lebutt hit you with her car today. You're popular in town, aren't you?"

I shrugged. "That's what happens when you try to bring some law and order to a bunch of thugs."

He quickly examined my bruising and my hip. "Luckily for you it's just soft tissue damage. It's bruising already and you'll be very stiff and sore for weeks, but you were lucky. She could have broken your hip or your leg. I'm sure you wouldn't want to go through that again."

I shook my head swiftly – I sure wouldn't. He was referring to another hit-and-run I'd been involved in about four years ago when I'd been home visiting from the city. I'd ended up with a badly broken leg, but that had been the least traumatic consequence of that accident for me. Of course it had been a Bycraft behind the wheel and I reminded myself with grim satisfaction that he was currently serving some time for it up in the maximum-security jail near the city.

The doctor had continued speaking, unaware that I'd been daydreaming. "– and I hope you're going to throw her in jail. People can't get away with doing that to law enforcement officers." He handed me some strong painkillers.

"We're going to go and arrest her now. Can you take some photos of me for evidence please?" I indicated the old film-based camera we kept in the patrol car

that I'd brought in with me and placed on his desk.

He turned his nose up as he picked it up and examined it unenthusiastically. "Why don't you just let me use the digital camera we've got here? This thing must be a hundred years old," he complained.

"It probably is that old. But if I let you take photos of me with a digital camera, then I just know that those photos are going to end up in everybody's email inbox about two minutes after they're taken, and I'm *not* having photos of me in my underwear circulating around town."

He grumbled some more but finished off the reel of film. Then he promised to write up his report on my injuries and email it to me also for evidential purposes. I speedily dressed and thanked him before collecting the Sarge from the waiting room and limping off back to the car.

"Hey, don't let Jake forget he's back on duty tomorrow," one of his workmates yelled after us.

"He knows," I shouted over my shoulder. "He'll be back tomorrow morning. I want to keep him for one more night though. I have some things I need him to do for me."

"Things you need him to do *to* you, more likely," yelled one wit in response, and I smiled cheekily at the hoots and catcalls that comment provoked, winking back at them. *Poor Jake*, I thought cheerfully. He was going to cop it from his workmates tomorrow.

Chapter 13

"What did the doctor say?" asked the Sarge, nosing the patrol car out onto the highway again.

"Exactly what I thought. Lots of bruising and pain, but nothing's broken. I asked him to take some photos for evidence, but this camera's so old and he didn't look very confident taking them. I'm worried they won't turn out."

"I have an excellent digital camera. I could take some for you," he suggested.

I was torn. I did want to have photos for evidence, but I didn't want the Sarge to see me in my undies.

"Maybe," I replied, noncommittally. I wasn't a prude and acknowledged with self-mockery that I'd probably parade around in front of him at the beach in my bikini without thinking twice, but it was my *undies* for heaven's sake, up close and personal. It was all about the context, I convinced myself. I decided then that I wouldn't take up his offer, no matter how much goodwill he'd shown in making it.

Back in Little Town, I directed him to the cramped house on Kwila Street that Dorrie shared with her mother Cheryl, her younger sister Kym, and their five young kids. I found it hard to remember sometimes who the mother of each kid was, but I was pretty sure that three of them were Dorrie's and the other two were Kym's. The kids all looked the same, with the unmistakable golden features of Bycraft brats.

I checked my utility belt – gun, spray, baton and cuffs all ready for action. For the millionth time I wished I had a taser as well, but there was Buckley's chance of the good officers of Little Town ever being issued with that expensive and carefully rationed piece of equipment. They only had a handful of them in Big Town to go around and we weren't even *on* the priority list, let alone close to the top. I took off around the back of the house while the Sarge walked up the front stairs and banged on the door loudly.

"Police!" he called out. At the rear of the house I could hear scuffling inside and

panicked voices. The back door was flung open suddenly and Dorrie made a run for it straight into my arms. I clasped her in a bear hug but she was struggling like a demon to escape, kicking out at me wildly. Her mother and sister watched impassively from the back door, not offering to help either of us. Dorrie wasn't anyone's favourite daughter or sister.

"Sarge! Around the back!" I yelled in my loudest voice and could hear him pounding up the side.

Dorrie struggled more fiercely and turned to bite me on my inner arm. It hurt.

"I've had enough of you today, bitch," I hissed in her ear and pushed her forward towards the house, up against one of its external walls, flattening her to the wall with my body. I reached around and pulled out my cuffs and slapped them around one of her wrists and after an intense tussle, around the other.

Even then she tried to escape from me, but I had a good grip on the cuffs and she was only hurting herself by struggling against them so much. The Sarge took charge then, telling her why she was being arrested as he marched her towards the car, pushing her ungently into the back seat. She fought and resisted him all the way.

"Get in the back with her so she doesn't hurt herself," he ordered me.

"I'm not getting in the back with her," I refused flatly. Was he out of his mind? Ninety minutes of Dorrie Lebutt trying to bite, punch and scratch me? No thanks! "She tried to kill me today and she just bit me." I showed him her teeth marks in my arm. "I'm not going anywhere near her."

Sighing with impatience, he threw me the key and slid in the back with Dorrie. And it was an even longer drive to Big Town than usual, the poor Sarge trying to fend off a wildly angry Dorrie and her teeth, nails and fists.

"For God's sake!" he shouted, his patience long gone, pushing her back into her place, doing up her seatbelt again. "I'm going to beat you unconscious in a minute if you don't shut the fuck up and sit there quietly!"

"Police brutality!" she screeched immediately. "I'm going to report you!"

"I didn't hear anything," I said, slowing down and indicating right for the turn-off to Big Town. "That's two against one, Dorrie." And I smiled at her in the rearview mirror.

"Fuck you, Teresa Fuller! You're nothing but a toffee-nosed bitch. Leaving us all behind, thinking you're going to make something of yourself. But look at you. You're back here in Little Town, living with your useless vegetable of a dad. You're fucking a Bycraft, just like the rest of us and I bet you were still a virgin when poor Jakey had to break you in. You work in a crappy pointless underpaid job trying to tame a bunch of people who want to kill you. You've come so far, haven't you, Teresa Fuller? You're no better than the rest of us, but you think that you are," she spat out.

She managed to push every button I had with that tirade and that was Dorrie's special talent. She knew how to annoy everybody she ever came in contact with. She had been a disrespectful student, a bitchy friend, a purse-robbing daughter, a boyfriend-stealing sister, a neglectful mother, an unfaithful partner, but by God she was good at finding people's soft spots. I shot her such a murderous glare in the mirror that the Sarge felt inclined to intervene.

"Keep driving, Senior Constable. Don't worry about this piece of rubbish in the back," he said, calmer. "I'm looking after it now."

I flicked on the lights and siren, planted my foot on the accelerator and sped to Big Town, twenty kilometres over the speed limit, dangerously swerving around

slower, more legal, vehicles. There was absolutely no reason on earth to have the lights and siren on; there was no emergency. But I was pissed off big time and it just made me feel better. I accidentally met the Sarge's eyes in the mirror once. I didn't want to meet them again, his expression was so furious. I knew I was due for a reaming over this, but at least he didn't reprimand me in front of Dorrie.

When I reached the police station at Big Town, driving around to the back entrance where the watch house was located, I screeched on the brakes, skidding slightly as I parked. I jumped out, slammed my door and opened the back door, roughly pulling Dorrie from the seat, making sure she banged her head hard on the door as she exited.

"Fuck!" she yelled loudly in pain. Two uniforms who were strolling out from the station to their own patrol car, laughing together, turned towards us in surprise. She appealed to them. "You saw that! This slut deliberately banged my head on the door." They regarded her with disinterest before getting into their car and driving away.

With me clutching one of her arms and the Sarge the other, we frogmarched Dorrie into the booking room of the station's watch house, where the holding cells were situated. She was processed and put into a cell to await interviewing, screaming all the while. I wouldn't be conducting the investigation into the matter, having an obvious conflict of interest, but gave my statement to the veteran detective, Gil, who was assigned my case. The Sarge gave his statement and handed over the contact details of the two removalist men who had also witnessed the hit-and-run. I told him how to contact Stacey as well.

That took the remainder of the day and the sun was setting by the time we left the station.

"Don't ever do that again, Fuller," the Sarge warned me in a chilly, cutting tone once we were back in the car again. I knew what he was talking about straight away and I supposed I should be grateful that he'd waited until we were alone before tearing strips off me. Not all bosses would be so considerate. Problem was though that I wasn't feeling particularly grateful at that moment. My hip was hurting and I needed more painkillers.

"She made me angry," I responded sulkily as we drove out of the carpark. It wasn't much of a defence – she'd made me angry a million times.

Apparently, he agreed. "That's no excuse for driving so recklessly. You endangered not just us, but everyone else on the road," he reprimanded harshly. "The patrol car is not your plaything and you can't let your personal emotions interfere with your professionalism. That's basic policing that you should have learnt at the academy. I'm beginning to wonder what else you've forgotten about being a good officer."

Go screw yourself, I thought petulantly, staring out the window, even though deep down I knew that he was right and I deserved it. We didn't speak for a long while and I took the time to think hard about what he'd just said. He was a sergeant after all, and had more experience than me and I should respect that. The truth was that I *had* become renegade working by myself in Little Town for so long. He was probably a blessing in disguise for the sake of my future police career with his by-the-books philosophy. I made a superhuman effort to appreciate that fact.

"Sorry Sarge," I said eventually, but probably with less contrition than a genuine apology ought to have.

He cut me a quick glance and nodded silently a few times in acceptance, but I was pretty sure that he'd noticed my failure to promise not to do it again.

I offered even more of an olive branch. "Why don't we drop in on Miss G to see if she's had a chance to look at that list of properties," I suggested, so we detoured over to Bessie Goodwill's daughter's place, only to find nobody home again.

"They might have gone to the city to visit Bessie's other daughter," I thought out loud as we climbed back into the patrol car.

"Doesn't matter, that's enough for today anyway," he decided, recovering from his anger. "You need to rest."

I appreciated his concern, considering his underwhelming opinion of me.

"I promised Mrs Villiers that we'd drop by her place today to investigate her peeper," I told him regretfully. I wouldn't mind going home and just forgetting all about today. "She's not someone you want to upset by ignoring."

"Okay, we'll go to Mrs Villiers' place and then we call it a day," he sighed as we sped off back to Little Town.

There were two parts to Little Town. The nice part where the more respectable townsfolk lived was situated to the north of the town, around Pine, Ironbark, Silky Oak and Blackbutt Streets. The houses there were large, well-kept timber homes with wide surrounding verandas, high ceilings, ornate ironwork and beautifully tended gardens. The not-so-nice part was where the Bycrafts and their offsiders clustered, around Cypress, Jarrah and Kwila Streets. The houses there were dilapidated and unkempt, the yards either wild with overgrowth or total dust bowls bereft of any vegetation at all, graveyards to rusting junk heaps and discarded, broken kids bikes and swings.

Mrs Villiers lived in a stately old home on Silky Oak Street. It was the grandest home in town, boasting five bedrooms and three bathrooms. She lived there with her meek little husband Vern, who had never uttered a word to my knowledge, and her four spoilt and obnoxious Persian cats – Carrie, Miranda, Charlotte and Samantha.

I limped up the path behind the Sarge and we climbed the steps to the broad front veranda. Vern answered the door with a silent nod and shyly showed us into a spacious, well-appointed study where Mrs Villiers was frowning over some paperwork, her glasses firmly perched on her nose. Carrie and Charlotte (I think) laid indolently on her table, eyeing us malevolently, their tails waving lazily.

"Ah, officers," she said, looking up. "You've caught me trying to make sense of the Council's financial statements."

I apologised for the interruption, which she brushed aside advising us she was more than glad to have a break because whoever had prepared the statements was an innumerate buffoon and she would be telling them so in no uncertain terms the following day. Feeling sorry for the poor Council accountant who would be copping that spray, I introduced her to the Sarge. She was instantly impressed with him, probably thinking that he looked much more like her ideal senior officer than Des ever had.

Des and Mrs Villiers had shared a mutual loathing. He thought she was sour and pretentious and she thought he was lazy and incompetent, and they were both right. She had never missed an opportunity to opine that his slack policing was directly responsible for the 'Bycraft problem' that blighted Little Town, although she did condescendingly acknowledge my futile efforts to maintain some law and order. She was partially correct in that thought, but the complete lack of resources didn't help either, and where she could have been a powerful advocate for getting better resourcing for the police station, her overwhelming hatred of Des stopped her from even trying. But perhaps now that the Sarge was in charge, she might become more

interested in petitioning for better resources for the tiny Little Town police force. Or so I hoped.

She directed us to the window in her study where she had spotted the peeper, and explained that she had been working the previous evening when she'd heard a noise at the window and glanced up in surprise to see a man's face peeking in. Not being one to shock easily, she hadn't screamed but had instantly stood up and marched over to the window where she'd shouted at the man who had jumped down and beat a hasty retreat. Regretfully, she hadn't caught a glimpse of his facial features.

We went around the side with our torches out and could see some footprints in the soft soil of the garden under the window.

"Look at these," I commented. "Whole footprints. It's very obvious that someone was standing here. It's as though he wasn't even trying to hide his presence this time."

The Sarge mused, "Maybe he wants us to know that he's doing it."

I looked up at the window. "He'd have to climb onto the battening to be able to see into the window because the house is so far off the ground. He might have left some fingerprints on the windowsill."

He looked up as well. "Good thinking. How long would it take to get some crime scene techs out here?"

I took out my phone and rang the head of the techs in Big Town, a no-nonsense veteran fortunately working late tonight, who informed me in her flat monotone voice that the earliest would be late tomorrow or early the following day. I gave her Mrs Villiers' address and the address for Miss G's ransacked place as well, and she logged both jobs for me.

We went back upstairs to tell Mrs Villiers that the techs would be coming out eventually to examine the windowsill and the garden bed and to keep away from both until they were able to complete their investigation. And with nothing more that we could do, we drove back to the station. Jake's ute was in the parking lot.

Some fruity language was drifting to us from the back of the station. Giving each other a curious glance, the Sarge and I went around the back to find Jake swearing with irritation, trying to coerce Miss Chooky from the lockup into a big cage. Out of my five chickens, he had two in the cage and three still running loose in a panic.

"If you don't come here right now, then I am going to break your scrawny neck and roast you up with some potatoes," he threatened as he made another grab for her. She squawked in alarm and pecked him ferociously on the hand, making him shout out loud in pain.

"Hey Jakey. How's it going?" I asked and ruffled his hair. He spun in surprise and stood up, stretching, leaning down to kiss me.

"These birds will not obey me. All I want is for them to come out of the lockup and get in the bloody cage so I can transport them to their new home. Does that sound unreasonable to you?"

"No," I laughed.

"Then why won't they listen to me? That Miss Chooky has pecked me four times already. Doesn't she realise I'm trying to help her?"

"No," I laughed again, kissing his bleeding hand. "She's just a chicken. They're not the smartest creatures around."

"She's not a chicken, she's a demon," he insisted.

I pushed him to one side. "Let me have a go. They're used to me." Jake had

unsettled them though, so it took a good fifteen minutes to get close enough to the remaining three to pounce on them and manhandle (henhandle?) them into the cage. The Sarge watched for a little while but was soon bored and abandoned us to go into the station.

Finally all the girls were safely secured in the cage. I picked a stray feather out of Jake's hair and took the opportunity to smooch with him for a pleasant minute. That important task completed, I grabbed hold of one side of the cage while he grabbed the other and we hauled the cage out the front to the carpark to put on the back of his ute.

"I'll be back home soon, honey-boy," I promised as he climbed into the driver's seat. "I can't wait to see the new chook house. I bet you did a great job."

"I did," he admitted immodestly, a cute splash of paint on his nose. I rubbed at it without helping and leaned in the window to kiss him again. "Are you going to be long, Tessie? You need to take it easy after what happened to you today."

"Won't be too long. See you soon."

He drove off, tooting his horn at me as he did. I waved and made my slow, painful progress up the stairs inside the station. The Sarge was sitting in front of the computer, jiggling his leg up and down and tapping his fingers impatiently on the desk.

"I've been waiting over ten minutes for this stupid thing to start," he complained, annoyance stamped onto his features. "How long does it normally take?"

"Fifteen minutes to get to the log in screen and then another five to actually log in," I replied, pulling up my chair to join him.

He stared at me in disbelief. "You're kidding me?" I shook my head. "What about the other computer?"

"I told you – it's been broken for weeks. It doesn't work at all anymore."

He muttered to himself, "This place is unbelievable." The phone rang and he picked it up. "Mount Big Town police station." He listened for a moment, then exclaimed in a surprised voice. "No, it's not the Saucy Sirens Gentlemen's Club." He listened again. "Well, it's not. It's the Mount Big Town police station." He listened again. "Do I sound like a saucy siren to you? . . . No, I didn't think so. You've got the wrong number, mate." And he hung up.

The computer flashed briefly as if it was about to give him the log in screen, but then the screen went blue.

"Oh no! What did you do to it?" I groaned in dismay. "You've made it blue-screen!"

He was defensive. "I didn't do *anything*. I just turned it on."

"Shit! Now we haven't got any computers. I'm going to have to go scrounging to see if someone in town has an old one they can give us."

"This place is beyond a joke. It's like the stone age here," he said, banging his fist on the side of the monitor. It didn't help – the screen was still blue. The phone rang again.

"Mount Big Town police station," he said crankily. "No, it's not the Saucy Sirens Gentlemen's Club. It's the police station at Mount Big Town. You've got the wrong number." He slammed the phone back onto the cradle.

Before it could ring again, I picked up the phone and dialled Abe's mobile.

"Hello police station," he answered.

"Hello pub," I responded.

"Everything okay, Tessie?"

"I was wondering if you still have Romi's old computer that I borrowed last year?" Romi had replaced it with the flash new laptop Abe had bought her for her birthday.

"Sure. Do you need to borrow it again?"

"If you don't mind, Abe. The Sarge has just broken our last working computer."

"I didn't break it," the Sarge insisted in the background.

"He broke it when he turned it on," I said to Abe.

"I didn't break it!" the Sarge repeated.

"How about I drop it over tomorrow morning?" Abe suggested.

"Sounds great. You're a lifesaver, thanks Abe. See you then." I hung up. The phone rang immediately, so I picked it up.

"Mount Big Town police station." I listened. "No, it's not. You have the wrong number . . . No, I'm not. I'm a police officer . . . No, of course I don't do strip shows in my uniform . . . That's a disgusting suggestion. You should be ashamed of yourself. Does your mother know you talk like that? . . . If you don't stop talking to me like that, I'm going to track you down and arrest you . . . Yes, I would have my handcuffs and baton with me. Why? . . . No! I wouldn't be willing to do that with them, you sick pervert." I hung up on him.

"Are these wrong numbers a regular thing?" he asked.

"I'm afraid so," I said and explained about the almost identical phone number to the brothel.

He exhaled noisily and looked up at the ceiling. "You know, if someone had told me about this town I wouldn't have believed them for a second. I can scarcely even believe it being right here, living through it."

I patted him on the shoulder, consolingly. "Never mind, Sarge. You'll get used to it. Or more likely, you'll just get jack of the place, run away and find another posting somewhere sane and leave me behind."

"Why do you stay, Tess?"

I regarded him steadily, meeting his dark blues, choosing to be brutally honest with him for once. "My father. He's too sick to be put through the trauma of a move. And . . ." I turned away so he couldn't see my face. "He wants to die in this town and be buried here, next to my mother. I can't deny him that last wish." I wouldn't deny Dad anything, no matter what it cost me. When I thought I'd mastered my emotions, I turned back to him brightly. "If you don't need me anymore, I think I'll head off. It's been quite a day, even for this place."

"Okay then. I'll see you tomorrow," he said quietly.

I left him, made it to the carpark and realised I didn't have a lift. Damn! I was forced to ask him to give me a lift home, which he did without complaining. I felt obliged to invite him to dinner, but he declined saying he had a lot of unpacking to do, giving me a toot on the horn as he drove off.

Chapter 14

The chickens were settling nicely into their new home. Jake and Dad had done a wonderful job and the coop was mended, freshly painted and spacious. During the day my chickens would be free-range and could wander our yard at their whim. It was only at night that I'd lock them away in their coop. There were always foxes and feral cats to worry about around these parts.

I made the men dinner, gave Dad a big hug and kiss in appreciation of his help and thanked Jake heartily for all his hard work later in the privacy of my bedroom.

The fact that he had to be up early the next morning to get himself off back to work at the prison and I was in a great deal of pain restricted our nocturnal activities. We didn't over-indulge as we had the night before, but shared enough good loving to send us both off to sleep as soon as we had finished with each other.

I loved it when he stayed over, loved sleeping in his arms, loved waking up with him lying next to me in my bed. I had suggested once that he think about moving in with Dad and me, but could tell that he wasn't keen on the idea. He enjoyed his carefree single lifestyle, seeing me often enough to satisfy his emotional and carnal needs, but not enough to suffocate him. He had a strong case of commitment-phobia. That was okay with me at the moment, but it would become an issue between us sooner or later. I didn't know what would happen when it did rear its ugly head. Like most women, I harboured dreams of one day marrying a good man, settling down with him and having some kids. But I was pretty sure that it wasn't going to be Jake that I'd be settling down with, no matter how strong our feelings were for each other. And that unwelcome truth overwhelmed me with sadness whenever I thought about it, so I tried not to think about it very often.

In the morning before he rushed off to work, I asked Jake to take some photos of me for evidence using his own digital camera. He was one of the few people I could trust not to send them around to everyone. I was sure I could also trust the Sarge not to do that, but I still didn't want him to see me in my underwear, so I wouldn't reconsider my decision not to ask him. My body was looking a right mess with the bruising on my torso from the kickings and my hip already turning an ugly dark red colour. That was going to be a spectacular bruise. *No bikinis for me for a while*, I thought with resignation.

I kissed Jake goodbye as he headed off to work. I knew that Dr Fenn would probably advise against it, but I decided to go for a jog anyway. Neither the Sarge nor Romi turned up that morning, probably assuming that I would wisely decide not to jog after being hit by a car the previous day. They obviously had a higher opinion of my intelligence than was warranted.

It quickly became apparent that going for a jog was an extraordinarily bad idea. But I felt as though I was caving in to my weak body to stop, so I kept pushing myself further and further, disregarding the screaming pain coming from my hip. Eventually though, I just couldn't continue and limped to walking pace. The problem was that I'd come so far that it was going to kill me to turn around and walk back home.

Feeling sorry for myself, I turned around and started the long walk home. Wrapped in my own self-pitying thoughts, I nearly jumped out of my skin when a car tooted from behind me. I spun around, eyes wide with fright, my knife out, ready to run or fight for my life.

It was only the Sarge. He pulled up next to me. "Get in," he ordered.

I didn't argue but opened the door and eased into the passenger seat gratefully. His hair was wet and he smelled of the sea, so I presumed he'd been for an early morning swim in the surf.

"You scared the hell out of me. I thought for sure that you were going to be a Bycraft." I leaned back in the seat and closed my eyes, trying to get my heartbeat back to normal.

"What in God's name are you doing?" His eyes lingered on my knife, which I still clutched tightly in my hand. Noticing his interest, I re-sheathed it.

"I thought I'd be able to jog, but I can't. It just hurts too much," I answered sheepishly.

He stared at me for a moment. "I could have told you that. A preschooler could have told you that. In fact, one of your chickens could have told you that," he said in exasperation.

I laughed. "I didn't think to ask my girls for their advice first."

He zoomed off and it wasn't too long before he was dropping me off back home. I offered to make him breakfast and he agreed, but admitted feeling guilty about it.

"I've had breakfast at your place every day I've been in this town," he said.

"People will start gossiping," I smiled, only half-joking.

"They probably already are," he replied. "Do you mind?"

I shrugged. "People will always gossip about something," then changed the subject. "Have you tried your eggs yet?"

"No, because you keep making me breakfast all the time. I haven't had a chance."

"Well, let's see what my lovely girls have laid. The disruption to their living quarters might have put them off." I limped around the back and he followed me, remarking in surprise at the renovated chook house.

"Jake did a good job on it in such a short period of time," he said sincerely, impressed.

"Yeah, my Jakey's a great guy," I said fondly, managing to find four eggs, only one less than normal. Miss Chooky was probably the non-participant, disliking being disturbed in any way. She was sulking this morning, probably still annoyed at being manhandled last night, turning her back to me and refusing to face me. I gave them fresh water and threw some feed down for them, which forced Miss Chooky to forget her huff in the usual frenzy for food. As the dominant hen, it was important for her to have the finest scratchings and I laughed as I watched her abandon her dignity and scrabble with the others for the feed.

I still had a couple of eggs left over from the previous day, so made us a quick omelette, some toast and coffee. We ate together at the kitchen table, inevitably talking shop. I reminded him that Abe was dropping off his spare computer this morning.

"I want us to work together most of the time," he said, picking up his last piece of omelette. I leaned forward, all ears. "So Monday to Friday we'll both work during the day and we'll take it in turns, week by week, to be on-call for evening and weekend work. I want everyone to see and to know that we're a team. How does that sound?"

"So I'd actually get every second weekend off?" He nodded. "I love it, Sarge. That would be great."

"Also, I want us to be more of a presence in town. A couple of times a week, I want us to do some foot patrols around the main streets. You know, walk around, let people know that the town has cops, talk to people. Let the kids in the town see us, get to know us. Start learning some respect for the law. Start building stronger community relationships."

I nodded. "Sounds good."

"And we'll start using the lockup too. Let those Bycrafts know that their days of terrorising you are over."

"That would make my life better, for sure." I looked at him with unconcealed appreciation. I could have hugged him right then. "Thanks Sarge. It's so great to have some support for once. It's been a long two years here. I couldn't count the number of times I've been spat on or abused."

He smiled briefly. "No worries, partner."

We exchanged a long glance. "Thanks partner," I said finally, smiling. It felt good to say that. I was beginning to think that Finn Maguire was a great guy himself.

I was in the process of collecting our plates and taking them to the sink when Dad wearily wheeled himself in. He looked palely tired and, I hated to even think it, sick.

"Hey Dad. How'd you sleep?" I asked, not able to stop myself from fussing over him. He weakly flapped me away with his hand in irritation.

"Not good, love," he said. "Morning Finn."

"Morning Trev," the Sarge said politely, then to help take Dad's mind off his pain. "Did you know your daughter tried to go for a jog this morning?"

"Tessie," Dad remonstrated, looking up at me with tired eyes. "You must be in ten kinds of pain today."

"I picked her up on Beach Road, looking very sorry for herself and wishing she hadn't set out in the first place."

"He's exaggerating. I was fine," I lied with bravado. "I just decided to take it slow for a little while." Nobody believed me.

When the Sarge left, I cleaned up and convinced Dad to go back to bed, worried about leaving him alone for the day. I rang up a few of his friends until I found one free to come over to sit with him for the rest of the day, begging him not to tell Dad that I'd organised the visit. It wasn't the first time I'd done that and to give them due credit, his friends were wonderful in rallying around when they could.

I showered and dressed in my oldest jeans and t-shirt, carefully packing my uniform in a bag and quietly left the house, driving the Land Rover to the station. I turned up before the Sarge but instead of opening the station, I detoured around to the back and began the tedious and messy job of mucking out the lockup. By the time the Sarge arrived at work and went hunting for me, noticing my vehicle in the carpark, I had cleared out all the straw and was on my hands and knees scrubbing down the floor and walls with a bleach solution. I didn't want anyone accusing us of giving them an avian disease from being kept in one of the cells.

"Don't we have anyone to clean the station and do that kind of routine stuff for us?" he asked, leaning on the railing.

I looked up at him, dripping scrubbing brush in my hand. "You're joking, right?"

He didn't offer to help, instead rolling his eyes and muttering something under his breath that sounded to my ears like a judgemental comment about "fucking one-horse towns".

Finally finished cleaning, I left the doors to the cells open to air out the bleach smell and looked at them with satisfaction, pleased at how clean they were. Almost ready for what undoubtedly would be a steady stream of Bycrafts enjoying a brief sojourn inside. I had a quick wash down in the basin of the bathroom and donned my uniform.

When I joined the Sarge, he and Abe were in the process of installing the computer that Abe had brought down to the station, as promised.

"Hey Abe," I greeted casually. "Anyone want a cup of tea?" They both did, so I put the kettle on and set out the cups and tea bags, humming happily to myself as I did. It was nice to have other people in the station with me. I'd become used to being here by myself a lot. Des had spent most of his time in his house 'writing reports' (napping), at the pub 'talking to informants' (drinking beer and watching

sport on Abe's satellite pay-TV) or 'investigating' at Foxy Dubois' place (shagging). He hadn't graced the station much with his presence in the time I'd worked with him.

The counter bell rang and I abandoned the tea-making to answer it, to find Valmae Kilroy standing there, a battered hardshell suitcase carefully placed on the counter.

"Hi Valmae. I haven't seen you around for a while. How have you been? How are those great kids of yours?"

"Good morning, Tess. Josh is doing great. He's in third year now. One more year after that then he's finished his degree. The first one in our family."

"Excellent. I bet he's been doing well at university. He was always a smart boy."

"I don't want to boast, but he is doing really well," she said proudly. "And we're all still so grateful you took the time to talk to him about surviving university and living in the city."

"That's okay, Valmae, it was my pleasure," I said, embarrassed. She had already thanked me about a thousand times for what was essentially nothing. What she was really trying to thank me for though, was convincing her husband to let their only son go to university in the first place. He had been dead set against it, wanting Josh to take over the family avocado farm. But it was more than obvious to everyone, except him, that Josh was a very intelligent boy with an overriding passion for engineering and that his daughter, Tina, was the mad keen budding farmer in the family. It had him taken a while to readjust his prehistoric thinking about gender roles, but he came around eventually. Now Josh was happy at university while Tina was thriving as a learner farmer as well as finishing high school.

"And Tina?"

"You know Tina. Takes everything in her stride. A great little trooper." She was equally proud of her strong capable daughter. Romi and Tina were best friends and I couldn't tell you how much it warmed my heart to see so many promising young people being born and raised in Little Town. It kind of made up for all the young Bycrafts. Kind of.

"What can I do for you, Valmae?" I prompted gently.

She roused herself. "Sorry Tess. Um, I was out with the dogs this morning, checking on the rear fence, when I found this." And she put her hand on the suitcase. "Lupin went chasing off down the hill into the neighbouring property after a rabbit and it took me an age to get him back on his collar." Her dog Lupin was huge, disobedient and incredibly stupid. "He'd run into a little lean-to hut that was overgrown with vegetation. I didn't even notice it at first. But inside the hut I found this." She patted the suitcase.

"It's kind of battered, Valmae. It was probably dumped. I'm not sure anyone would want it returned," I said tactfully. It was an ugly old suitcase, slightly water damaged. I could faintly make out a monogram in faded gold lettering: *EAG*. I was surprised she'd bothered to drive into town to hand this in. I would have chucked it straight in the bin.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure they'd want this suitcase returned," she insisted and her tone of voice made me turn the suitcase around and pop the catches. I lifted the lid and my eyes nearly popped out in surprise.

"*Bloody hell!*" I yelped unprofessionally, taking in the piles and piles of cash sitting inside it. I'd never seen so much money.

“That’s the first thing I said when I opened it up too! Gerry and I didn’t know what to do, so he suggested I bring it down to you straight away. So here I am.”

“Good call,” I turned to the back and bellowed inelegantly, “*Sarge!*”

He came out, curious, but clearly not appreciating being beckoned in such a summary fashion. But he forgot his irritation as soon as he set eyes on the great wad of cash.

“Sarge, this is Valmae Kilroy, and she’s just found a whole pile of money in this suitcase.” We ran through the story for him.

“So it wasn’t found on your property?” he clarified, and Valmae honestly but somewhat regretfully admitted that was correct. “Do you know who owns that property? We’ll have to contact them.”

“It’s government land, I believe. Nobody’s ever lived on it as far as I know. And this money must have been there for a while, because these are paper notes and look,” she pointed at some brown and green coloured bills, “there are one and two dollar notes in there as well.”

I glanced at the Sarge with uncertainty. “Is this paper money still worth anything? We’ve had the polymer notes and the one and two dollar coins for ages.”

“It sure is,” he assured us and commenced jotting down some details on an incident report form, while I counted the money and issued Valmae a receipt for the whopping sum of \$104,383 and one hideous ancient brown hardshell suitcase. I thanked her profusely for being so honest, and hopefully that dispelled any lingering doubts she might have had about the wisdom of relinquishing so much dosh to the authorities.

The Sarge and Abe formally witnessed me putting the cash into the small floor safe in the back room, where Stacey’s gun was still sitting.

“It barely all fits in,” I complained, jamming the money into every available gap. It was only a small safe and it was a lot of cash. I looked up at the Sarge and Abe. “I’ve never seen so much money in my life. Where do you think it came from?”

Abe shrugged his shoulders and the Sarge frowned, perplexed. Nothing had been robbed, no rich miser had died, nobody had come forward complaining that their life savings had been misplaced. How could someone not miss all that money? It was a real mystery.

“We’ll have to take the money to the Big Town station. We can’t keep it here. We’ve got no proper security,” the Sarge fumed. “God, this station isn’t set up to handle anything. I’m going to get some money spent around here to get us up to scratch.”

“I know where we can find an easy hundred grand,” I said with a cheeky grin, slamming the door to the safe closed to temptation. “That could buy us a couple of new computers and some Tim Tams for morning tea every day.”

“Are they the only improvements you’d make?” he asked with a half-smile, reluctantly pulled from his rant.

“Yeah, pretty much,” I said, gazing around. “Oh, and a new mug for Young Kenny, of course.”

The Sarge turned to Abe, “She’s cute, isn’t she?”

“She sure is,” he agreed, regarding me wistfully.

I protested. “I’m not in the slightest bit cute. I’m tough and mean. Haven’t you seen me kicking Bycraft butts?”

“I’ve seen the Bycrafts kicking *your* butt plenty since I got here, but not so much the reverse.”

“Sarge!” I reproached. “I thought you were on my side.”

He smiled. “I am Tess, and that’s why I’m being so honest with you.” I blew a raspberry at him and turned back to the tea-making.

Abe laughed, looked at his watch and prepared to make tracks. “I’d better head off. I have a big delivery coming soon. See you later guys.”

“Bye Abe and thanks again for the computer,” said the Sarge. “We appreciate it.” Abe waved off the thanks. He liked to help. He especially liked to help me.

“Sure you don’t want to stay for a cup of tea?” I tempted, dangling the tea bag between my fingers, smiling.

He was torn, hesitating for a second. “Better not, Tessie. If I’m not there when the delivery truck arrives, those Bycrafts will be swarming over it like ants. Last time I was on the phone when it turned up and I lost three cartons of beer and a whole box of bourbon in just four minutes. Bloody Bycrafts. They cost me money every time they come near me.”

“Least they don’t beat you up every time they come near you,” I replied, feeling sorry for myself again as I experienced a painful twinge in my hip.

“I’d like to see them try,” he said grimly, his massive arm muscles rippling as he clenched his fists. He’d probably enjoy the chance to take on a few Bycrafts. So would I, in a fair fight for once, without being outnumbered or ambushed. He gave us a last wave goodbye and left.

I handed the Sarge his mug of tea and he carried it back to the borrowed computer that was loading twenty times more quickly than the blue-screener. He took a sip and grimaced, running to the sink to spit out his mouthful.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, offended by his expression. I’d been making cups of tea since I was twelve-years-old and I’d never had anyone look like that after tasting one I’d made. Except once, I suddenly remembered. “Oh,” I said awkwardly, worrying my bottom lip with my teeth. “I think I gave you the mug Young Kenny used yesterday after his broke.”

He rinsed and spat. “I could actually *taste* him! Un-be-liev-able.”

“That’s what Des said too. Sorry Sarge. I’ll make you a fresh cuppa.”

“Are there any safe mugs?”

“Here, you have mine and I’ll make myself a new one. I haven’t touched it. You won’t get any germs from me.”

“Your germs I could live with. *His* germs are another matter altogether,” he said vehemently, and took my mug with a doleful look.

“Sorry,” I repeated abjectly. I felt awful. I tried to make it up to him by offering the last Tim Tam in the packet, a huge concession from me because they were my favourite treat and Stacey had eaten more than her fair share yesterday. He considered me gravely with those fathomless dark blue eyes as I held the packet out to him. And when I thought he was about to refuse, he reached out, snatched it from the packet and demolished it in two bites.

“Sarge!” I protested, shocked. “The Tim Tam should be savoured, never gobbled.”

He grinned wickedly as he crunched the biscuit between his teeth and turned back to the computer, tapping in his username and password.

“I don’t even like Tim Tams,” he confessed, his mouth full.

He broke my heart when he said that, because I didn’t have enough money to buy myself any more for a while. And yes, I did buy all the kitchen supplies for the station each week – tea, coffee, milk, sugar and biscuits. And I also had to make sure I had Young Kenny’s favourite biscuits on hand as well.

I stood there and stared at him sadly. He looked up but I turned away not wanting to witness any more gloating from him.

And I don't know why, but somehow that stupid biscuit suddenly represented everything that was wrong with my life at that moment: Dad, my only family in the whole world, was dying; I was living a stilted and endangered life in a town I couldn't wait to escape from; the man I loved came from a family of brutes who would cheer as I died; my computer was dead; my chickens had been evicted from their home; my bank balance was perilous; my wheels had been taken away by a man who already owned an expensive car; my hip hurt to hell and back; my period was due *AND* someone who didn't like Tim Tams had just eaten my last Tim Tam.

All at once it seemed too much, so I escaped to the back veranda. I sat on the stairs for a breather, mug of tea close by, chin in my palms, elbows resting on my knees, glumly looking over at the sparkling clean lockup. It made me feel better thinking about Lola Bycraft locked in there overnight, her raucous voice screeching into the lonely darkness for someone to get her "a fucking cigarette, for fuck's sake". In fact, that even made me smile. Not that it would ever happen because I'd *never* lock up Lola Bycraft. That would be a very unwise thing to do.

"What's so funny?" asked the Sarge, venturing out to the veranda and coming over to sit next to me, probably wondering why I was slacking off.

"Nothing," I said, and took a sip of tea.

"What's the matter, Tess?"

I looked at him. "I needed to have a private pity party for a moment," I hinted lightly. "Now and then everything just gets a bit too much. You know how it is." *He probably didn't know how it was at all*, I thought to myself, not without a small touch of bitterness.

Unfortunately, he didn't take the hint but glanced down frowning and nudged a beetle off the step with his boot. It fell to the ground, struggling on its back. I leaned down to flip it over onto its legs, watching it scuttle frantically to safety. He frowned again. "I shouldn't have eaten that last Tim Tam, should I?"

A laugh burst from me unexpectedly and my good humour returned in a rush. "No, you shouldn't have, Sarge. Some days it's all I have to look forward to."

The phone rang. "Your turn to talk to the nice men wanting a saucy siren," he said, giving me a gentle nudge with his elbow. "You're more what they're after than I am."

I sighed and stood up slowly and painfully, dusted off my pants and went back inside, carrying my mug. "Mount Big Town police station," I answered politely and listened. "You have the wrong number, I'm afraid . . . That's right, this is a police station." Then listened to some rather lewd remarks about what a hot police babe could do for a man's libido. I hung up on him in disgust.

"In your dreams, loser," I muttered to myself and jumped on to the abandoned computer, logging in with my ID. I called up my police email account and groaned softly when I saw the hundreds of emails I hadn't had the equipment or time to access. I isolated one, the report on my injuries from Dr Fenn, and sent it to the printer. It would take ages to print. While the printer thought about whether or not it was in the mood to action my request, I sent a quick email back to the doctor thanking him nicely and answered another wrong number.

I washed the three mugs, giving the one that Young Kenny had used an extra hard scrub. I put it to one side so I was sure not to use it again for anyone else. The counter bell rang. I went out to answer to find the two Big Town detectives who'd been given my hit-and-run case, looking around them disparagingly. They were

both old hands that I knew very well.

“Nice digs you’ve got here, Tess,” said Gil, the older one, a dark-skinned man with short black hair and liquid chocolate eyes. He smirked.

“Now don’t be nasty,” I admonished as I opened the counter for them. “It’s home sweet home for some of us. What can I do for you gentlemen?”

He sighed with heavy resignation. “The Inspector’s sent us back here to interview you again about your hit-and-run. And to take down some notes about the location. You know, all the routine stuff that she insists on.” He sounded bored.

I invited them out the back and went to seat them, but we only had enough chairs for three people. My desk was covered in paper, so I had to perch on the Sarge’s desk. It was hard for him to do any work with my butt in the way – not that he was complaining, I noticed.

The detectives again went over the events that had transpired the previous day, then interviewed the Sarge again. I handed over the doctor’s report on my injury that had finally finished printing and promised to email them the photos Jake had taken as well. They had a cursory look around the carpark, asking a couple of extra questions and jotting down a few notes.

“We’ll probably want you at Lebutt’s committal hearing. We’ll let you know when it’s scheduled.”

“Okay, thanks guys. See you later.” I walked them to their unmarked and watched them drive away.

Chapter 15

“Let’s go walk the beat,” the Sarge decided when I returned. “Oh and Tess, I want you to start wearing your radio from now on.”

“Sorry Sarge,” I said, suitably reprimanded yet again, and grabbed it out of the drawer where it had been languishing for two years, slinging it into place over my shoulder. There was no point wearing a radio if there was no one to contact on the other end, I’d reasoned to myself when I’d taken it off for good soon after I started working here. It was pointless radioing the station because, of course, nobody was ever there. I’d tried to radio Big Town in my first few weeks, but the disparaging response I’d received, the few times I even received a response, had dissuaded me from continuing. That was when I’d realised that nobody except me cared two hoots about what happened in Little Town, not even Des. But now there was someone there for me on the other end of the radio.

I thought about that for a moment – it was a good feeling. I had dreaded a new boss, but I was now glad that the Sarge had come to Little Town, no matter if I liked him or not.

We strolled around the central shopping area of town. It was clustered into two streets, the main thoroughfare, Timber Street, which was the part of the Coastal Range Highway that ran through the centre of town; and Gum Street, which ran crossroads to it. Despite being a sleepy and tiny rural community, because of the proximity of Mount Big and Lake Big, Little Town’s population swelled during long weekends and school holidays. As a result of that we had a reasonable range of shops, nothing fancy, but better than you’d expect in a one-horse town. And by that I meant that we had a pharmacy, the Chinese takeaway, the post office/newsagency, a craft store showcasing local artists, a small exorbitant supermarket, a dodgy ‘antique’ shop and a bakery/coffee shop that served real, decent coffee and gourmet lunch meals. As well we had the expected petrol station/milk bar and pub that every

small touristy town had.

The Sarge was a hit out on the beat. He was virtually mobbed by curious shop owners and shoppers, every citizen in Little Town out on a Tuesday morning eager to meet their new police officer. Or maybe it was just sheer surprise that Little Town finally had a senior officer who showed his head outside the pub and was willing to mingle with the townsfolk.

I stood back and let everyone introduce themselves to him. I was glad that he was finally experiencing the nicer part of town, not a Bycraft in sight, no one wanting to attack us or run us over, just good, honest townsfolk trying to make a living. I had a fair few sympathetic comments about my injuries, dark murmurings over the Bycrafts and the silly women who ran with them, before the inevitable embarrassed back downs and retractions once they remembered that I was one of those silly women.

Some didn't even speak to me at all because of my relationship with a Bycraft. I sometimes wondered if I should find myself a new boyfriend, but when I thought about how much I loved Jake, his hot kisses and sensational lovemaking, that thought flew straight out of my mind. I didn't even wave it goodbye. A sensible girl's not going to give up on loving that fine too quickly.

"Senior Constable? Tess?" The Sarge's sharp voice pierced my consciousness and I turned to him, a goofy smile on my face.

"Sarge?"

"You're blocking the path," he whispered fiercely. I turned to see Lavinia Knowles, the largest lady I'd ever met in my life, trying to squeeze past me on the footpath. Her flesh spilled over her giant-sized black muu muu printed with silver suns, stars and moons, showing an impolite amount of cleavage, and as usual, she'd applied her face with a makeup cannon. She claimed to be a psychic, running a small 'conferral centre' above the coffee shop for the last three years. Everybody I knew had consulted her at some point, even Jake, but I had always resisted. I sure as hell didn't want to know my future, being rather nervous about it. But the meaningful glances she always affected to throw me whenever she saw me turned me off as well.

"Teresa Fuller. Such a fascinatingly tragic life," she purred, running her long black fingernails up and down my arm caressingly. I flinched at her touch. She noticed, smiling with a hint of maliciousness. "Don't you want to know what your future is? I could tell you *so* much that you need to know."

"No thanks, Lavinia," I said, forcing a smile on my face, making a great effort to maintain my politeness. "I'm struggling to cope with the present, to be honest."

"*Some* Fuller women would have appreciated the opportunity to receive advanced warning of their futures, don't you think?"

It was all I could do not to slog her one at that thoughtless comment. I battled to contain my temper. My mother and my grandmother had been two of those Fuller women. Oblivious to my anger though, she pressed on.

"And who is this?" she asked, her lascivious eyes landing on the poor Sarge.

"This is Sergeant Maguire, Des' replacement," I explained icily, glad to have her eyes away from me.

"Dearie me," she said, eyes widening with interest, smiling. "*Mm mm!* Thank the Lord for Des' retirement on behalf of all the single girls in town." The Sarge shuffled his feet, clearly uncomfortable with her intense attention. "You *are* free, aren't you, Sergeant Maguire? *Please* say yes. I'm not seeing a wedding ring."

"No, I'm not free actually," he shot back with indecent haste. "I'm engaged."

That took all of us by surprise.

"Are you really?" I blurted out in astonishment. He hadn't mentioned anything about it so far.

He glanced at me. "Yes, I am."

"Will your fiancée be joining you here in Little Town soon?" asked Lavinia, covering up her disappointment at that unwelcome news.

"I hope so," he replied, with an expression suggesting that he wasn't prepared to discuss his personal life one second longer with anyone.

I shouldn't have been so surprised – he was a man in his early thirties, a time when a lot of people start thinking of settling down. But I pondered over his odd response as we kept strolling. It sounded as though he didn't know whether or not his fiancée was going to join him but hoped that she would, and that struck me as strange. If Jake and I had been engaged and he had moved town for work reasons, I'd want to be with him without a doubt. I was dying to ask the Sarge a million questions about his fiancée, but that formidable look on his face warned me not to even try.

Knowing that I wouldn't have any joy probing into his personal life, I turned my thoughts to the Greville problem instead as we walked. Could the suitcase full of money have anything to do with Miss G's peeper? But what about Mrs Villiers' peeper? Were they connected or did we have two men who liked to peep on older women on our hands in this town? And why hadn't anyone reported such a big stash of money being lost or stolen? And how did it get into that hut? What did the Sarge mean about getting some money spent around the station? How was he able to say that with such confidence? Why wasn't his fiancée joining him the second she could? And then I realised that I was thinking about her again. *Damn!*

While he was being earbashed by the owner of the craft store, Gwen Singh, I cast my eye over the streetscape. The hair on the back of my neck suddenly stood up and I knew there were Bycrafts in the near vicinity. The young ones. It was a Tuesday morning – they should be at high school in Big Town. But instead, there they were, strutting down the middle of Gum Street in their skinny jeans, their horrible music blaring from their stolen iPods. Knowing them as I did, they were planning on a shoplifting extravaganza that morning. The sight of the Sarge and me made them pull up sharply, unhappy expressions crowding out the usual cocky, bored looks they sported. They stopped and huddled together, having a quick discussion before continuing on their way towards us. They'd decided they could handle the two of us.

"Sarge," I warned, discreetly but firmly butting into Gwen's monologue, "trouble heading our way."

He turned to see the Bycraft posse coming towards us.

"Don't react to them, Tess," he ordered. "No matter what they say or do to you."

Easy for him to say, I thought sourly. He wasn't the target of their constant hatred.

There were seven of them – Chad, Timmy, Kristy, Jade and Sean (all Jake's younger cousins) and Larissa and Mikey (Jake's younger siblings). And I know it's tragic, but I'm the world's expert on Bycrafts. Jake himself could barely remember the names of his numerous cousins or tell them apart, but I could without fail. I virtually had a doctorate in Bycraftology.

The teenagers all had that unmistakable Bycraft look – honey-brown skin, hair ranging from blonde to dark golden brown, eyes ranging from light yellow to dark

yellow-brown. They were tall, beautiful and arrogant. They believed that they ruled the town and they were right.

The shop owners withdrew their friendly faces back into their shops to protect their merchandise from the plundering that the Bycraft juniors were planning. Like me, they'd learned from bitter experience about the Bycrafts, and while they respected my dedication, they had acknowledged a long time ago that one cop was no match for the whole immense Bycraft clan. Nobody in Little Town relied on me to stop petty pilfering in their shop. That cut me to the core.

The posse drew level with us and threw us hostile glances, standing with what I thought was some unsteadiness.

"Why aren't you kids at school?" demanded the Sarge.

"It's a holiday," drawled Chad.

Jade sniggered. "Yeah, a Bycraft holiday."

"Have you kids been drinking?" I asked them.

"None of your fucking business, piglet," sneered Larissa.

The Sarge shot her a steely stare and turned to me. "Senior Constable, can you please ring the parents of these kids and let them know that they are truant?"

I nodded, pulled out my mobile and rang Lola Bycraft, smiling sweetly at the complaining teenagers. As soon as she heard my voice though, she hung up on me. I redialled but didn't even get two words into my explanation of why I was ringing when she let loose a stream of invectiveness so loud that I had to hold the phone from my ear. Then she hung up on me again.

"One Bycraft mother clearly doesn't care what her offspring are doing. Maybe I should ring Jakey instead?" I threatened. Jake gave Larissa and Mikey some pocket money every week to stay at school and finish twelfth grade. It was a very generous thing for him to do because he wasn't all that well paid as a prison officer and had a huge bank loan on his ute to pay off, not that his brother and sister ever showed any gratitude. They would miss his cash though if he withdrew his offer.

"Fucking bitch," said Mikey viciously.

The Sarge stepped up close to him, towering over him and poked him in the chest, leaning down to speak right in his face. "I don't want to hear any of you talking to Senior Constable Fuller like that again. You'll call her Senior Constable or Officer Fuller and nothing else. You're going to start treating the police officers in this town with some respect. Understand?"

"Or what?" Mikey asked insolently, but took a telling step backwards. The Sarge stepped forward again.

"Or you'll spend some time in the lockup."

"You can't lock up kids," Larissa spat out. "We've got fucking rights."

"Who's going to stop me, girlie?" asked the Sarge in a nasty voice. He turned to me. "Senior Constable?"

"Certainly not me," I said mildly, shaking my head.

"Anyone else in town?"

"Doubt it," I responded, smiling. They'd probably applaud him, given half the chance.

While they stared at him in silent, sullen rage, I took that time to ring Jake. He picked up straight away.

"Hey, Tessie darling. Ringing to thank me again for last night, are you, babe?" I could hear the conceited smile in his voice.

I laughed. "No, I think I thanked you enough already, Mr Ego. But now that you mention it, when will I see you again?"

“Not for a while, unfortunately. I’m rostered on for the next two weekends. And before you complain, that’s so I can have the weekend after that off to take you to the city for your fun run.”

“I know, Jakey. Thank you. Look, I’d love to chat all day, but I did ring you for a reason.” And I looked over to his rebellious siblings. “The Sarge and I have Larissa and Mikey with us as I speak and five of your cousins too. They came wandering down Gum Street a few minutes ago.”

He swore and demanded that I pass the phone to one of them. I chose Larissa, because she was more articulate and sensible than Mikey, which to be honest wasn’t too difficult. My chickens were more articulate and sensible than Mikey and had greater brainpower as well.

“Hello Jakey,” Larissa wheedled sweetly. I could hear his angry voice in response from where I was standing. She rolled her eyes derisively at whatever Jake was saying to her.

“It’s sports day. It doesn’t fucking matter if Mikey and I are there or not.” She sulkily listened to his angry voice again. “Fuck off, Jakey! Like you never wagged school. You’re such a fucking hypocrite,” she said angrily and we all heard his voice becoming louder in fury. “You’re such fucking self-righteous prick now. You’ve been hanging around that bitch piglet too long.” She hung up on him, slipping my phone in her pocket.

“Give me my phone back now,” I said impatiently, holding my hand out.

She snatched it from her pocket and almost threw it at me in disdain. “Like I want to keep that ancient piece of shit anyway.”

“Okay,” said the Sarge, getting out his notebook. “I want your names. You first.” He pointed to Larissa.

“Lady Gaga,” she said with a smirk. The others sniggered.

“Larissa Bycraft, seventeen-years-old. She’s Jake’s sister,” I told him, ignoring her glare. He wrote it down and then pointed to Mikey.

“Harry Potter,” he said. They sniggered again.

I sighed wearily. “That’s Michael Bycraft, known as Mikey. Jake’s brother, fifteen-years-old.” He pointed again.

Before any of the rest of them could get a smartarse response in, I named Timothy (Timmy, fifteen), Kristy (fourteen), Sean (fourteen) and Jade (thirteen). “And that,” I said, pointing to Chad, “is Chadwick Bycraft, Jake’s cousin, sixteen-years-old.”

“Chad,” he insisted sullenly. It was my turn to smirk because I knew how much he hated being called by his full name. He cut me a look bursting with hatred. I was almost positive that he was the one who had stolen my little car and driven it into the quarry lake. In the normal scheme of things, it should be me who hated him, not the reverse.

“Right,” said the Sarge, finishing writing. “I suggest you kids either get yourselves off to school or get home straight away. I’ll be ringing your principal to report your truancy and visiting your mothers to remind them of their legal responsibility to send you to school.” He regarded them all coolly, one by one. “What I don’t want to see is any of you on the street again today. Now scram.”

They all stared back at him, none of them moving.

“You heard me. *Move it!*” he bellowed suddenly, making them (and me) jump in fright. And with insolent slowness they eventually slouched away, back in the direction from which they came. We stood and watched the entire way. They turned around a few times, but kept going, and there was not even one flipped finger in

response from any of them. Progress!

When they had disappeared from view, I turned to him and couldn't hide my approval. "Very impressive, Sarge."

He flashed me his here-and-gone smile. "Always pleased to impress a lady."

"I'm incredibly glad to hear that, Sergeant," purred Lavinia, silently sliding up to him, further into his personal zone than he preferred. "I, for one, am *always* ready to be impressed by a handsome man."

He was uneasy at her interest and not sure how to respond, so I immediately stepped up for him. "Lavinia, back off. The Sarge doesn't want to impress any of us ladies here in town. He's engaged, remember?"

"Such a pity," she said, but stepped out of his personal space. "But maybe the Sergeant would like to share a cup of coffee with me upstairs in my lair and I'll fill him in on the *psychic* atmosphere in the town. It's *incredibly* important to be aware of that in a town full of *so* much tragedy and emotion." She paused for an impolitely long moment, before throwing out indifferently with a shrug, "Oh, and you too, Teresa."

"That's a kind offer," I said insincerely. She made the worst coffee I'd ever tasted in my life. "But we have to go visiting some Bycraft mothers to advise them of their children's absence from school. Let's go, Sarge." And he followed after me to the patrol car, leaning back on the driver's seat with a big sigh.

"That woman scares me," he admitted.

I giggled guiltily. "She scares me too. All that psychic rubbish. It's so crazy."

He smiled at me. "Not a believer in the supernatural?"

"I'm not sure. Let's just say when it comes to the supernatural, I need more proof," I replied. "Like personally seeing a ghost or being warned about a Bycraft attack by Lavinia well in advance."

"She's never exercised her 'special powers' to help you that way?"

"Never. She just wants to tell me in gruesome detail about my horrible, violent death at the hands of a Bycraft."

"Tess! Don't say that!" he protested, genuinely shocked.

I laughed at the expression on his face. "Why not? It's true. She's obsessed with the Fuller family. She's been predicting my murder since she got here. She's hoping to be proven right eventually and make her reputation. But I refuse to play along and I won't let her read my fortune."

He regarded me gravely for a long while. It was warming up uncomfortably in the car in the day's heat. Just when I could feel sweat trickling down my back and was about to crack open a window, he started the patrol car and the air con blasted out a welcome wave of iciness. But he didn't drive off.

"What are you afraid of hearing if she did give you a reading?"

I laughed again. "That I'm going to meet a horrible, violent death at the hands of a Bycraft. What else?"

He was lost for words at that and nosed the car silently into the street. We didn't engage in any further chat except for me reminding him where Lola Bycraft lived with her youngest children. Often she had other people living there as well, assorted family members who needed somewhere to kip for a while, and usually one or two of her oldest children who had broken up with their partners or who had just been released from jail. Sometimes there could be fifteen people living in that rundown three bedroom, one bathroom house. Jake never complained to me about the cramped conditions during the odd times he stayed there overnight, content to find any spare corner of the house to bunk down in. And that only served to convince me

further that the Bycraft family was more a pack of wild animals than humans.

The seven teens had returned there, hanging around on the front veranda, smoking and hastily hiding a bottle of something as we parked. We stepped out of the patrol car slowly and I reminded the Sarge to lock it. After all, Chad Bycraft was only six metres away.

We sauntered up the path and the teens snarled silently at us.

"Put out those cigarettes and hand over the bottle, Kristy," I directed, holding out my hand. The Sarge looked at me in surprise. He mustn't have noticed their furtive movements.

"What bottle, piglet?" she asked with a sneer.

"What did I tell you about addressing the Senior Constable?" yelled the Sarge, startling both them and me again. "You want to be the first in the lockup, little girl?" She turned her malevolence from me to him.

"Don't you fucking call me that! I'm not *little*," she said, provocatively pushing out her chest, making herself stagger in the process. The others giggled, stupidly drunk. She looked up at him, her lips pouting. "You want a feel of my tits? Only cost you five bucks. Thirty for a head-job."

"Give me the bottle, Kristy," I repeated patiently, ignoring her vulgarity. "And don't go offering to sell yourself to a man again. You're better than that."

I don't know why I tried, but it really bothered me to see yet another generation of Bycraft girls heading down the same slutty path. Surely one of them could rise above her birth curse, have a career, maybe even go to TAFE or university, and not get knocked up when she was fifteen, living off welfare for the rest of her long, fertile life. I had high hopes for Larissa. She was in her last year of school, doing okay in her studies despite her repeated truancy, and had reached the advanced aged of seventeen without becoming pregnant. Yet.

Kristy, only fourteen, was confused by my supportiveness, not experiencing much of it in her short life. Despite the protests and scornful swearing of the others, she reached behind the smelly, mouldy lounge that had sat on Jake's family home's veranda since he was born, and held out the half-empty bottle of bourbon to me.

"Who nicked this off Abe Stormley? And what happened to the rest of the bourbon and the beer?" I asked, taking it from her.

"We fucking drank it, didn't we?" slurred Mikey and laughed so hard that he fell off the lounge. The others ragged him and kicked him gently as he rolled on the veranda, laughing.

The Sarge stepped over him, disgust on his face, and banged his fist on the door. "Mrs Bycraft. Police," he yelled.

After a long wait, Lola Bycraft opened the door a crack and peered around, the smoke from the cigarette clamped between her lips obscuring her face.

"What the fuck you want?" she demanded. "My shows are on."

"Step outside please. I want to talk to you about your truant children. And the fact that they're all clearly intoxicated," the Sarge said firmly. When she hesitated for one moment too long, he grabbed her by her scrawny, sun-spotted arm and dragged her outside.

"Get your fucking hands off me, arsehole!" she screeched, struggling frantically against him.

In a flash, he had her up against the house, bending her arms behind her, forcing her to drop her cigarette or risk having it shoved down her throat as her face pressed up against her wall. He yelled in her ear loud enough not just for her children and nieces and nephews to hear, but the entire neighbourhood to hear. "Address me like

that again and you'll spend the rest of the day in the lockup. You call me Sergeant and nothing else. Got it?"

She nodded and so he let her go, thinking he had subdued her. His mistake, because the harridan immediately turned on him and spat a glob of saliva into his face.

"I'll call you whatever I want, *Sergeant Arse-licking Shit-sucking Motherfucker*," she screamed at him, incensed at being challenged. Her offspring and relatives showed their support with ear-splitting enthusiasm.

He was instantly furious himself, his nostrils flaring, lips pinched together until they were thin and bloodless, taking everything too personally. He grabbed her viciously by her arm again, wiping her spittle off with his sleeve, his face a study in raw anger. He slapped on his cuffs and pushed her down the stairs.

"Open the car!" he yelled at me and I hurriedly reached in my pocket to unpop the locks, thinking that this was a really bad idea. He roughly shoved Lola into the back of the car, slammed the door hard enough to make the car shake and threw himself into the driver's seat.

The teenagers stopped cheering and began yelling at us, picking up whatever they could get their hands on to throw, Larissa and Mikey running down to bang on the patrol car.

"Let Mum out!" Larissa screamed, pounding her fist on the driver's window of the patrol car. Mikey picked up a broken loose brick lying in a pile, the detritus of a long-abandoned handyman job, and smashed it against the side. I ran to the car.

"Let my mum go, you fucking pigs!" he shouted, denting the patrol car relentlessly.

"Get in!" the Sarge bellowed at me, and I jumped in the passenger seat and we screeched away, the brick that Mikey threw after us landing with a thump on the boot.

"You're *dead*, piglet!" he screamed after us and I didn't doubt that for a second.

"Sarge," I started in a low voice so that Lola couldn't hear in the back. Not that she'd hear anything over her angry screaming and frenetic seat kicking. "This isn't a good idea. You can't lock up Lola. There will be terrible consequences." *Especially for me*, I thought desperately.

"*Nobody* talks to me like that, Senior Constable!" he roared at me. "And may I remind you that *I* am the senior officer and *I* will make the decisions around here. And you ought to know that spitting on a police officer is serious assault."

"Sarge –" I kept trying to puncture through his incredible rage to reach his commonsense. The Bycrafts were tribal. No matter how much damage their mother had inflicted on them psychologically, emotionally and physically as they grew up, they would defend her with their lives.

"Shut up, Fuller! You've been too soft with this bunch of savages. I'm not interested in what you have to say," he dismissed, face hard, eyes fixed on the road. He squealed around a corner, frightening poor Freda Johansson who was about to step out onto the road to cross with her baby in a pram and her toddler clutching her hand.

That certainly put me in my place, I thought unhappily and leaned back against the seat, my stomach churning with dread. Maybe I didn't know much in life, but I knew without a doubt that this wasn't going to end well.

Chapter 16

It took both of us to manhandle Lola Bycraft to the cell. For a tiny woman, she had the fury and strength of a titan. While he struggled to restrain her, I quickly rushed around to find the mattress for the bed. We weren't well prepared for someone to occupy one of the cells so quickly after I had cleaned them out. Luckily though, the smell of bleach had dissipated in the fresh air, not that Lola could probably smell anything after so many years of smoking.

The lockup's two cells were very basic, erected in the late 1880s when the station itself was built and nothing except the lighting and a primitive alarm buzzer had been modernised in them since. And the lighting merely consisted of the addition of glaring fluorescent tubes that dangled from the ceiling by rusting chains and flickered annoyingly, their wiring inexpertly tacked to the timber walls and painted over at least twenty times since then. The wiring led out to two round and clunky cracked Bakelite switches located outside on the veranda. The cells themselves were bare squares, furnished with only a metal bunk bed firmly bolted to the wall and floor, normally covered by a thin, lumpy ancient mattress.

One of those mattresses was possibly even the same bedding lain on by the lockup's most notable inmate, roguish Theodore Bycraft, a local boy turned bushranger of some infamy, who once terrorised the road from here to Big Town. He was known as Mountain Ted because of his regular and notoriously slippery escapes from the police into the thick bush and rugged ground of Mount Big.

Ted had enjoyed an overnight stay in one of the lockup's cells in 1894 after being captured by Little Town's sole constable while naked, drunk and asleep at his temporary camp at the base of Mount Big. Humiliatingly, the constable's own young wife had been happily and firmly clasped in Ted's arms at the time of his arrest, also naked, drunk and asleep, her petticoats strewn around his campsite with shocking abandon.

Somehow, Mountain Ted had managed to escape from custody the next day. I'd read the station's observation book in which the poor constable had noted nothing in his elaborate script that very day but the forlorn words: *Bycraft – disappeared again*. He'd moved on himself from Little Town soon after, so there was no record of how his marriage had fared. But out of curiosity I'd researched the good constable and his wife on the internet and discovered on a government database that they'd had seven children together after they left town, so I guess they soon made up from her indiscretion.

Eventually, Mountain Ted was recaptured and hanged for his many crimes in Big Town in 1897. His execution drew the biggest crowd ever documented for a public hanging in these parts. All the contemporary accounts of his death by male journalists not only noted the extraordinary number of weeping women in attendance, but also reluctantly admired him for the sheer cockiness he showed at meeting his death. His final words to the public were allegedly shouted in a loud, ringing voice: *I don't regret one moment of my life and I thank you well for the fine adventures, my good ladies*. He'd received a deafening ovation from the crowd as his neck had broken on the hanging rope, but had left a lot of husbands eyeing their wives with unhappy speculation afterwards.

In a compilation book of bushrangers, I had once seen a photograph of Mountain Ted, taken by an accomplice or family member. He was posed in one of his campsites, feet spread wide, a pistol in each hand ready for action. A self-confident grin showed his white teeth. Framing his beautiful face were the wild waves of his golden hair, complete with mutton-chop sideburns and an impressive moustache. He was wearing well-filled breeches and a homespun vest over a loose

cotton shirt that showed an enticing glimpse of his hard chest muscles. I'd noticed with an unnerving jolt the first time I'd seen the photo that he had been the spitting image of his descendent, Red Bycraft.

And *that*, Lavinia Knowles, was truly spooky.

There were some blankets for the beds stored somewhere as well, but we didn't currently need them in this warm weather. There were no other facilities in the cells. Any toilet breaks the prisoner needed involved one of us escorting them to the station bathroom on the back veranda. There was nowhere for them to bathe except up at the Sarge's house. Not ideal conditions by any means. I don't know if the Sarge had really thought it through, but one of us would have to be present at the station at all times while we had someone in the lockup, to check on them regularly. That cut our crime fighting force in half straight away.

We pushed Lola up the stairs and he flung her into the nearest cell, slamming the door behind her. She immediately banged on the barred door, screaming obscenities at him in her shrill, raucous voice.

"She'll go insane without cigarettes," I warned him as we walked through the back door of the station.

"I couldn't give a fuck," he said, still angry, kneeling down in front of the safe. "I'm going to transport this money to Big Town. I don't feel comfortable with it being in this station with no real security. Especially with all these Bycrafts around. You can stay here, do the paperwork and look after *her*." We listened for a moment to Lola's screeching. "And while I'm in Big Town I'll check to see if Miss Greville has returned yet and then go talk to the principal of the high school about having so many truants."

"Sarge, I'm worried about her family. It could get violent. Please don't leave —" I didn't get to say anything else.

"Fuller," he said unpleasantly, standing up to tower over me in an intimidating way, his eyes flashing, "maybe you got away with disrespecting the orders of your senior officer in the past, but that was then and this is now. You'll do what I tell you to without contradicting me or talking back. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sarge," I said, and even to my own ears I sounded every bit as rebellious and sullen as any one of those Bycraft teenagers.

He continued, his voice growing even colder, his eyes a darker stormy blue as they raked over me critically. "Ever since I arrived here, you've been nothing but insubordinate to me. May I remind you that you are *not* the officer-in-charge and there's a very good reason for that?"

Take another cheap shot, you bastard, I dared in my thoughts, staring back at him with hatred.

He didn't notice, overwhelmed by his own anger. "*I'm* the senior officer and you'd do well to remember that in future."

"Yes Sarge." My voice matched his for frostiness.

"Good. Help me repack this money and give me all the paperwork for it," he ordered. We worked in icy silence until the battered old suitcase was full with cash again. I signed a witness form that there was \$104,383 in the suitcase when the Sarge toted it to the patrol car. He drove off with some attitude, spinning the tyres in the gravel.

I pulled a bottle of water from the fridge and went outside to the lockup to Lola's cell to hand her the bottle through the bars on the door.

"Here you go," I said neutrally, ignoring her cries of complaints. Then she did something that made me sick to my stomach — she tried to be nice to me.

“Tessie, you know I’ve always thought of you as one of my daughters,” she cajoled.

“No Lola, you’re very mistaken about that. What I do know is that you hate me and wished I was dead. You’ve told me so to my face on hundreds of occasions,” I reminded her, matter-of-fact.

“That’s just my little joke, love, you know that. Now show me how much you love my Jakey by letting me go. Jakey will be upset when he hears that his mum is in the clink. I know it’s not you who’s put me in here, but that fuckwit of a sergeant you’ve been landed with, and I don’t blame you for it. You would never do that to me, I know. We have an agreement.” She even smiled at me, a hideous rictus grin that did nothing but make me nauseous.

“No, we don’t Lola, so you just shut up and be a good girl.” I walked away.

“Come back here, you pig-faced whore!” she screamed after me.

So much for the family loving, I thought with resignation. I ignored her cries and went back to the Sarge’s desk to fill in the charge sheet and the lockup observation log, noting the details of when Lola entered the cell and when I took her the water and had a conversation with her. The last entry before today was dated 1997. It had been a while since someone had been locked up in Little Town.

That done, I turned on the computer and thought I’d spend the time until the Sarge returned trying to catch up on all of the reports I had to write, most of which were overdue. I had the feeling that the Sarge would be a stickler for paperwork. I briefly considered locking the doors, but wasn’t sure I’d hear anyone knocking on the front door if I did. Also, it didn’t seem right to lock out the rest of the Little Town citizens from their own police station just because of the Bycrafts. So I went to work and soon I was engrossed in writing about Dorrie Lebitt and the hit-and-run, blocking out Lola’s screams. After about an hour, I raised my head briefly to realise that she had stopped shouting at some point. That should have made me suspicious straight away, but I was busy pounding the keyboard, getting the facts onto the screen, the prospect of actually finishing some paperwork for once driving me on.

I had reached the part where Dorrie reversed out of the carpark when the front and back doors to the station flung open simultaneously. Two thumps sounded from the front room as somebody landed on the timber floor after jumping over the counter. I sprang up and spun around quickly, sheltering behind the Sarge’s office chair, to discover that I was encircled by Bycrafts. They’d moved with such speed and stealth that I didn’t have a chance to pull out my gun.

There were only four of them, but it was the worst four, the older ones. Jake’s brothers, scary Red and the equally evil Karl, had come through the back door. They must have first spent a few minutes letting their mother know that they were here, which was why she had shut up so abruptly. Grae and Al, Jake’s cousins, had come in from the front. Bad news for me – I had history with Red, Karl and Al. Grae was the only one who hadn’t served some time in the past for assaulting me.

Red snarled at me, his face distorted with an ugly anger that made his scar stand out starkly pale against the honey-brown skin of his neck. “Get my mum out of that fucking dogbox now or you are going to regret it mightily, piglet whore.”

I didn’t doubt him for a second about that, but replied with a bravado I wasn’t quite feeling. I pushed my chin out and looked him in the eye. “Not going to happen. Lola’s having a sleepover with us tonight, so you can all just turn around and piss off home.”

As I spoke though, I backed up against the desk, on high alert. I was trapped

and surrounded, my eyes flicking continuously between the four of them. Holding onto the back of my chair, I assessed my situation carefully, my hand inching towards my gun.

Red shook his head slowly, a cruelly amused smile creeping across his lips. “I don’t think you understood me, lovely bitch.” His fist shot out suddenly and connected hard with the right side of my nose. Instant pain flowered across my face. I put my hand up to my nose in shock, touching the warm wetness of my own blood as it trickled into my mouth. “I meant get her out *now!*”

The hurting gave me the impetus I needed to act. But I didn’t do what they expected.

Instead, without a word or any warning, I pushed the chair violently towards Grae, the smallest of the four. It recklessly rolled across the floorboards before colliding painfully with his knees making him stagger. I took advantage of his momentary inattention and barged through the semi-circle they’d made around me, between Grae and Al. I pushed Grae off balance as I did and kicked out at Al at the same time.

My goal was the front door and I was climbing over the counter when Red hauled me back by the waistband of my cargo pants. I kicked out behind me furiously, my boot hitting his chin as I scrabbled to hold onto the counter with my fingers. He grunted in pain and yanked me backwards, three of my fingernails breaking as I flailed desperately on the battered surface for purchase. I fell to the floor in a heap on the wrong side, scrambling to my feet straight away.

Before I could reach for my spray, his fist smashed into my nose again. My head flung backwards and pain crossed my vision like fireworks, multicoloured dizzying explosions. The trickle of blood became a spurt.

“Get my mother out of there,” he hissed, voice as cold as a frozen hell. “*Now!*” He dragged me into the back room by the scruff of my shirt and I kicked out at him furiously until he let me go.

I loosely crossed my arms up in front of me in defence, ninja style, no desk to hide behind anymore, ready to lash out left or right. My eyes shifted from one man to the next, trying to watch their movements while I considered my options.

“The Sarge will be back in a second,” I bluffed, trying not to panic, turning to spit out some blood that had run into my mouth. I edged to one side, lifting my right knee up suddenly to block Al from trying to remove my utility belt. Over my dead body would they get their hands on my gun. And that’s what I’d be too – a dead body – if they ever did.

“*Bullshit!* We saw him drive off towards Big Town. He’ll be hours,” said Red viciously, moving to backhand me across the face. I raised my arm to deflect and he whacked into my forearm instead. But as I did that there was another punch from the left, Grae I thought, that caught me in the eye, sending me reeling. As I righted myself, Al’s fist also shot out from the left hitting me in my mouth, splitting my lip. I could taste nothing but the metallic tang of my own blood.

I stood before the four men, panting hard, my face burning with pain. There was no way I was going to hand over the keys to the lockup, thinking of them safely secured in one of the multitude of pockets in my cargo pants. But I didn’t really know how far they’d go to get their hands on those keys, although a brutal frenzy that ended in my agonising death after a sadistic gang rape would not surprise me. I needed help. Abe sprang instantly to mind. He could easily assemble a group of local men to drive the Bycrafts away. I needed to escape the station so I could ring him. I eyed my mobile phone, sitting on the Sarge’s desk, plugged into the wall,

charging. *If only it was in my pocket*, I thought with bitter regret.

"I am simply loving this, Tessie Fuller," Red said with a pitiless laugh, running a finger painfully across the blood on my lip. He brought it to his own lips, licking it off with orgasmic relish. He grabbed my hand and pressed it firmly against his crotch. "Can you feel what a hard-on I've got for hurting you?"

He wasn't lying. I snatched my hand away in disgust, and as I did I turned it into a fist and drove it straight back into Red's face, smashing into his nose. Then I swiftly raised my left leg to the other side and kicked Grae's already injured kneecap as hard as I could, making him stumble. Lifting my arm in front of my face, elbow out, I rammed through the four of them again, elbowing Red in his injured face, fleeing for the back door this time.

I didn't really know what I was thinking. I had no plan at all. Perhaps I could reach my Land Rover, except I didn't have the keys on me, I realised. They were sitting in the top drawer of my desk. Maybe I should head for the Sarge's house where I could barricade myself and ring Abe, except I didn't have any keys to get inside. I'd just have to head to the street and run until I found someone willing to shelter me and ring Abe for me, except I was too sore to run anywhere at the moment.

Karl brought me down to the floor of the station with a tackle. He was a quiet man who never said much, letting Red do all the talking, but that didn't make him any less of a monster. I hit my head above the right eye on the station's old metal doorstopper, nearly knocking myself out cold. An immediate warm gush of blood into my right eye reduced my vision.

Karl held my ankles tightly, so I twisted around, rolling over, managing to wriggle one foot free of his grip. He reached for my ankle again and I kicked him in the face with my boot. He let go of me, screaming in pain. And then for good measure, I kicked him again, possibly breaking his nose from the sound of his cries and the amount of blood that flowed from his nostrils. I jumped to my feet and stood watching the others warily, arms up in defence again, desperately trying to hide the fact that I was woozy from the hit to the head. Impatiently, I wiped blood from my eye with the back of my hand, smearing it across my cheek and hair, blinking furiously to clear my vision.

My back was pressed to the rear door and I was breathing heavily from fear, pain and adrenaline. My mind was desperately racing through every scenario I could think of to get away from them. Karl was out of the picture for a while, moaning on the floor, clutching his nose, but the other three were now incensed and sickly excited as well by the thought of overpowering, humiliating and hurting me.

"You are one hot little pussy," grinned Red, blood from his nose dripping down off his chin onto the floor. He flicked his tongue out to lick at it. "Is this what Jakey has to go through every time he wants to fuck you? God knows I love a bitch that puts up a fight, but I am looking forward to teaching you some manners, lovely. I'm planning on finishing the job that Uncle Bobby and Craig left undone." He laughed, his snake eyes wide and glinting in anticipation. "The things I'm going to do to you today, Tessie Fuller."

The very mention of Bobby and Craig Bycraft shoved steel into my spine. "The only thing you're going to do to me today, Red Bycraft, is kiss my arse," I said defiantly but awkwardly through my busted lip, blood spraying everywhere when I spoke.

Al lurched forward to claw at my uniform shirt. I grabbed him by his throat and dug my surviving nails into his Adam's apple until he started gagging and at the

same time, kicked up and out ferociously towards Grae who advanced from the other side, catching him solidly in the chest and knocking him flying across the Sarge's desk. Abe's computer crashed to the floor at the impact. I managed to pull out my OC spray and squirted Al at close quarters, then also cracked him across his nose with my elbow in a cruel backwards move, just to be sure. He dropped to the floor howling in pain.

I turned and squirted Karl in the eyes as well to subdue him and keep him down and out, before Red chopped at my arm to send the spray flying out of my hand. It rolled under the fridge, out of the reach of both of us.

Grae stirred to my left and stood up groggily, staggering towards me. I kicked up at him blindly while I kept my eye on Red. I hit Grae in the chin, slamming his bottom jaw against the other, his teeth pushing into his upper lip. Blood flowed from his mouth and he fell backwards, crying in agony.

That left Red and me facing each other. I fumbled at my utility belt and pulled out my gun, pointing it at him.

"You better piss off and take your relatives with you before I shoot you," I warned, only a small tremor in my voice betraying my fear. I raised my left hand to wipe the blood free of my right eye again.

"You think I'm scared of your little girl cop gun, Tessie?" he laughed, advancing on me. "You couldn't shoot Jakey's favourite brother, could you, lovely?"

"You're right," I said, shoulders sinking, the life sucked out of me. "What was I thinking?"

I made as if to re-holster my gun, then quickly raised it again and deliberately shot him in the upper left arm. He screamed in pain, clutching the bleeding wound, and without another word, I charged him, elbow out in front, head down. I knocked him backwards but not over, and he smashed into the filing cabinets, forcing the end one, which had already been leaning precariously, to tumble sideways crashing into the wall. He launched back at me and thumped the gun from my hand where it hit the wall and landed in the corner, behind the fallen cabinet. We both tried to stop the other one going for it, grasping each other's upper arms and struggling desperately back and forth. I let go with one hand briefly to reach for my baton, but he knocked it out of my hand with his fist the second I freed it from my belt.

We might have scuffled like that together for the rest of the day, eyes locked in battle. I let go of one of his arms to free my hand to viciously poke my index finger into the bullet wound on his upper left arm. He screamed in agony and reached for my throat with his free hand. I choked while he screamed.

The counter bell went off. "Mail," yelled a booming and very welcome voice.

"Joanna!" I screamed out in desperation. "Go for help! I need help! Get Abe!"

"Tessie? Are you okay?" she yelled back with concern.

"No . . ." I spluttered. Disgusted at myself, I wiggled my finger around in Red's bullet wound, causing him maximum pain. Howling like a wounded animal, he tried to shove me out of the way and scramble for my gun. I pushed his head down towards the floor with my hand on the back of his head and raised my knee to smash into his chin.

"Tess?" called out Joanna again anxiously. "What's going on back there?"

"Fucking bitch," Red groaned and pushed me harder backwards until I stumbled over the fallen computer, taking the both of us down. We were making such a racket that Joanna climbed over the counter to investigate.

She was a sight for sore eyes in a lovely pale blue twin set and crisp white

blouse with size twelve navy blue court shoes. All this was topped with a strand of pearls, a little strained by the girth of Joanna's muscular neck, for sure, but still tasteful. I wondered briefly even as I struggled against Red if she was deliberately mimicking Mrs Villiers' dress sense.

"Get off her," Joanna said in a cold voice.

"Make me, freak," Red wheezed with exertion as I clutched my hands around his neck and he feebly punched me in the stomach with his bleeding arm. So Joanna did, with a hard right hook to the chin that sorted out a weakened Red straight away. He fell to the floor, while I lunged to secure my gun. I covered the four Bycrafts with my weapon and they cut their losses, Red's three injured relatives dragging him out the back door. I ran over to lock it immediately when they left, running to the front to lock that door as well. I returned to the back room and hugged Joanna fiercely, not able to speak with emotion.

"Oh Tessie, look at you, love. They've gone to town on you," she said with shocked sympathy. "Where's Sergeant Maguire?"

"Big Town," I managed to say through my busted lip. I was feeling very fragile and needed to sit down suddenly, my legs too wobbly to support me. Unwillingly, I sagged against Joanna and she kindly helped me to my chair.

"I'm going to ring him," Joanna said, taking out her phone and shaking her head. "Geez, when I think what might have happened if I hadn't turned up when I did."

"No!" I shouted in agitation, startling her. "Please don't ring the Sarge, Joanna. Please. He had things he wanted to do in Big Town and I'm all right now. He's already angry with me. I don't want to disturb him. They won't come back now."

"What happened, Tessie?"

"Lola Bycraft's in the lockup."

"What the hell? Why would you do something so . . . inflammatory?" The look on her face expressed all of my earlier misgivings.

I didn't want to complain about the Sarge. He was trying to build a solid police team in the town and my bitching about his decisions to others would be disloyal and disunited. So I looked down at my bruised, blood-splattered knuckles and remained silent.

However, Joanna was a smart woman. "I bet it wasn't your decision, Tessie. You know better than that."

I didn't respond.

She gave up. "You need a doctor. Let me take you to the prison. Jake will want to know what's happened too."

"I can't leave Lola."

"Set her free," she suggested. "You need to see a doctor."

"No, I'll wait until the Sarge gets back and then I'll go." I remembered the Sarge's biting words about my insubordination. "I don't want to let Lola out without his permission. He'll be back soon," I assured. "But thanks so much, Joanna, for everything today. I'll never forget your help." I hugged her again.

"At least let me help patch you up," she offered, concern on her face as my blood dripped gently down onto my shirt, staining its pale blue purple. "Did they injure you on your stomach or back or anywhere to cause any internal damage?"

"No, it's all on my face. I'll be right. You've got your rounds to do. People will be wanting their mail. Off you go," I insisted firmly and ushered her from the station, suddenly needing to be alone. And when she had reluctantly departed, I relocked the front door carefully, compulsively checking both front and back doors

three times before I could release the incredible tension in my shoulders.

I flew to the sink and threw up repeatedly until I had nothing left in my stomach and I was pale, breathless and shaking. I sat at the Sarge's desk with my compact mirror open, half-heartedly trying to wipe the blood away with some wet tissues. I was a wreck, physically and emotionally. I needed . . .? I didn't know what I needed right then. A doctor? A stiff drink? A big hug? A new job? A Tim Tam? To get the hell out of this town as soon as I could pack?

All of the above?

I sat there doing nothing, slumped in his chair, staring out of the window without seeing the view and listening to Lola Bycraft screaming out endless obscenities without registering anything she said. The station phone rang three times but I didn't answer. My mobile rang four times but I didn't answer that either. I was probably in shock when I look back at it, and that was how the Sarge found me when he eventually returned.

He came storming back into the station, slamming the front door and rousing me from my stupor. He was in a foul mood from not finding Miss G or the principal available to see him, berating me loudly as soon as he set foot inside for having the door locked and for not answering the phone. Banging the counter hatch closed behind him, he stamped into the back room in the middle of furiously questioning my professionalism yet again, only to pull up in horror when he saw me and the state of the office.

"Oh shit." He stood staring in disbelief. "Tess. Are you all right? What's happened?" He came over and hesitantly rested his hand on my shoulder.

"The Bycrafts came for Lola," I said carefully, shrugging off his hand and standing up shakily, avoiding any eye contact. "And no, I'm not all right. I'm going home."

"Did they get her?"

I did look at him then, eye-to-eye, unable to hide my incredible hurt and disgust at that question. Was that all the cold-hearted bastard cared about?

"No, they didn't get her!" I spat out, spraying my blood over him, angrier than I could ever remember being in my life. "Is that what you think of me? That I'd just roll over and give the Bycrafts what they want because they roughed me up? Because I'm sleeping with one of them? Because I'm *unprofessional*?"

And I was so angry that I viciously kicked over my chair and swept a pot plant off the windowsill with my arm, its ceramic planter smashing when it landed, potting mix spilling out over the floor. That wasn't enough – I was still furious. So I kicked one of the few good filing cabinets, leaving behind a dent so deep that it forever rendered that drawer unable to be opened.

"Tess . . ."

I stood toe-to-toe with him and screamed right up into his face. "*They didn't get her! Are you happy?*"

He drew back. "God, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean . . ." He faltered, unsure what to say next, stunned and pitying. But I didn't want or need his pity and with unbridled fury shoved past him to the front room. He seized my arm.

"Tess, you have to see a doctor." His words were gentle, but his grip on my arm was iron-fast. "You need stitches in your forehead. It's bleeding a lot. I'll take you to the prison now."

I struggled wildly to free myself, hurting myself all over again. But I didn't care. I couldn't bear for him to touch me. "Get your hands off me! I'll drive myself. You can stay and watch Lola."

He let go of my arm immediately, afraid I would break something as I shook him off so violently. "You can't drive yourself. You're too upset."

"Don't you dare tell me what I am!" I screamed at him again and then realised that I sounded hysterical. I took a couple of deep breaths, blinked away the tears that were threatening to brim over and wiped more blood from my eye with my palm, smearing it across my face and hair again. "I'll ring Abe and ask him to take me," I decided, more calmly.

"No, you won't. I'll take you. I'll let Bycraft out now."

"Then they've won, haven't they?" I said bitterly. "And the next time we bring her in, they'll come and do the same to me."

His jaw was diamond-hard, his face unforgiving. "No, they won't. They won't get the chance."

He turned on his heel and strode out to the lockup. I took the opportunity of his absence to retrieve my mobile and my keys from my desk drawer and left the station, heading to the carpark. I would drive myself to the doctor. I couldn't tolerate being in his presence for one second longer.

It took three attempts to unlock the Land Rover. On my last try, with the support of my other hand, I finally managed to encourage my shaking hand to insert the key properly and open the door. As I did, Lola Bycraft stomped down the side of the station, swearing up a storm at being forced to walk home. She stopped when she saw me and stood in front of me, tiny, sun-spotted, straw-haired, wrinkled hands on her scrawny hips, laughing so much for a couple of minutes that she couldn't breathe. The tears plopped off her face, splashing the gravel beneath us.

"My boys have done me proud today," she gasped between laughs. "Except they should have killed you for locking me up, pig-bitch. Don't ever think about doing it again or you won't get off so fucking lightly next time." And she spat on my boot and strode off down the drive towards the street. At the gate, she turned around to yell, "And I hope they all took turns to fuck you till you begged them to kill you."

"They didn't even get close, Lola Bycraft, you maggoty old bitch," I yelled after her, despite the pain it caused me. "I beat the shit out of them and I'll beat the shit out of the next bunch to come to get you too. And you know it!"

She gave me the finger with each hand, but didn't turn around.

I climbed into the driver's seat, the keys falling from my trembling fingers down onto the gravel. I leaned my forehead carefully against the steering wheel and began to cry silently, shoulders shaking. I was in so much pain that I wasn't sure how I was going to drive anywhere or do anything. The tears dropped onto my cargo pants, leaving small watery bloodstains on the dark blue material.

A gentle hand took my arm and led me down out of the Land Rover and another hand in the middle of my back pulled me up against a hard, warm, safe body. I didn't really care who it belonged to, I leaned against it gratefully and let my tears finish their quiet course. The Sarge pulled me in closer, both arms around me, rubbing my back soothingly and murmuring some comforting words in my ear, none of which I could remember when I thought back on the moment.

When I had finished crying, leaving smeared blood all over his now soggy shirt, he led me over to the patrol car and pushed me down into the passenger seat, did up my seatbelt and offered me the box of tissues I always kept inside. I took two handfuls and used them to mop up my eyes, nose and blood, then leaned back against the seat and closed my eyes, holding fresh tissues to the gash on my forehead. We sat in silence for a long time until I opened my eyes again.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled down at my lap, too embarrassed at my loss of composure – first the anger, then the tears – to even look at him. I carefully swiped away more traitorous tears. He'd surely have more heated words to say about my lack of professionalism now.

But of course he didn't. Instead, his voice was soft, but strained. "Tess, please don't say that. You have nothing to be sorry about. It's me who's sorry for everything. I can see that I've fucked up this whole situation badly."

I wasn't going to argue with him. He waited patiently until I grabbed another handful of tissues and mopped up some more. I was fast running out of tissues.

"How many of them were there?" he asked when I'd finished, starting the car.

I breathed in a deep gasp of air and released it in a huge unsteady draught, wanting only to forget what had just happened. "Four. Red, Karl, Al and Grae. The older ones. The worst ones." I sketched out for him what had happened as we sped off towards the medical clinic at the prison again, pressing more tissues against my forehead. It wouldn't stop bleeding. I was proud that my voice trembled only a smidge as I spoke.

"You fought off four men by yourself?" he asked with unconcealed astonishment.

"I can look after myself," I said coldly, not appreciating his condescending attitude.

"I can see that," he commented evenly. "But still . . . four men?"

"I told you, Joanna came along at the right time too." I paused for a moment. "I'll be in trouble. I shot Red Bycraft in the arm. I've never shot anyone before."

"Who's he going to complain to?"

I looked out the window. "I should have shot him in the head. They would have all raped me if they'd had the chance. Especially him."

"Tess . . ." He was at a loss as to what to say. We drove in silence for a while.

I finally made eye contact with him, my eyes scouring his profile, all the hope that he'd brought into my life evaporated. "You said we were going to be a team, but you wouldn't listen to me when I told you it was a bad idea to arrest Lola. And you left me alone to deal with the Bycrafts when I tried to tell you that I was worried about them seeking revenge. They told me that they watched you leave before they pounced. They wouldn't have tried it on if you'd been there."

He said nothing, only tightening his jaw in response. We kept driving.

I stared at him accusingly. I couldn't hide the depth of betrayal I was feeling at that moment. It hurt almost as much as the physical pain I was experiencing. I'd trusted him and he'd let me down. "I genuinely believed everything you said to me about being a team. But you know what? I've heard all that crap before. Des gave me the same rubbish when I started working with him, so you can save your breath in the future."

Nothing but silence from him as he steered the wheel and pressed the pedals automatically, but the emotional electricity in the air could have powered a small village for a few weeks.

I didn't hold back and lashed out at him fiercely. "Now I know you're just one of those people who only talk the talk. The kind of hypocrite that tells me off for letting my emotions affect my professionalism and then does exactly the same thing himself. But I guess that's the reason you're the officer-in-charge and I'm not. Because you're the big city cop who knows everything about this town after living here for a whole five minutes and I'm just the thick hillbilly who doesn't know shit. Well, you know what? I'm a better cop than you'll ever give me credit for." I stared

out the window, stonily, one hand pressing the tissues against my forehead.

A wretched look crossed his face. "I deserve every word of that and I'm really sorry, Tess, believe me. I completely misjudged the whole situation. You're right. I was so angry at Lola Bycraft that I let my emotions take over my thinking. I won't make that mistake again, I promise."

I turned to him with scorn. "If you do, you'll have to work out what happened to me from the forensics." I let that sink in for a moment. "Because I won't be alive to tell you."

His jaw clenched and unclenched a few times at my bluntness. "I'm going to get us more resources, Tess. We're a team now. We're going to beat those Bycrafts, together. You're not alone anymore," he said earnestly.

"Aren't I?" I questioned with bitterness, thinking that, God help me, I *did* want to believe him. Then I berated myself. *Was there no end to my gullibility*, I asked, reminding myself that when I'd needed him most, he hadn't been there for me. Just like Des.

Chapter 17

We were saved from any further uncomfortable discussion by my phone ringing. It was Dad and I assured him that I hadn't been shot as he'd heard and that, yes, I had been injured but was well and truly alive and on my way to the doctor. Then Abe rang and I went through the same routine, but this time assuring him that Joanna and I hadn't shot five Bycrafts dead as he'd heard, though I confessed that I wished we had.

The next call was from Jake. He was at boiling point with angry distress. "Tess, what the fuck's going on? I'm hearing all sorts of things – that you've been shot, that you've killed my mother, that you've been assaulted by my brothers. Talk to me, babe."

I didn't feel like going through it again while the Sarge was listening, so told him I was okay, was on my way to the prison as we spoke and would tell him everything when I arrived. Then I hung up and turned off my phone, not wanting to talk to anybody else. I closed my eyes and tried to go over every action that had happened during those terrifying minutes, thinking about the report I'd have to write later.

When we pulled into the carpark of the prison, Jake was waiting for me. As was every other prison officer on a break. I wasn't happy about that, not particularly wanting to have an audience. Jake rushed over to me the second I gingerly stepped out of the car, pulling up short when he saw my face. The response from his work mates ranged from sympathetic murmurings to angry disgust (at the Bycrafts, not me, I hoped).

"Oh Tessie. Babe," he whispered in dismay and gathered me to his chest, crushing me in his arms. We stayed like that for a while, but there were no more tears from me. I'd cried myself out all over the Sarge's shirt already. Jake pulled back to look down at me. I met his eyes steadily, not flinching from his intense gaze, even though I knew I looked beyond terrible.

"Who did it?" he asked with suppressed anger, stroking my hair. "I'm going to kill them."

I loosened one hand from his tight grip and pointed to my bleeding nose. "This was Red. Twice. And this was Grae," I said pointing to my blackening eye. "And this," referring to my split lip, "was Al."

“What about this?” he asked softly, kissing my forehead near the ugly gash.

I gave a sour laugh and wiped away more blood. “That was where I hit my head on the doorstep after Karl tackled me.”

“And what about . . .” he hesitated, not knowing how to phrase one of his greatest fears.

“No, they didn’t get the chance. But Red threatened to and your mother told me that she hoped they had.” I wasn’t sugar-coating the truth for him.

“You shouldn’t have arrested her,” he said defensively.

“She swore at the Sarge and spat on him. We’re not putting up with that rubbish anymore, Jake,” I said, defending the Sarge. I wondered briefly why I bothered. “Your family has to start behaving themselves like civilised human beings.”

He changed the subject, which he always did when the talk about his family became too prickly for him, needing to direct his immense rage somewhere else besides them. The Sarge made an easy and obvious target. Jake looked over at him waiting impatiently, wanting to take me to the doctor as soon as possible.

“Where the hell were you when all this was happening to Tessie, Maguire? You’re supposed to be a team.” His tone was unmistakably hostile.

The Sarge bristled immediately. “I had other duties to see to that took me from the station.”

“Did you know that your clever decision to lock up my mother would provoke my family? I’m sure that Tessie told you it was a bad idea. Did you listen to her or are you too much of a hotshot city cop to listen to a local yokel?” The expression on the Sarge’s face apparently told him everything he needed to know. Jake shook his head with pure loathing. “What’s happened to Tessie is all your fault,” he said heatedly.

“No, it’s not!” the Sarge shouted suddenly. “It’s *your* family’s fault, Bycraft. They’re the savages who ganged up on your girlfriend and beat her up. And I hope you’re proud of them.”

Jake stalked over and stood nose-to-nose with the Sarge. They were of a similar height and build, the Sarge marginally taller and bulkier.

“Your bad judgement is hurting Tessie,” Jake snarled.

“That pack of animals you call a family is hurting Tess,” the Sarge snarled back.

“I’m going to sort them out,” Jake told him.

“No, you won’t,” the Sarge insisted coldly. “You won’t interfere with police business.”

Jake butted up even closer to him. If the two men had horns, they would have been locked together by now. “Don’t you fucking tell me what to do, Maguire. This is *my* girlfriend and *my* family we’re talking about.”

“Don’t you disobey a directive from a police officer,” warned the Sarge officiously, “or you’ll find yourself in the lockup as well. You stay away from your family, and I’ll take care of Tess.”

“You haven’t done a good job of that so far, have you? Des looked after her better than you,” sneered Jake. “You better just stay the fuck away from her if you know what’s good for you.”

My eyes moved from Jake to the Sarge, unimpressed with either. I rotated and pushing through the crowd of prison officers engrossed by the men’s confrontation, stalked into the prison by myself, straight past the reception area. Unlike my usual practice, today I didn’t stop to talk to any of the curious staff, who jumped to open all the security doors for me down the hall to the clinic. When he saw my face,

Lindsey hustled the current patient out of the consulting room to a prison officer and took me in ahead of the waiting prisoners, ignoring their loud moans about the unfairness of my priority treatment.

Dr Fenn took one look at me and made me sit down, telling Lindsey to fetch me some warm sweet tea immediately. I fell into the chair and started trembling uncontrollably, tears pooling in my eyes again at their kindness and concern. The doctor held my hands tightly and reassured me with a composed authority I found comforting that I was suffering from delayed shock. He informed me it was a perfectly normal physical reaction to any event that had caused the production of a lot of adrenaline in the body. And while I sipped on the sweet lukewarm tea and calmed myself, he and Lindsey patched me up, stitching the gash above my eyebrow and cleaning up my split lip, examining my nose. I told them everything that had happened to me while they worked.

"Tessie," sympathised the Doc, pausing with a blood-drenched cotton swab in his hand, "you can't continue like this. Your body's taken a real beating over the last few days. You need some time off and maybe start thinking about leaving town. Or finding a new job."

"I'm not going to let those Bycrafts beat me," I insisted stubbornly. "They've already done enough damage to my family. I'm not letting them drive Dad and me out of the home that we were both born in, or the town that our family has lived in since the very beginning. Especially with Dad in the shape he is."

"Tessie, you know that I admire your spirit, but those Bycraft animals are clearly gunning for you. And you're not going to be any good to your father if you're dead, are you?"

"Doc . . ." I started, shocked by his brutal frankness. But before I could say another word, there was a soft knock on the door and Jake poked his head around, uncertain of his welcome.

"We're still consulting here, Officer Bycraft. Wait outside please," the doctor demanded with icy sharpness. Jake withdrew without a fuss.

The doctor took a syringe out of its packet. "I'm giving you a shot of morphine. You'll feel the effects immediately. You must be in a great deal of pain with these new injuries on top of your old ones."

I admitted that I was and braced for the injection. I wasn't a big fan of needles or of drugs in general, but he was right. I felt the strong pain fading into the background after only a few minutes. I could have kissed him.

He took photos of my face for evidence, with close-ups of each wound, and promised again to email me his report as soon as possible. As I stood up, he pressed even more painkillers into my hands. "You're going to need these later. They're very strong so take them sparingly and strictly according to directions."

"Thanks Doc. I better let you get back to your other patients," I said as I gave both the doctor and Lindsey a spontaneous hug. "And thanks very much again for helping me out so often."

Dr Fenn smiled sadly. "Tess, I'm very fond of you, but I'd be happy never to see you here again." Lindsey nodded in wry agreement.

I gave them the best half-smile I could manage, a bit tearful again and agreed, leaving the room and quietly closing the door behind me.

Jake and the Sarge were sprawled on the plastic waiting-room seats, bored, sitting conspicuously apart. They both jumped up when I came out and both walked towards me. I went to Jake and stepped into his arms again. He hugged me tightly and it was heaven to lean against him, safe and loved again.

“Tessie, I’m so sorry about what my family have done to you. I want to go and sort them out myself, but Sergeant Shithead over there keeps threatening to arrest me if I go near them,” he whispered in my ear, kissing me gently on the lips. I recoiled strongly backwards in pain.

“Don’t do that! It hurts,” I snapped, pushing him away. “You better listen to the Sarge, Jakey. I don’t want him to arrest you.” I yawned. Now that the adrenaline had faded, I suddenly felt totally exhausted. “I’m going home. I need to rest.”

“Of course you do. I’ll drive you home,” he said, taking my hand.

“No, it’s okay. You go back to work. I don’t want you to lose any pay because of me. I’ll ask the Sarge to drive me home. It’s the least he can do for me.”

“You sure, baby doll?” I assured him I was. “Okay. I’ll call you later. I love you.” And he kissed me tenderly on my forehead, away from my new stitches.

I looked up at him and hugged him tightly. “I love you too, Jakey.” I walked over to where the Sarge was waiting, watching us with deceptive aloofness, his arms crossed.

“Let’s go, Tess,” he demanded and I nodded agreement, carefully yawning again. He slid his arm around my shoulders and looked down at me, his eyes showing his genuine concern. “Are you okay? What did the doctor say?”

“I’ll live,” I said flatly. I didn’t want to talk to him. I turned and waved to Jake, sighing at the dark expression on his face at the Sarge’s familiarity. I slipped out from under the Sarge’s arm and headed off to the patrol car by myself. Inside, I slumped in the passenger seat, closing my eyes to discourage any conversation on the way back.

“Tess,” he began, despite my unmistakable hint that I had no wish to speak. “I’ve organised a force from Big Town to meet me so we can arrest all four Bycrafts at once. That’s why I didn’t want your boyfriend to be in town when it happens. It will probably get ugly.”

“I want to be there too,” I insisted, opening my eyes and sitting up with interest.

“No,” he said firmly. “I don’t want you exposed to any more violence today.”

“I’m a cop in this town. It’s my job! You can’t just –”

He was resolute, interrupting me. “Don’t make me give you an order about this, Tess. I want the Bycrafts to stop associating every policing activity that happens in this town with you. You’re not going to be involved in this bust. If there’s going to be any retribution, I want it to be on my head this time, not yours.”

I said nothing, silently fuming.

“I know you think I’m not listening to you again, but can you please try to understand my reasoning about this?”

I didn’t respond, staring straight ahead at the road flying towards us, jaw set, not meeting his eyes. My thoughts were spinning. I’d always been in the middle of *every* police action in Little Town since I’d been posted here. I couldn’t imagine stepping back from a Bycraft raid.

“Tess?” he asked again. “Please?”

I remained silent, staring ahead. Couldn’t even imagine it.

“Please Tess?” he begged, with so much honest emotion that I relented a little. But I didn’t answer him straight away.

“Okay,” I said finally and quietly, all the fight deserting me in a swift flow. The morphine was knocking me out, I realised reluctantly. And I’d had enough of the Bycrafts for one day anyway.

“Thank you,” he said, equally quiet, as we pulled into my driveway. He insisted on accompanying me upstairs to explain everything to Dad, me instantly shaking off

his helping hand when I painfully climbed the front stairs. Inside, he faced the same angry scepticism about his judgement from Dad that Jake had dished out to him. I didn't defend him. While he listened to Dad calmly and patiently, not trying to justify himself or blame anyone else, I wrote down the usual home addresses of the four Bycrafts who'd attacked me. After ten solid minutes of Dad berating him, the Sarge looked at his watch and excused himself as it was time to meet the team from Big Town at the station. I walked him to the door.

"I wish I was going to be there with you all," I complained unhappily, leaning with weariness against the doorframe.

"I know you do. But it's better if you're not involved." He leaned on the doorframe as well, standing too close to me, his dark blue eyes looking down into mine intensely. His hand reached up to rest on my shoulder, squeezing it tightly, sincere regret on his face. "Today's the last time I'm ever going to let you down, Tess. Do you believe me?"

I wanted to duck out from under his hand, but was too mesmerised by his eyes to move, lost in their depths. "I want to believe you, but I . . . it's just . . . I . . ." I sighed deeply. "I don't know."

"I'll prove it to you, I promise," he said in a low serious voice and we searched each other's eyes, captured by the emotion of the moment. He snapped out of it first, looking away with a heavy sigh. "Well, okay, I better get moving, I suppose. I'll drop by after it's over. See you, Tess."

"Good luck. Take care." He walked away. "Oh, and Sarge," I called out after him. He turned. "Kick a few heads in for me. Especially Red's." He smiled briefly. I didn't smile back. He jogged down the stairs to the car. He tooted the horn as he drove off and I waved and leaned against the door until I couldn't see the car anymore.

A few minutes later, I was standing under the shower, the stream of hot water equally painful and therapeutic as it washed away the dried blood. I dressed in a loose skirt and t-shirt and carefully avoided looking at my poor damaged face in the mirror as I combed my wet hair. When I came out I found Dad soaking my uniform in stain remover.

Dad made me lunch, but I wasn't able to choke down even a bite of it. It was only as I settled down next to him, his hand softly and soothingly stroking my hair, to watch some mind-numbing afternoon TV that I remembered that I'd turned off my phone. I turned it back on to see that I'd had missed a number of phone calls since then. The only one I was interested in was Jake, so I rang him back, but he must have been working because it went straight to his voicemail. I left him a quick message letting him know that I was safe at home and then turned my phone off again. Sometimes you just don't want to talk to anybody.

The banality of the TV show and the strong shot of painkiller the doctor had given me made me drowsy. I curled up on the lounge and fell asleep. When I woke up, groggily roused by the sound of raised voices, I was alone in the room and the late afternoon sun was streaming through the window. I sat up and rubbed my eyes, wincing with pain when I belatedly remembered that one of them was now bruised. The voices were coming from the kitchen, but I didn't go investigate. My brain was too fluffy with painkiller and sleep to give my body any directions, so I remained slumped on the lounge blinking blearily at the blank TV.

The voices came closer until a blonde-haired pixie poked her face around the doorway and a familiar husky, sexy voice assailed me. "Thank Christ! Sleeping Beauty's finally woken up, and she didn't even have to kiss a fugly toad like Bum

here to do it.” It was Fiona, and standing behind, towering over her, was Bum Bunion.

“Oh no, what’s he doing in my house?” I complained tiredly, listing to my right. I closed my eyes again.

Fiona turned her head and yelled to someone in the hall. “Hey Maguire, get your arse in here and come prop up your little partner. She’s as loose as a Bycraft-fucking slut. Oh that’s right, I almost forgot, she *is* a Bycraft-fucking slut.”

I waited for Dad to yell out to her to watch her mouth because that was his daughter she was talking about, but he didn’t.

“Where’s Dad?” I murmured, anxiety breaking through my grogginess.

“One of his reprobate friends took him down to the pub for a few hours,” she reassured me. “They’re playing the pokies. He didn’t want to go, but I told him we’d keep you busy while he was gone. And Christ knows the poor bloke deserves a fucking break now and then. Especially with you as a daughter and all the trouble you cause.”

The Sarge entered the room, shooting the Inspector a dirty look at her language, and sat next to me on the lounge, hauling me upright with his arm around my shoulder. Too groggy to care, I leaned over until I was comfortably supported on his shoulder, refusing to open my eyes. He kept his arm around me. I surprised myself by thinking how nice it was.

“Tessie, you are one lucky bitch,” Fiona said, settling herself in an armchair, Bum in the other. I opened my good eye briefly and glared at her. I was not able to think of a single way in which my situation could possibly be considered as ‘lucky’.

“You have the Inspector herself coming out to this horrible horse-fucking shitpile of a town to investigate your assault. Talk about teacher’s pet.” She cast a scornful eye on Bum. “I couldn’t trust any other of the dumbshits I have to work with to look after my Tessie properly. Couldn’t even find their own arses with a map and a GPS.” Bum ignored her calmly, well used to her diatribes.

I sat up, instantly alert, and twisted to look up at the Sarge. His uniform was scuffed, his hair more mussed than usual, he had a bruise developing on his cheek and a small cut on his bottom lip. “What happened? Did you get them all?”

“All four are in custody, on their way to Big Town right now,” he told me, with an exalted smile. “We had to get medical attention for all of them, especially Red. You did a good job of beating them up, Tess. When we broke the door down to Red’s place, his mother and his girlfriend were trying to stitch up his arm with nothing but some Dettol, cotton balls and fishing line. They weren’t very happy about him being arrested and it became violent at one point. But he’d had a half-bottle of rum to numb the pain by the time we turned up and was as drunk as all hell. He couldn’t even stand up straight and didn’t put up much of a fight. His mother was a different story though. She fought us like a demon. God, that woman is the devil’s consort.” He frowned. “What I don’t understand is why none of the men made a run for it after they left the police station. They had at least a three hour head start over us.”

Fiona answered. “Too fucking used to getting away with everything. Think they’re above the law.” She laughed, a hard barking noise. “We showed those scrotes who’s in charge around here today, that’s for sure.”

My hand flew up to my mouth, not able to speak, suddenly overwhelmed by emotion again, glad that someone besides me was finally doing *something* about the Bycrafts for once. I furiously blinked back the unwelcome tears that sprang into my eyes. Nobody cried in front of Detective Inspector Fiona Midden.

“Aw Jesus, don’t turn on the waterworks, Tessie,” Fiona sighed with impatient disgust. “It doesn’t cut any ice with me because I know that you’re really as tough as dried bull’s balls. Besides, you’ll just give these two even more of a horn for you with those helpless little girl tears. And they don’t need any more encouragement, believe me. Look at this one,” and she indicated the Sarge, “with his fucking hands all over you like a Braille-reading octopus. And this one,” nodding towards Bum, “has been perving at your panties since we got here.”

Those comments had the immediate effect of drying up my threatened tears, but left the three of us feeling uncomfortable. I looked down and saw with embarrassment that I was flashing an indecent amount of thigh, and yes, probably some panties. I hastily pulled my skirt down over my legs from where it had ridden up as I slept. The Sarge let go of my shoulder and I promptly shifted away from him to the opposite end of the lounge, crossing my legs and arms protectively, not making any eye contact with either man. The Sarge’s face was stony and Bum squirmed in his chair, his eyes firmly fixed on the carpet, pink flushing his cheeks.

“Good,” said Fiona, pleased with the response. “Now that the men are focussed and got their minds off their dicks for once, let’s get down to business. I haven’t got all day and I’m gagging on the stink of cow shit already.”

“There’s only a handful of cows around here, ma’am,” I pointed out politely.

“Must be those Bycrafts I can smell then. Whatever. It fucking reeks in this town.” She turned to Bum. “Get your notepad out, dipshit! I want you to get your head out of your arse and do some work for once.”

“Yes ma’am.” He scrambled to open his notebook and have his pen poised, ready to write. I almost felt sorry for him having to work so closely with Fiona, day in, day out. Almost.

She skilfully took us through the day’s events from when we began our community beat. When we reached the part about taking Lola Bycraft to the lockup, she stopped her questioning, an incredulous expression on her face.

“And which one of you numb-nuts thought that was a good idea?” she demanded, her sharp blue eyes scorching first the Sarge, then me. It was a test of sorts, because she knew it wouldn’t have been me.

I stayed silent, looking down at my bare feet, possibly the one part of me that currently wasn’t bruised. The Sarge spoke up without hesitation. “That was me, ma’am.”

She shook her head sadly. “Jesus! It’s always the fucking same – the better-looking they are, the dumber they are. And you, Maguire, are as dumb as a box of rocks. Tess!” She made me jump. “Why didn’t you tell Sergeant Shit-for-brains here that it was a stupid idea to lock up that old bitch-hag?”

I didn’t want to answer because that would be disloyal.

The Sarge jumped in again. “She did, ma’am, but I wouldn’t listen to her. I was angry that Mrs Bycraft spat on me.” We exchanged a glance and he gave me a small remorseful smile. I gave him a smaller one in return. I also gave him major points for owning up to a screw-up in front of Fiona and not blaming me for anything. He couldn’t have been more different to Des at that moment if he’d tried.

“Fuck a duck! Can you two save your lovefest for later in the backseat of your patrol car like the rest of us? Just answer the questions so I can get the fuck out of this backwards shithole before I start wanting to root a goat and marry my own brother.”

“Your brother’s pretty cute,” I reminded her, eyeing her steadily. “And we’ve got some real talented goats around these parts, if you know what I mean. You

could do a lot worse, ma'am."

Fiona's mouth slammed shut and a rare, beautiful smile crossed her face, lighting up her features, making her look twenty years younger and sweetly pretty. She turned to the two men. "And that's why I'll always respect Tessie Fuller a hundred times more than I'll ever respect any of you swinging-dicks. She makes me smile, and there's not much in this arse-fucking world that can make me smile anymore, but she can."

She dropped the smile and continued questioning me. She led me through the ambush at the station, even making me stand up and demonstrate exactly what I did and what they did, and that's why she was such a good detective – she was thorough, never sloppy and never missing any information, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. When she'd finished questioning me at home, she wanted me go down to the station and re-enact the assault.

When I groaned in complaint, she argued back, banging her fist on the armrest of the chair to stress her points. "Look Tess, I want a guaranteed [bang] conviction on these arsewipe [bang] Bycrafts, so we're going to make sure our fucking case [bang] is absolutely solid [bang] and tighter than Red Bycraft's arsehole when he steps back into prison [two bangs for extra emphasis]."

She sat back and fixed me with those bright eyes. "I really want to see Red Bycraft locked up permanently. He's a cold-blooded predator and I want him off the streets of Wattling Bay as soon as possible before he attacks again. Jesus fucking Christ, Tess! If you'd seen the injuries he left on that young girl. She's scarred for life, physically and mentally. She'll never be able to trust a man again." She glared at the Sarge and Bum accusingly as if they were both rapists-in-waiting and shook her head in genuine sorrow at Red's last victim. The last victim he was locked up for, anyway. Poor Sharnee didn't count officially.

There was no way I could argue with that, so the four of us trooped out of my house only to meet Jake walking up the front stairs, still in his uniform, his overnight bag slung over his shoulder. The Sarge and Bum tensed, shooting him overtly hostile glances that he returned doublefold, while Fiona regarded them all, hands on her hips, cynically amused half-smile on her lips. Her blue eyes were bright with mischief. Mine was the only welcoming face for him, but even then I secretly wished he hadn't come.

"Fuck me!" Fiona said loudly. "Smell the testosterone spraying out around here, Tessie. The stench is unbearable. I reckon we'll see a cockfight over you if we hang around long enough, there's so much competition for biggest dick dominance going on right now. Someone better call David Attenborough fast. It's fascinating animal behaviour."

"Stop it, ma'am!" I remonstrated with sharp embarrassment, before turning to Jake. "What are you doing here, honey-boy? I wasn't expecting you."

"The boss let me swap my shift so I could be here for you tonight, Tessie." He put his arm around me and gently kissed me on the cheek, his gaze sweeping over the other three with none of his usual friendliness. I guess he'd heard from his family about the arrests.

"I have to go down to the station with Fiona and Bum. I'm being interviewed."

"I'll come with you."

"No, you won't," said Fiona straight away.

That ruffled his feathers. "Why the hell not? Tessie needs my support right now and I'm going to give her that."

She turned to me and shook her head in mock bewilderment. "Another one

who's too hot for words, but almost too stupid to breathe." Then she turned back to him. "Because Jake – and I'll try to say this in words of one syllable or less just for your benefit because you're a Bycraft – this is an official investigation into an assault against *our* Tessie by four of *your* fucking repulsive relatives, who are now, thank Christ, safely in custody so they can't hurt her even more. You are *not* welcome to join in the investigation. And fucking forgive me if I question your motives for wanting to join us in the first place." She stamped off down the stairs, uncaring of how offended he was by her insinuation regarding his intent or her comment on his intelligence. She turned back to the rest of us. "Come on! Get your arses in the car. And I don't mean tomorrow."

The Sarge and Bum rushed to obey, both shooting Jake toxic glances as they did. I didn't rush off, but stayed to hug him. "I have to go with them. What are you going to do, Jakey?"

"I'll wait here for you and keep Trev company."

"Dad's not here right now. He's at the pub."

"Okay," he sighed. "I'll potter around then and make you dinner." He looked down at me and tenderly brushed my hair away from the stitches on my forehead, undiluted love shining in his eyes. "Is that all right, my beautiful girl? Or do you think I'm trying to spy on the investigation for my family too?"

"The thought never crossed my mind," I said honestly. Bum blared the horn and made us both jump. "I gotta go, but please stay with me tonight, Jakey. I really, really need someone to hug."

"Course I will. I love you." I smiled up at him, hugged him fiercely, and limped down the stairs as fast as I was able, before clamouring into the backseat of the patrol car next to the Sarge. Jake watched pensively from the veranda as we drove down the driveway out onto the highway. I waved at him as we left, but I was the only one who did.

Chapter 18

"Why do you go out with a Bycraft anyway, Tessie? They're nothing but animals," asked Bum, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror.

"Because Jake's not an animal and he's fucking hot, you dildo," replied Fiona for me, looking out the window with boredom. She hated the country. "Haven't you seen Tessie's face after a night with him? He's obviously a smoking hot screw, unlike you, you limp-dicked early-squirter. He's giving our Tessie the ride of her life and he treats her like a princess to boot. And, besides, everybody knows the Bycrafts are all hung like horses."

"Can we *please* stop talking about my private life? It's nobody's business who I go out with or why," I insisted, annoyed that people still felt my relationship with Jake was a topic for casual conversation. Bum desisted, but continued to mutter about it under his breath all the way to the station, shooting me glances in the mirror.

When we pulled into the carpark and alighted from the car, Fiona looked up at the station and groaned.

"Oh Jesus! I'd forgotten what a third-world hovel this place is. You still got those Sunday-roasts-on-legs living in the lockup, Tessie?"

"No ma'am, the Sarge made me move my girls out. They're living at home now."

"Good for you, Maguire. The only time I like animals is when they're on my

plate, swimming in gravy,” she said, stalking up to the front door, tapping her foot impatiently while the Sarge unlocked it.

“God,” she exclaimed derisively as she took in the simple surroundings of the counter area.

We took them to the back room that was in the same state of disarray as we’d left it earlier in the day.

“They really made a meal of you, didn’t they Tessie?” Bum said angrily, looking around at the upturned furniture.

That was genuinely nice of him and I appreciated his empathy, but I was embarrassed. “The chair and the pot plant were me,” I confessed, everyone’s eyes on me. “And that dent in the filing cabinet too. I had a temper tantrum afterwards.”

“Anger’s good,” said Fiona mildly. “Better than tears.”

“There were those too.”

“Never mind, you’re only human,” she said, disappointed. “Now run me through the whole story again.”

So I did, performing for them a strange type of dance, choreographed by fear and pain, as I re-enacted my fight with those four men as best as I could remember. She shot questions at me the whole time, helping me recall even the smallest details, barking at Bum to write down this or that. The Sarge stood quietly to the side, leaning on the wall, arms and ankles crossed, watching me the entire time with an unreadable and closed expression on his face.

When I reached the part where I shot Red, I stopped. “Ma’am, I’m worried about getting into trouble for shooting Red Bycraft in the arm.”

“You should be worried. You’re in trouble with me about it already,” she snapped out.

I looked at her anxiously, waiting for a reaming or to be told I was going to be investigated by the police integrity unit. There would be an investigation of course, as there was after every police shooting, but I’d hoped it would be done close to home and not by anyone in the city who didn’t understand the local Bycraft situation.

Fiona continued, “You should have shot him in the dick instead while you had the chance. No, better still, in the fucking head. I know you’re a good shot, Tessie, so next time don’t miss, okay?”

I breathed out heavily in relief, my eyes closed. She came over to me, sliding her arm around my shoulder.

“You weren’t really worried about it, were you?” I simply nodded, not able to speak, close to those traitorous tears again. She noticed, as she would. “There isn’t a cop in Wattling Bay who wouldn’t want to plug a bullet into Red Bycraft’s skull if they had the opportunity and could make it look like an accident.” She gazed into my face and a fleeting affectionate expression crossed her features. “Tessie, you did a good job here today, and we’re all very proud of you. Once again, you showed those Bycrafts that you’re not going to lie down and die like they expect. We’re going to make sure those bastards get what they deserve. And don’t worry, I’ll be doing the investigation into the shooting and I’ve already decided that you have no case to answer to.”

Pep talk over, she hardened up and commenced interrogating me again. But by the second hour I was flagging badly. The painkiller the doctor gave me had worn off a long time ago and I was in great need of some dinner, more painkillers and a hug from someone. My head thumped badly and I couldn’t stop thinking about Jakey, hoping desperately that he’d still be there when I finally returned home. I

righted the chair I'd kicked over that morning and plonked myself down in it, propping up my weary head with one hand, while Fiona made sure she had every little detail straight.

I would never dream of telling her that I was exhausted. You didn't admit to human weakness around Fiona. She couldn't be further removed from a sympathetic, maternal, loving woman, but I found her endlessly supportive of me, an inspiring mentor and a relentless champion. For some reason she'd taken a shine to me from the second we'd met when I was a critically injured toddler and she was a fresh-faced detective constable thrown into her first murder investigation – that of my mother's. Being childless, maybe saw me as some kind of daughter-figure. And maybe, having been motherless myself almost my whole life, I saw some well-hidden hint of motherliness in her that I responded to. Whatever. It worked for us and I'd always found her entertaining and enjoyed her company immensely. And I especially loved watching her dish it out to men. Being a young woman myself, I'd copped my fair share of chauvinistic behaviour since I'd joined the force, as I'm sure she had also at my age. To see her put arrogant men in their place with a few sharp words was priceless. I never grew tired of it.

But eventually even Fiona had asked every question she needed to. By then I had laid my head in my arms on the table and closed my eyes, wearily mumbling answers to her.

"Inspector," spoke up the Sarge finally. "Tess has had a traumatic day and she's exhausted. I think I should take her home to bed."

Fiona stiffened and spun around to face him. "Excuse me, Maguire? Did I just hear you correctly? Fuck me, but you're bold! Tessie, wake up!"

I sprang up, eyes wide. "I'm awake! I wasn't sleeping, I swear."

"This man," and she pointed at the Sarge, much to his surprise, "is talking about getting you into bed. I swear to Christ that's all he thinks about when he's near you."

"*What?*" the Sarge and I said simultaneously, glancing at each other askance.

"He didn't say –" I started.

"I didn't mean –" he started.

"The Sarge is engaged," I told her, as if that resolved the matter entirely.

Fiona directed her terrifying gaze on him. "*Engaged?* Who the fuck bothers getting engaged these days? It's like being half-pregnant. Either you're married or you're not. None of this 'engaged' shit. My Ronnie and I met at a nightclub, banged each other's brains out the entire weekend and got married four weeks later. Been married for over twenty years of happiness now. When are you getting married?"

"We haven't settled on a date yet," he said edgily, clearly not wishing to discuss his personal life.

"Why not? How long have you been engaged?"

"With all respect, ma'am, I think that's my business, not yours," he said, displeased with her aggressive inquisitiveness. He straightened up and was about to become bolshie with her, I could tell from his antagonistic stance.

I stood up and yawned, stretching as much as I could with all of my injuries. "I really do need to go to bed, Fiona. I'm whacked. And Jakey's waiting for me at home."

It did the trick and she turned her attention back to me and away from him, coming over to me and hugging me tightly. The Sarge shot me a grateful glance, conscious of my diversionary tactics. "Of course you're whacked, sweetheart." She let me go and turned to the Sarge. "Maguire, take Tessie home now. And don't you

fucking try anything on with her or you'll have me to answer to, got it?"

"Yes ma'am. Clear as glass," he said, his tone bordering on insolent. They exchanged an icy stare, sheer dislike in her eyes. He returned it twice over. She let it go, although I knew that she had made a mental note of his attitude.

She turned back to me. "Tessie, I'll be in touch. To take your mind off this shitarse day you've had, you go home and get Jake to fuck you so hard that you scream. And not just once. Make him get it up it a couple of times. You won't even be able to remember your own name afterwards, let alone what you've been through. Always works for me."

It was excellent advice, but I was cringing with embarrassment yet again about how blunt she was being in front of the two men. I didn't want them thinking about me being intimate with Jake. I didn't dare look at either of them, sensing that they were both eyeing me speculatively, Bum overtly, the Sarge more discreetly. They were probably wondering how Jake was going to go about such an energetic activity with such an injured woman.

The Inspector spoke again and we all jumped to attention. "Come on, Bum! Move your arse. I want to get back to fucking civilisation before they get the banjos out. A high-maintenance pretty boy like you isn't going to last long out here in *Survivor*-land surrounded by sex-starved mouth-breathers."

"We have shops here you know, ma'am," I reminded her. "We even have a school. It's hardly *Survivor* territory."

She snorted with scorn and they jumped into their unmarked and sped off into the night back to Big Town.

"Let's take my old bomb home," I said to the Sarge. "Then you can pick up the patrol car." I stopped suddenly in alarm and he ran into the back of me, grabbing my arms to stop me stumbling forward. "My keys! I don't know where they are! I dropped them earlier."

"I have them," he said, rummaging in his pocket. "I'll drive."

"Thanks Sarge." Painfully slow, I climbed up into the passenger seat and we drove off as well.

"I need a shower after being with the Inspector for so long," he confessed in a rare moment of openness. "She made everything I did and said seem so sordid, like my life goal was trying to get you into bed with me." He glanced over, obviously feeling awkward. "I hope you don't think . . ."

"No, of course not, Sarge." I reassured. "You're engaged." And as if any man would be interested in seducing me, considering my current appearance. "But that's just her way. She's very protective of me."

"I've noticed," he replied dryly.

We drove in silence for a while. "Where did you learn to fight like that?" he asked, screeching to a sudden halt to let a mother duck and her four little ducklings cross the highway. I smiled as best I could as I watched the little family safely reach the shelter of the other side of the road and ignored the Sarge's question, hoping he'd forget that he'd asked, distracted by the cute scene.

He didn't and asked me again when we started driving. "Where did you learn to fight so well?"

"From a little emotion called desperation," I said lightly.

"Bullshit," he said mildly, shaking his head. "You're a lot tougher than you pretend to be and a lot more modest than you ought to be."

"That sounds like confusing big city talk to me. I'm just a simple country girl, trying to do her job and get by."

He snorted rudely. We drove in silence again for a while. "You don't like to give in to the Bycrafts, do you?"

"Not normally, but I'm prepared to give in to Jakey now and then. It stops him feeling emasculated."

He sighed with frustration. "You're not going to talk to me about any of this seriously, are you?"

"Nope," I admitted. "I've just been grilled for hours and I'm done with being serious for the day. I want some food, some painkillers and some good loving, that's all, and maybe not even in that order."

"I don't have any painkillers on me and I'm too afraid of the Inspector to even dare to offer you good loving, but I can pick up some food if you like." He threw me his quick smile. "Feel like Chinese takeaway?"

"Takeaway? That doesn't sound healthy enough for you, Sarge," I teased wearily.

"Tess, tonight I'd happily eat three deep-fried triple bacon and cheese burgers if it made you feel better." The expression on his face was too far from light-hearted for me to return, so I busied myself studying my nails. Despite my shower, there was still dried blood embedded under them.

"I'm sure you'd regret eating those, but thanks for the offer anyway. Jakey said he'd make something for me. You're welcome to join us," I said into my lap, quietly polite, hoping he'd decline. I'd had enough of him for one day.

"I better not. I don't think he's too keen on me at the moment. I just arranged the arrest of four of his relatives."

Another silence.

"Tess?"

"Hmm?"

"When we arrested Red Bycraft, he had his shirt off."

I knew what he was going to say and continued to sit silently.

"He has a tattoo."

"He has a lot of tattoos," I said with no emotion.

"This one's on his stomach. It's unbelievably obscene. A man who is the spitting image of Bycraft himself seems to be raping a woman while he stabs her in the chest with one hand and strangles her with the other."

I glanced out the window at the darkness and crossed my arms defensively. I saw my own face reflected back at me in the glass. I stared at myself sadly.

"Tess, the woman looks exactly like you." In the window reflection his eyes were on me, eyebrows furrowed. "And she's smiling while he does it." He shook his head in disgust. "*Smiling*, for God's sake!"

I didn't speak for a while. "I know," I sighed. "He's taunted me with it enough times."

"That kind of obsession is incredibly disturbing."

A humourless laugh erupted from me. "Don't worry, Sarge. You'll be safe. He's not interested in you."

And that was the last thing I said to him before he pulled into my driveway. I jumped out as soon as possible. He walked over to the patrol car and drove off while I made my slow way up the stairs. He honked the horn, but I was too tired to wave back at him.

I went into the lounge room to give Dad, who had returned and was watching the news, a kiss and followed my nose to the kitchen where Jake was cooking. It was an activity for him that involved much swearing, misreading of the recipe and

more dirty pots, pans and utensils than could ever possibly be warranted by the end product. But damn, he looked hot while he did it! He was wearing Nana Fuller's huge frilly flowered apron to protect his white t-shirt from the tomato sauce he was making for the pasta. When I silently entered the kitchen he was leaning down, his elbows on the messy bench, frowning in puzzlement over one of my food-splattered cookbooks, his cute butt sticking out, a smear of tomato paste across his cheek.

I went up behind him, squeezed his butt and then hugged him tightly, moulding my body against his, nuzzling his neck. "I love to see a man cooking in my kitchen. It's so sexy," I murmured in his ear.

He turned around smiling and moved to kiss me, then remembered at the last second that he couldn't. He made a sad face. "I never realised that I'd miss kissing you so much, Tessie. Damn those Bycrafts," he said with a sad smile as I reached up to wipe the paste off his face. He kissed me on the forehead instead and turned back to his recipe.

It was lucky I arrived when I did because he was about to add a bunch of coriander to the pasta sauce instead of the flat-leaf parsley that the recipe called for, even though I'd told him at least twenty times about the differences between the two herbs. After teasing him mercilessly, I went outside to my herb garden to snip some parsley for him. It was a beautiful night, clear and warm, the jasmine that grew wild up the side of the house redolent with perfume, the sky bright with stars. I had to admit that the marvellous night sky was something I'd missed a lot when I'd moved to the city. You just couldn't see the stars properly in the glare of the city's lights.

I took a minute to breathe in the calm darkness, a moment of peace, to remind myself that I was still alive, still fighting. For now at least. I looked up at the stars, identifying the Southern Cross, Alpha and Beta Centauri and bright Venus, the planet of love. I hoped there would be love for me tonight and much love into the future. And I hoped I would be here to experience it. I moved over to my well-tended herb garden and was leaning over the raised garden bed, when a large shape rustled near me. I shrieked in fright, dropping my secateurs and startling my sleeping chickens, who clucked loudly in alarm. The shape pounded away down the side of the house. I was enraged beyond belief.

"*Piss off, Denny Bycraft!*" I screamed after him as he ran off. "Stop bloody spying on me!"

Jake ran out to see what the matter was and found me standing in the yard, my hands covering my face, trying to control myself, on the verge of tears again, my heart thumping. *I don't cry*, I reminded myself, my old mantra from since I was a kid. *I don't cry*.

He clutched me to him. "What's wrong, baby doll?"

I took a deep breath and gave him a fake watery smile. "I'm fine, Jakey. It was only Denny. He startled me, that's all."

"Shit! Of all the nights to come here, he had to pick tonight." He hugged me tightly. "He only wanted to see for himself that you were okay, you know that."

"I know, but I'm a bit fragile at the moment. I don't need any extra adrenaline in my life," I laughed weakly.

"You don't need Bycrafts in your life, is what you mean to say, isn't it?" He sounded as bitter as I'd ever heard him.

I looked up at him. He looked down at me. He was very serious for once. So was I.

"I really need one Bycraft in my life, that's all. The rest can rot in hell."

"This is my family we're talking about, Tessie."

“This is my life we’re talking about, Jakey.”

We searched each other’s eyes for a long time in the luminosity from the backyard spotlights. Then he sighed and let me go. And once again we avoided the most important and sticky question between us – how could a Bycraft and a Fuller ever possibly have a long-term, loving relationship? I had no doubt at all that we loved each other sincerely and deeply, but it was still an intractable, and maybe even unanswerable, question. There was too much history, too much bad feeling between the two families.

“Which is the parsley again?” he asked lightly, changing the subject. “I thought I’d memorised the herb garden last time you lectured me on where everything was, but there we go – we almost ended up with Asian-flavoured spag bog.”

“That would have been interesting,” I commented, equally light, leaning over to retrieve my secateurs and cut a bunch of parsley for him. “I never know what I’m going to get for dinner when I set you loose in the kitchen.”

“I’m not that bad, babe,” he pouted, his arm around my shoulder, the parsley in his hand, gently but determinedly leading me back to the bright light of the kitchen.

I let myself be led, I let myself be fed, I took the painkillers Jake gave me, I let Dad wash up, I let Jake lead me to the bathroom to brush my teeth and then to my bedroom where he undressed me and undressed himself. We lay on my bed, naked, face-to-face, our eyes locked together. I made him turn the light off because I didn’t want him to look at my damaged face a second longer.

“I want to kiss you, Tessie, but I’m afraid to,” he whispered. “I don’t want to hurt you.” He tenderly kissed my cheek and my earlobe.

“Lower,” I demanded. He kissed my chin and my neck and my shoulders.

“Lower,” I demanded. He kissed my collar blades and my breasts.

“Lower,” I demanded. He kissed my stomach and my bruised hips.

“Lower,” I demanded. He moved down even lower.

“Is this where you want me to kiss you, baby doll?” he asked, gently pushing my bruised thighs apart and flicking out his tongue.

“Oh God! Yes!” I gasped. “Yes, that’s the place, Jakey.”

And I couldn’t think or talk for a while. And when he had finished down there and my body was throbbing with unadulterated satisfaction, he pushed himself inside me and I wasn’t able to think or talk again, heading for another heavenly experience at his expert hands. Afterwards, we slept for a couple of hours in each other’s arms until I woke him up and made him do it to me all over again, my eyes rolling back in my head with complete and absolute pleasure. My bones and my brain felt like jelly when we’d finished.

We slept for the rest of the night, entwined, blissful, exhausted. And the last thought in my mind before I gave into sleep was that Fiona had been right – good loving was the antidote to all the horrible things in the world. I had been afraid I was going to have nightmares about Red Bycraft tonight, but his brother Jake had driven all of them away with his unconditional love, and that seemed very fitting to me. I closed my eyes and fell asleep quickly, safe in his arms.

Chapter 19

When I woke up, feeling fantastic as I always did after a night with Jake, he was already gone. In return for staying the night with me, he’d agreed to pull a double shift today and had to be at the prison ready for the six AM morning shift changeover. *Poor baby*, I thought. I’d worked him hard last night. He’d be shattered

by the time he finally got to bed this evening.

I stretched, all my injuries protesting at the motion. I had to keep moving or I'd seize up, so I forced myself out of bed to at least go for a walk. I had my usual glass of juice and discovered a note on the kitchen bench addressed to me in Jake's careful scrawl. Sitting on top of the note in a glass of water was a fresh-picked golden hibiscus from my mother's long-neglected flower garden.

Tessie my darling

Your so beautiful when you sleep. I love you. I wont see you for weeks, but I'll be thinking about you all the time. Dont forget to ring me & email me, every day!!! I love you. I know I alreddy wrote that.

Lots and lots of love Jake xxxx

I smiled as I read that note, spelling mistakes and all, especially loving the hand-drawn lovehearts surrounding it. I clutched it to my chest as I opened the back door to look outside. It was a beautiful morning – the sun was shining, the sky was a brilliant cloudless blue, the kookaburras were going insane with laughter in the nearby gum trees, the magpies were warbling on the ground searching for grubs and the chooks were clucking contentedly. I went out and collected the five eggs, fed and watered my girls, set them free from their coop, then went inside again and dressed in my running gear. When I limped to my gate, Romi was there, but not the Sarge.

"Oh Tessie, you look so terrible!" she hugged me tightly, sobbing, fat luxuriant tears rolling down her cheeks when she saw me, not thinking for a moment about the effect that might have on my self-esteem. "Abe had to tell me ten times that you were okay before I could believe him, because those Bycraft kids were telling everyone at school that Red Bycraft had killed you. I was crying so much that they had to ring Abe to come and collect me."

"No sweetie," I replied calmly, touched. "Here I am, still alive. Red Bycraft didn't kill me."

Yet.

We set off together, and I warned her that I could only walk, but assured that I was still determined to make the fun run, regardless of everything. We walked briskly, despite my continuing pain and complaining muscles. I was self-conscious, feeling the eyes of the few people who drove past us lingering on my facial injuries, sympathetic but curious. I wasn't sure if I was going to go to work today. I was entitled to some sick leave, surely.

To hide my insecurity, I listened attentively to Romi all the way as she confided everything about her life, her thoughts and her current idols, one of who was still clearly the Sarge. She brought him up in conversation every couple of minutes.

"Romi," I said, not wanting to do it, but it was best that she found out from me and the sooner the better by the sound of it. "The Sarge told me something very interesting about himself yesterday." *God, was it only yesterday?* I thought to myself in surprise.

"What?" she asked breathlessly, pretty blue eyes huge. I had her undivided attention as we walked.

"He's engaged to be married," I told her and felt like a monster as I watched her face instantly crumple in a study of intense emotional teenage pain. And hating myself, I embellished further, hopefully crushing those feelings forever. "He can't wait for her to join him here in town. Maybe they'll get married here? Wouldn't that

be romantic?”

“Yes,” was all she said, in a small, quiet voice. She didn’t speak much for the rest of our walk. We parted at my gate and she rode off on her bike, her shoulders slumped in dejection, for once politely declining to join me for breakfast. *Poor little thing*, I thought, leaning on my gate watching after her. Being a romantic teenager could be so hard sometimes, especially living in a small town where you were usually bored with the boys you’d grown up with and were longing for someone new and exciting to come along. It was a blow to all the single women in the town to have an eligible man like the Sarge join the community and then to learn that he wasn’t free. More than a few dreams would be crushed by that bit of news, I suspected.

I had a shower and an easy breakfast of Weet-Bix and a glass of orange juice. I still hadn’t decided whether I’d go to work today and was mulling over the pros and cons, sipping the juice carefully through my sore lips, when the phone rang. I moved as quickly as was possible for me to get to it before it woke Dad up.

It was the Sarge, checking that I was coming into work.

“I can’t make up my mind,” I admitted. “I’m so battered that I should probably give my poor body a rest and stay home for a few days. The doctor told me to take it easy for a while.”

“If anyone deserves some time off, it’s certainly you,” he agreed.

Rare vanity overcame my better sense and I blurted, “Plus, I look so awful. I don’t want anyone to see me. Everyone was staring at me this morning when Romi and I went for a walk.”

“You don’t want those Bycrafts to think that they have you beaten though, do you?” he asked slyly.

I knew I was being manipulated, but I couldn’t stop the tide of rebellion that washed over me at his words. “Of course I don’t, but –”

“You don’t want them to think they have you too scared to show your face around town, do you?”

I replied heatedly, “I’m not scared of them.”

“You better come to work then and show them that you’re not.”

“I know you’re using psychology on me,” I said angrily. “And I hate the fact that it’s working.”

He laughed, a pleasant warm chuckle down the line into my ear. “See you soon, Tess.”

I was dressed, kitted up and ready to head out the door when Dad awoke. He rolled up to me in dismay, taking my hand and squeezing hard.

“You’re not going to work are you, Tessie love? You need to recuperate,” he protested. “Stay home and let me look after you, for once.”

“Dad, if I don’t get back on the horse, everyone will think I’ve lost my nerve. I won’t let those Bycrafts think for one second that they’ve got the better of me,” I answered, grabbing the keys to the Land Rover and planting a kiss on his forehead. He knew there was no point arguing with me once I’d made up my mind. I was a lot like him in that respect, he’d acknowledged ruefully one day. Unhappily, he rolled onto the veranda to watch me leave and his furrowed face full of worry was the last thing I saw in the rearview mirror as I drove out of the gates, waving.

When I arrived at the station, the Sarge wasn’t even there I noted with indignation. He had hurried me into work, but then decided to dawdle himself. When I walked into the back room, I stopped. Someone had been in there after we’d left last night – the back door was wide open. I knew we’d locked it when we’d all

departed the previous evening, because I'd watched the Sarge checking it.

Warily I scanned the tiny office, gun out, almost expecting a Bycraft to jump out at me at any second from thin air. I didn't see anything astray until I cast my eyes over the safe. It was open, the door hanging crookedly from its hinges. There was a faint smell of something unfamiliar, metallic, in the air. I crouched down in front of the safe, careful not to touch anything and noticed that one hinge and the locking mechanism were now damaged. Inconceivable as it seemed, someone had blown our safe and I was reasonably sure that it wasn't a coincidence it had happened the same day a very large amount of money had been handed into the station.

The Sarge would turn up at any minute, so I didn't bother ringing him. I'd show him when he arrived. It wasn't as if the safecracker had got away with anything, because the Sarge had taken the money and Stacey's little gun to Big Town yesterday for safer keeping and there had been nothing else inside. So I put my gun back in my belt and spent ten minutes righting the room and sweeping up the potting mix mess on the floor I'd made. Finished, I went to the kitchenette to make some tea, not even sure if I'd be able to sip a hot drink through my busted lip. Today it felt ten times bigger than normal. Closing the back door, I caught a glimpse of myself in the age-spotted mirror fixed to the rear of the door. It wasn't a pretty sight and I regretted coming into work. It would have been smarter to hide under my bed for a couple of weeks until I looked better.

I filled up the kettle and switched it on. When I opened the cupboard for a tea bag, I was greeted with a marvellous surprise. The whole top shelf was now crammed with packets of Tim Tams. There must have been thirty packets in there at least, every variety known to humans – the double chocolate, the rocky road, the mint, the caramel, the white chocolate, the honeycomb, as well as the very delicious and perfect original. Laughter exploded from me and I couldn't stop for ages even though it made every sore part of my body complain. I leaned helplessly on the sink, tears rolling down my cheeks, my body aching badly with each laugh.

"What's so funny?" a voice asked from behind me. I jumped in fright, my laughter drying up immediately and spun around, gun out before I could even think. I hadn't heard anyone coming in, which I reminded myself, was exactly how I was ambushed yesterday.

It was just the Sarge. I leaned back on the sink heavily in relief, my hand up to my thudding heart. "Don't sneak up on me like that!" I snapped at him angrily. "You scared me half to death. I nearly shot you." I re-holstered my gun.

"I'm sorry, Tess," he said, hands up in appeasement, realising how much he'd frightened me. "I wasn't sneaking around I promise, but you were laughing so hard I don't think you heard me come in."

"I didn't mean to bite your head off," I apologised. "I'm a bit jumpy at the moment."

"Understandable," he said, leaning on the sink next to me.

"I was laughing about the Tim Tams." I turned back to look at them again. "Thanks Sarge. That's so nice of you."

"I felt guilty about eating your last one."

"So you bought me thirty packets to make up for it?" I smiled. "That's a bit of overkill, wouldn't you say?"

He shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Only seemed fair. It was the last one, after all."

"You must have cleaned out the supermarket."

"I never do things by halves." He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper, his eyes shifting from side to side. "But I've heard on the grapevine that there is now an official Tim Tam drought in Little Town."

I giggled at his unexpected silliness and he smiled at me warmly as if pleased that he'd lightened my life for a small moment. I appreciated the effort and felt a tiny crack forming in the thick Antarctic ice sheet of our relationship. I wondered if he felt it too.

If so, he didn't show it, so I pushed aside my fanciful thoughts and told him about the safe. We crouched down together to examine it and he rang up the Big Town forensics leader and asked a team to come and dust the door and safe for prints. She couldn't tell us when a team would be available but promised to log the job straight away, piggybacking on the other two jobs we'd already logged.

"You did the right thing taking the money to Big Town yesterday, otherwise it would have been stolen," I said to him.

"No, I didn't," he argued, with that same strange, closed expression on his face he'd had last night. "I left you alone when I should have stayed. If I had a choice, it would have been for the money to be stolen rather than you being attacked."

Without any warning, he stepped in closer to me and grabbed my chin in his hand, gazing intently into my face. I was startled and disconcerted by his intimate touch. I was about to push him away violently and tell him in no uncertain terms that he could bloody well keep his hands to himself, thawing ice sheet or not, when he turned my head one way then the other, peering closely with detachment the whole time. He let me go and stepped backwards.

"You're bruising up nicely around the eye and nose. You'll look like a rainbow tomorrow."

"Oh joy," I said sarcastically. "Every woman's dream."

He was about to move away when he stopped and turned back towards me, peering closely at me again. He slid the collar of my shirt aside slightly, his fingers warm on my skin, and frowned.

"Tess, you didn't tell the Inspector that one of them grabbed you around the neck."

"Yes, I did. Red tried to throttle me."

"No, I can see those bruises – they're finger-shaped. This is lower. You have a series of little bruises on the bottom of your neck. They must be from yesterday. You didn't have them earlier."

My cheeks pinkened. *Dear God*, I thought, *how embarrassing*.

"They must be from the fight," he persisted. "We should ring up the Inspector to tell her. I'll take some photos for evidence."

I wished the ground would swallow me up and save me from this awkward situation.

"Sarge . . ." I began. He stared at me expectantly. "No need to ring. They're not from the Bycrafts. Um . . . crap, that's not quite true. They're from one Bycraft. Oh God, this is so embarrassing." I took a deep breath. "Jake stayed over at my place last night."

He looked at me blankly.

"I took the Inspector's advice."

He frowned in puzzlement. He wasn't making this easy for me.

"Her advice about taking my mind off what had happened to me yesterday?" I reminded him desperately. "Jake was a little . . . um . . . over-passionate."

Comprehension dawned slowly on his face, swiftly followed by embarrassment

and another couple of emotions I couldn't decipher.

"Oh," he said. I could feel my cheeks flaming. "Sorry." We stood there ill at ease with each other for a moment. "Guess you don't want me to take any photos?"

I giggled uncomfortably and turned to make us both a cup of tea, kicking myself for not checking my neck before I came to work. If I'd noticed that Jake's little love-nips had left me with bruises, I'd have applied some concealing makeup. I hope that Jake had noticed if he had any little bruises from me before his workmates did. They wouldn't be embarrassed and drop it like the Sarge – they would torment him mercilessly about his wild sex life.

To avoid the whole awkward situation, the Sarge strode over to Abe's computer that was still lying on the floor where it had landed yesterday morning. I placed his mug of tea on his desk and took mine over to my desk, clearing a small spot to deposit it safely.

It wasn't right for one of the town's police officers to be parading around with hickeys on her neck, so I took my little makeup bag to the bathroom and covered up those bruises with my concealer and pressed powder. I thought briefly about trying to do the same with the ones on my face, but decided that it wouldn't be subtle enough and would only draw even more attention to them. I would probably need three truckloads of makeup to do it properly anyway.

The Sarge had moved the computer back up on to his desk again and was reconnecting it. As I sat down, his eyes lingered for a moment on my newly covered neck bruises, but he didn't say anything.

He turned the computer on. Nothing. He swore under his breath, checked all the cables and turned it on again. Still nothing. I sipped my tea carefully, watching him.

"Is it broken?" I enquired, a question that his withering glance told me was an annoyingly stupid one for me to ask. He pulled all the cables out and reconnected them again, then flicked the switch. Nothing.

"For fuck's sake," he muttered under his breath. The counter bell rang. I didn't move. He looked over at me expectantly.

"Tess? The counter?" His voice was stropy.

"I don't want to go out there. I'm ugly."

He stopped to smile at me briefly. "You're not ugly, but it doesn't matter what you look like anyway. You weren't employed to be beautiful, but you were employed to serve the public, so off you go."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. Go on. You're not going to hide away. We're not going to let those Bycrafts win."

Easy for him to say, I thought, reluctantly dragging myself out to the counter, only to find Rick and Rosie Bycraft. Just brilliant! As soon as they saw me, they both laughed.

"What do you two want?" I asked with a level of hostility that probably wasn't textbook for best practice client-focused service.

"Nothing," said Rosie cruelly. "We just wanted to laugh at you."

I looked coldly from one to the other. "Okay, you've had your laugh so you can piss off now."

"Red and the other boys did a good old job on you," sneered Rick. "That'll fucking teach you for locking up our mum, piglet." And they laughed at me again.

"I'll lock her up again today if I have to," I told them.

"Then you'll fucking get the same treatment again, won't you, you dumb slag?" Rosie threatened scornfully, leaning over the counter, her horrible overlarge plastic

boobs almost spilling out of her Barbie-pink tank top. "And I'm coming for you next time."

"Probably, but then we'll arrest you and whoever comes for me. And when I lock up Lola the following day too, we'll arrest whoever comes for me then as well. And after a few weeks of that, there won't be one Bycraft left in Little Town. You'll all be in the watch house up in Big Town." I smiled at them both sweetly. "And that's what I call a happy ending."

"You're fucking crazy," spat Rosie in disgust.

"It sure helps around here," I said, smiling again.

"Everything okay, Senior Constable?" the Sarge asked from the doorway. I didn't even bother turning around.

"Sure Sarge. Rosie and Rick just popped in to wish me a speedy recovery and to apologise for their family members' reprehensible behaviour."

"Fuck you, piglet," Rick sneered.

In a blink, the Sarge vaulted the counter and pinned Rick to the wall with his baton across his neck. "You don't talk to the Senior Constable like that again, understand?" he hissed into Rick's face.

Upper lip snarled back enough to show teeth, Rick stared defiantly at the Sarge until increasing pressure on his windpipe from the baton encouraged him to back down. "Yes," he said sullenly, and the Sarge let him go. Rick rubbed his throat resentfully. He and Rosie left, throwing both of us aggressive backwards glances as they did.

"Very athletic of you, Sarge," I complimented and opened the hatch in the counter for him to return.

He flashed me his transient smile. "What did they want?"

"To laugh at me."

He stopped and stared at me. "Seriously?"

"Of course. That's one of the Bycraft family's favourite past-times. Second only to causing me pain." He shook his head in disbelief.

My mobile rang. It was Gil, the lead detective from my hit-and-run case, telling me that I wouldn't be needed in court today after all. Both sides had agreed to a full handup committal hearing, so witnesses weren't needed at this stage. He warned me that the prosecutor wouldn't oppose a bail undertaking for Dorrie because she had small children to look after.

"You'll probably see her back in your town this afternoon," he advised.

"As long as she stays away from me."

"She'd be stupid to go anywhere near you, or she'll find herself back in custody. Nobody's that stupid."

I laughed. "Have you actually met her yet?"

"Tess, she's genuinely sorry. She hasn't stopped crying the whole time she's been in the watch house."

I snorted in disbelief. "She's just sorry she got caught. She's not sorry she did it." We made our farewells, and he promised to let me know what happened in court.

"Then I think we'll walk the beat again for a while this morning," the Sarge said as we sat back at our desks. I took a sip of my tea and grimaced. It had cooled down, but still stung on my busted lip.

"I don't want to go out in public," I complained.

He sighed impatiently. "Tess, you have to show your face so the Bycrafts see how tough you are. You handled those two then really well. Very calm, not fazed in

the slightest.”

“Everyone will stare at me.” I knew I sounded whiny.

“Nobody’s going to stare at you. Come on, finish your tea and we’ll head off.”

“It’s too early to do the beat, Sarge. We’d be better off doing it late morning or early afternoon. There will be more people around then. Maybe even some Bycrafts, for greater community impact. If that’s what you’re after.”

“Tess! I said I wanted . . .” He stopped and glanced over at me. We duelled with our eyes for a moment, deep blue versus dark gray. Stormy ocean battling stormy sky. He caved first. “Maybe it’s better to go later when there are more people around.”

In my mind, I punched the air in victory. In real life, I plastered on my blandly innocent face. “Good idea, Sarge,” I chirped, sweeter than caramel.

“You can spend the time until then getting all that paperwork on your desk sorted out,” he ordered, ignoring my Oscar-worthy groan. My eyes roamed over the small mountain of documents without enthusiasm. It would take hours and hours to get through it. I dragged my feet over to my desk and picked up the first sheet. It was a circular memo from the Commissioner about uniforms that had been issued over six months ago. I threw it in the shredding pile without reading it. *Well, that was one piece of paper down*, I told myself with forced cheerfulness. Only three billion to go.

The phone rang. I sprang over to answer it with unprecedented eagerness, earning myself a surprised glance from the Sarge.

“Good morning, Mount Big Town police station,” I said politely, expecting another Saucy Sirens call.

“Officer Tess, it’s Mabel Greville speaking.”

“Miss G! How are you?”

“I’m well, dear, but how are *you*? Someone told me that Red Bycraft shot you dead. I knew that couldn’t be true. You’d never let that happen.”

“No, Miss G. I’m still here, but I did have some trouble with the family yesterday. We took Lola Bycraft into custody and her family weren’t happy about it.”

“Goodness me! That was a foolish thing to do. It would have been that handsome new sergeant of yours who made that decision I think, not you, dear. You know better than that.”

I couldn’t respond to that with the Sarge in the same room and so changed the subject. “Now, Miss G where have you been? We’ve been trying to contact you since Sunday. Your house was broken into. It’s a bit messy, but nothing has been taken as far as the Sarge and I could tell. It was as if the intruder was looking for something. Do you have any idea what that could be?”

“No idea, Officer Tess, as I told you before. I live a simple life with no secrets.” There was more than a hint of regret in her voice about that. “But I rang you to tell you that I looked over that list of Greville properties that have been sold off and there were a couple that I simply don’t remember. I know that I’m getting on, but I pride myself on my excellent memory and I just can’t remember signing any paperwork for those two properties.”

“This might be important. Can the Sarge and I come to visit you today to talk about it?”

“Certainly dear, we’re now back in Big Town. We had a lovely little trip to the city to visit Bessie’s other daughter. We went shopping and took in a marvellous show at the theatre. I had a wonderful meal at a *very* fancy restaurant afterwards.

The waiters wore white gloves! Have you ever heard of such a thing? White gloves! One even rushed over to put the sugar cube into my coffee before I was able to pick up the sugar tongs! And the maitre d' squeezed my hand as we left." She giggled prettily. "A very handsome Italian man too! Goodness, this has been an exciting time in my life!" She took a deep happy breath before sensibly calming herself down. I chuckled discreetly to myself at how sweet it was for someone to find such joy in the little things in life. "Before you come to see me, Tess dear, I wonder if you could do me a favour?"

"Of course, Miss G."

"I keep a daily diary and I write down everything that I do or see in it. I've kept it since I was young, so all the property sales I signed off on will be recorded in one of the volumes. I just need to refresh my memory – perhaps I've forgotten one or two. Could you bring my diaries to me please, dear? I keep them in my bedroom. In the bottom drawer of my wardrobe there's a false compartment, and all my diaries are stored in there." She giggled again, such a youthful, light-hearted tinkling sound. "I had to hide them from my mother. There are some very personal thoughts and wishes in them and she was an absolute dragon about propriety. Even worse than your Nana Fuller," she confessed, sighing.

"That's tough," I sympathised. We'd evidently shared a similar upbringing and my heart warmed to her even more. "We'll head off now, first to your house and then to Big Town. See you in a couple of hours, Miss G."

"Bye Officer Tess."

"Oh, Miss G?"

"Yes dear?"

"Please don't be distressed when we meet. The Bycrafts were very rough with me."

She paused for a moment and her voice was full of warm kindness when she continued. "I'm so sorry, Tess dear. You don't deserve that."

"I don't think so either, but thanks for saying that, Miss G. I can't tell you how nice it is to have people on my side in Little Town."

Chapter 20

In the car on our way to Miss G's house, the Sarge made me go over my conversation with her again.

"So maybe the intruder was actually searching for Miss Greville's diaries?" he mused as he drove.

"Someone who didn't want her looking over her own records of the property sales?" I thought out loud. "But that means it has to be someone who knows she keeps a diary. That rules out a casual thief."

He nodded in agreement. "And where does the hundred grand come into it though? If it's related, that is."

"I don't know. The land it was found on is government land and I don't know how it ties into the Grevilles, but I get the feeling that it does. I think we're going to be visiting Mr Murchison again after we've seen Miss G."

"Definitely. He needs to start answering some questions for us."

He bumped up Miss G's driveway and parked the car. At least it didn't look as though there had been any further break-ins at the house and we quickly located the hidden diaries. There were about fifteen volumes, five years to a volume, all overflowing with Miss G's tiny, spidery handwriting. I couldn't be bothered sorting

them out, so grabbed all of them, shoving them into a canvas bag I found in Miss G's cupboard. I figured that if she wrote in her diary every day, she'd have her current volume with her in Big Town. The Sarge carried the bag to the car for me and placed it in the boot, and we headed off to Big Town.

When we pulled up outside Bessie's daughter's house, Miss G and Bessie were sitting on the veranda waiting for us. The two elderly women jumped sprightly to their feet as we walked up the front path and rushed down the stairs to crowd me, fussing and tutting over my injuries, before ushering us up the stairs. The Sarge carried the bag of diaries into the house and dutifully delivered them to the bedroom Miss G was using during her stay.

Before Miss G would let us talk to her, we were forced into the stuffy 'parlour' to have some morning tea with them. The three women had clearly gone to a lot of trouble for the occasion, the coffee table beautifully set with Bessie's best china. We were both poured tea and had a variety of homemade goods pressed on us – small iced cakes, smoked salmon finger sandwiches and petite biscuits. I tucked in with eagerness and conversed happily with the women, but could sense the Sarge becoming fidgety after a while, furtively checking his watch as time ticked by. He refused a top-up on his tea and then declined another cake, another biscuit and another sandwich as the three ladies took turns in urging him to have more.

Eventually though, we ran out of tea and had polished off most of the goodies, and the Sarge was able to persuade Miss G to focus on the matter at hand while Bessie and her daughter cleared up around us. She pulled out the computer printout that we'd left for her and peered down her glasses at the notes she'd written beside each transaction. There were two that she'd marked with a yellow highlighter pen.

"Now, it's these two that I'm having difficulty recalling. The most recent," she advised, her mouth pursed in concentration as she stabbed the paper with her gnarled index finger. I pulled the sheet around for the Sarge and me to read.

The first property she'd highlighted was a large tract of land on the south side of Little Town, adjacent to the mental health clinic. It had been sold two years ago to a company called Traumleben Pty Ltd for \$10.

"That can't be right," I exclaimed in surprise, glancing at the Sarge. "Ten dollars? I know that bit of land and it would be worth a lot more than ten dollars. Any sized block of land around Little Town would be worth more than that!"

The second property was an equally large plot adjacent to the prison where Jake worked. It had been sold to Traumleben Pty Ltd also for \$10 four years ago. It must have been on-sold to the government since then though, because construction had already commenced on an extension to the prison on that particular piece of land.

"Miss Greville, you don't recall signing any papers relating to these two sales?" clarified the Sarge.

She shook her head, "No, I don't. That's why I was so surprised to see them on the list. And I certainly don't have any recollection of dealing with a company called . . . What was its name again, dear?"

"Traumleben Pty Ltd," I told her, and spelled it for her.

She shook her head again. "It just doesn't sound familiar at all, but I'll go through my diaries for two and four years ago and see if I'd jotted down anything about those sales." She gave us a rueful smile. "I certainly hope I haven't forgotten them. I've always prided myself on my good memory."

We both stood up. "Let us know when you've had a chance to do that, could you please, Miss Greville?" requested the Sarge and she walked us out, her hand tucked into the crook of my arm.

She gave me a peck on my cheek at the door and patted my arm, tutting over my poor face again.

"Sergeant Maguire, I hope you're going to look after Officer Tess better in the future," she scolded gently. "She's the best police officer we've ever had in Little Town and I should know. I've seen more than my fair share of them. And I don't mind telling you that most of them were complete fools. Tess is definitely not a fool and the townsfolk are going to be very upset when they see what's happened to her."

"Miss G . . ." I began to remonstrate that, while I appreciated the sentiment, I didn't need anyone looking after me. Especially the Sarge.

He didn't seem to agree though. "I'll certainly do everything in my power to make sure nothing like this ever happens to Tess again," he responded gravely, carefully avoiding eye contact with me. She smiled up at him in satisfaction, squeezed my arm again and let us go.

We drove in silence for a while. "That was a big promise you made to Miss G back there, Sarge," I remarked neutrally. "How do you plan on keeping me safe? Make me quit?"

He smiled brilliantly for a moment, his face lighting up attractively. "If that's what it takes."

I looked away. "I'm not really trained for another profession."

"You could marry your boyfriend and become a housewife." He laughed. "Mrs Tess Bycraft."

I pulled a face at him. "No thanks! Dad would kill me if I married a Bycraft. Anyway I couldn't marry Jake, even if I wanted to. He's already married."

"Is he?" There was a disapproving silence. "You don't strike me as the kind of woman who'd have a relationship with a married man."

"Don't be judgemental, Sarge," I reprimanded him mildly. "I'm not that kind of woman, but Jake's married status is no secret. Everybody knows about it. We're not sneaking around behind anyone's back. He married when he was very young and it only lasted a couple of years. He's been permanently separated from Chantelle for over six years now, well before we started our relationship. He just hasn't got around to getting a divorce. She well and truly moved on after him too, believe me. She lives here in Big Town with her many children. None of them are Jake's, but they all belong to his brothers."

I don't know why I felt the need to explain my situation to him, but I suppose I didn't want him thinking that I was some kind of home-wrecking tart.

"So he's uncle to his own wife's kids?" I nodded. "Strange family."

I laughed for a second. "Not to mention that her kids' fathers are uncles to their kids' half-siblings."

"God, what a genealogical mess." He thought on that for a moment, then asked, naturally inquisitive, "Why doesn't Jake get a divorce? He's obviously not planning on reconciling with his wife."

"Not a chance," I laughed, thinking of Chantelle and her semi-wild brood, but avoiding his question.

"But that means that you two can't get married," he pointed out.

I shrugged and smiled. "Can you imagine Lola Bycraft as my mother-in-law?" I joked light-heartedly, avoiding answering again. "The Christmas lunches would be hell on earth. If I survived them!"

He cut me a look that let me know that he was well aware of my evasive tactics, but I didn't see why he thought he could third-degree me about my personal life, but

expect his own to remain strictly private.

We pulled into the carpark of the Big Town police station. I glanced over at him, screwing up my nose. "More record searching?"

"Afraid so."

We approached the station. Three detectives were chatting near the entrance, each clutching a coffee. They stared at me, openly curious, as we walked towards them.

"Tess," they greeted, nodding, eyes assessing my injuries.

I nodded generally to them in return, but didn't stop to chat. "Guys." I could feel their eyes on me as we walked through the doorway.

"Well, well, Tessie Fuller. You're looking real pretty today. I love what you've done with your makeup," yelled Phil from the counter, ensuring that everyone in the near vicinity turned to glance at me. There were a variety of expressions on their faces as they did, ranging from shock to pity.

"Cram it, Phil," I suggested with irritation. I wasn't seeking any more attention.

"Come to visit your in-laws, have you? Though they're more like outlaws, I reckon," he said and laughed raucously at his own lame joke.

"They're no relatives of mine," I insisted firmly.

"Might as well be, you've been going out with that Jake Bycraft for so long."

I ignored him. "We need to use a computer again, please."

He opened the door to the counter area and let us use the same computer we had used last time. It still had the same cobweb stretched across it, so obviously nobody had touched it since Sunday. I plonked down in the seat and the Sarge sat on the desk again, his foot resting casually on the seat of my chair, his boot poking painfully into my thigh. I shifted over – it was one of my bruised bits.

"You distract them while I smuggle the computer out under my shirt," he said in a low voice, leaning down to me. Unfortunately I gave a loud giggle at that which drew everyone's notice to us. "Tess," he reproached.

"Sorry Sarge. Spoiled your plan," I said sheepishly and called up the log in screen. Without any instructions from him, I went back onto the land title database and looked up all transactions relating to Traumleben Pty Ltd.

There were two extremely interesting sales in the last two years concerning that company.

"Sarge, look at this," I said, pointing at the screen. "Traumleben Pty Ltd sold the block of land next to the prison it bought from Miss Greville to the government two years ago for \$250,000. And then it also sold the land next to the mental health clinic to the government for \$330,500 one year ago. That's quite a profit margin from two ten dollar investments, wouldn't you say?"

"It sure is. Can you go onto the ASIC website to see who's behind Traumleben Pty Ltd?"

"No worries." I printed off the property report and tapped on the keyboard again, calling up the ASIC director database, interrogating it about Traumleben Pty Ltd. It told us that the sole director of the company was Mr Lionel Mundy of 5 Acacia Court, Wattling Bay.

"A local man. This gets more interesting every second," he said, running his fingers over his well-shaven chin in thought. "Will we go visit Mr Lionel Mundy of 5 Acacia Court? Or should we visit Stanley Murchison first?"

I leaned back in the chair and looked up at him. "Let's go meet Lionel, Sarge. I'm a junkie for excitement."

"Okay then, let's go meet Lionel." He stood up, waiting patiently while I

printed off the director report as well. We clutched our printouts and walked out of the station back to the car, keeping our heads down, trying not to attract any more attention. It worked, all the other cops distracted by an hysterical woman who burst into the station crying and shouting that she had accidentally locked her baby in her car at the supermarket across the road and could someone please, *for the love of God*, help her! Uniforms were mobilising left, right and centre to assist, and we managed to escape without any further smart-arsed comments.

The Sarge drove to Acacia Court as I directed him. I looked out the window for a minute, spotting Jake's wife, Chantelle, herself, on the footpath outside a fast food franchise. I pointed her out to the Sarge, so he'd know what she looked like.

She was slurping a gargantuan cup of cola and greedily stuffing supersized french fries into her mouth, only stopping long enough to slap one of her small children hard on its bottom. It joined in with the other three who were already crying, including the little red-faced baby in the tattered pram. My heart broke for those poor kids. What possible chance did they have in life with an ignorant and negligent mother who didn't have the skills or money to look after them properly, multiple fathers who didn't care at all and a community services department that was too overwhelmed to deal with anything except the most dire emergencies? She was even larger than normal and I wondered if she was pregnant again, and who to, if she was? It was probably one of the Bycrafts, knowing her.

There's a secret saying in Little Town, just among the women, that once you've had Bycraft, you wanted Bycraft forever. I hated to say it, but most of the girls and women who sampled from the Bycraft tasting plate did want more Bycraft afterwards. My greatest fear was that if Jake and I broke up for whatever reason, I would want to start a relationship with another Bycraft, addicted to the passionate and magnificent lovemaking I'd been getting from Jake.

My best friend since our first day of kindy together, Marianne, assured me that all the Bycrafts she had known intimately at one time or another growing up in Little Town – Rick, Denny and my Jake – were all well-endowed and good in bed. Of course, that was well before she moved to the city, married a decent man and started her family. She'd also confessed that Jake was unanimously considered by all the girls in town to be the best of the bunch because he was more respectful and not as rough as the others could be. I was quietly confident that I'd be the one who would disprove that old Little Town saying though, because there wasn't another Bycraft besides him that I wanted within twenty metres of me. An involuntary shudder at the thought of Denny Bycraft or Red Bycraft in my bed with me pushed out goosebumps over my arms. And not the pleasant anticipatory kind of goosebumps either. I was determined that Jake would be the beginning and end of my Bycraft experiment.

The Sarge shot me a curious glance as I rubbed my arms and I realised he'd been speaking to me.

"Huh?"

"I said, we're here," he repeated patiently. "You okay?"

"Yep," I assured, not saying another word. There was no way I was explaining to him what I'd been thinking about. We pulled up in front of 5 Acacia Court. The nondescript cavity brick and tile house appeared uncared for and unoccupied, junk mail spilling out of the letterbox and the lawn calf-high. We stepped out of the car and walked to the front door. There was no bell, so the Sarge banged hard on the door. We waited a minute. Nothing.

I automatically went around the back, noting the overgrown and weed-ridden

side garden as I did. I banged on the back door. Nothing. I banged again. Still nothing. Suddenly I remembered I had my radio, so contacted the Sarge.

"Nobody here, Sarge."

It squawked, "No response for me either, Tess. Come back."

"On my way."

We met each other back on the front porch. "No Lionel," noted the Sarge unhappily.

My eyes roamed the unkempt property. "No Lionel for quite a while, it seems."

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a nosy neighbour poking his head over the tall, straggly hedge that separated the two houses. It appeared he was desperately trying to hear what we said and take photos of us with his phone. But he was too elderly to successfully manage both the technology and the hedge. I sneaked over to the hedge and the second he poked his head up again, I jumped up too, frightening him with my scary face. He shrieked in fear as I grasped him firmly by his collar.

"Sarge!" I shouted. The Sarge rushed around to the neighbouring property to help me subdue what turned out to be a quite fragile, but extremely wriggly, senior citizen. I jogged over to join him quickly.

"Don't hurt me! Don't hurt me!" he yelled with fear as the Sarge gently held one arm.

"I'm not hurting you," the Sarge pointed out, letting go of him. "Who are you and what are you doing?"

The man stood in front of us, smoothing his hair and brushing down his clothes with old-fashioned dignity. He had an ugly, wizened face and with his round balding head and large ears, looked like a grumpy goblin. Or maybe Gollum from *Lord of the Rings*.

"I'm Vince Macostic and I've lived in this house here for fifty-seven years. I noticed you creeping around the Mundy's place and was checking you out. I'll have you know that this is a Neighbourhood Watch area," he said proudly in an accented voice, then muttered, "even though the young ones around here don't seem to give two figs for keeping the neighbourhood safe." He glared at us young ones accusingly. "Only three people turned up to the last meeting of the Watch, you know." We didn't know – how could we? "*Three people!* If this keeps up, next year I might as well just book the phone booth instead of the school hall for our meetings."

Not knowing how to respond to that, the Sarge merely introduced the both of us. Mr Macostic insisted on seeing our identification, because obviously the uniforms, weapons and the patrol car weren't evidence enough for him that we were *bona fide* police officers.

"What happened to you?" he asked me in that blunt way that many elderly people have, staring at me rudely after he closely examined my identification photo. I figured they thought they didn't have enough time left on earth to bother with manners at their age. "You look like you're normally a hell of a beauty."

Boy, was his eyesight fading, I thought dryly, and told him, equally blunt, "I was beaten up by some Bycrafts."

"Oh, them," he sniffed in disapproval. "Bunch of yobs, the lot of them. They're forever in the paper for getting arrested or appearing in court. I'm glad they don't live here in Wattling Bay."

"Mr Macostic, we're looking for Lionel Mundy," cut in the Sarge. "Nobody appears to be home."

He cackled. "If you want to find Lionel, you'll have to go to the crematorium. He died three years ago."

"Oh," said the Sarge, taken aback. "Did he have any next-of-kin?"

"His wife, Anne. She moved to a retirement village in the city after he died. Haven't heard from her for ages though. Oh, and they had a useless layabout son, Graham. Don't know where he is. Spent all his time playing those stupid games on the computer instead of getting a job like a real man." He shook his head. "I've never understood those games. What the hell's the attraction? It's just a bunch of —"

"Do you have an address or phone number for Mrs Mundy?" I asked, butting in.

He shot me a dirty look, not happy about being interrupted during his rant, and snapped, "Yes. Come with me."

We followed him inside his house, which was cool, dark and spotlessly tidy, the faint citrusy smell of furniture polish hanging in the air. I had a sudden nostalgic pang because it reminded me of the smell of Nana Fuller's house. She'd been a great one for polishing her furniture. Personally, I'd never polished a piece of furniture in my life and I certainly didn't intend to start now. My furniture was lucky if I had time to give it a dust now and then.

A querulous female voice called from another room in a different language, Italian I think, and Mr Macostic yelled out a response in same language. There was a brief exchange of expressive words, shouted loudly, either opinions or insults. Who could tell?

"My wife," he explained with a heavy sigh and went to a side table in his lounge room. He rummaged in a drawer for a moment, pulling out an address book. He took his time, cleaning and then popping on some spectacles before slowly writing down the contact details for Mrs Mundy in a notebook in shaky handwriting. He ripped off the page and handed it to the Sarge.

"Thank you, Mr Macostic. We'll see ourselves out," the Sarge told him, but he followed us to the door anyway and watched as we walked back to the car and climbed in.

"What now?" I asked, doing up my seatbelt.

"Back to the station to ring Mrs Mundy."

And before long we were pulling into the Big Town police station carpark again. There was a different crowd in the counter area this time, so I had to endure another round of shocked and pitying looks, as well as more teasing from Phil before he let us out the back to use the phone. This time I sat on the desk and the Sarge sat on the chair and phoned Anne Mundy, while I listened in on his side of the conversation, my feet up on his chair. It didn't sound as though he was having much luck.

Frowning he hung up. "She didn't know anything about a company called Traumleben Pty Ltd. Had never even heard of it. And she denied that her husband had ever been the director of any company. Apparently Lionel Mundy had Alzheimer's disease for five years before he died and was therefore completely incapable of running a company."

"Isn't that strange?"

"It certainly is. And when I asked whether her son could help us, she was very dismissive. Like Mr Macostic said, he sounds like a total no-hoper."

"None of that's getting us anywhere," I complained, frustrated.

"Don't despair," he said, looking up at me, smugly pleased, his hands clasped behind his neck. He swang on the chair, forcing my legs to rock back and forth along with it. "She thought that maybe her brother might be able to be of some

assistance though, because he has looked after their business affairs for the last forty years. He's a lawyer and he lives right here in Big Town." He grinned up at me.

"And . . ."

I looked down at him impatiently. "And?" I prompted.

"And his name is Stanley Murchison."

Chapter 21

We pulled up in front of Mr Murchison's lovely home again and climbed out. I pressed the doorbell and we waited. And waited. Nothing. I pressed it again. More waiting. More nothing. I looked up at the windows and could have sworn that I saw some movement behind one of them. I pressed the bell again.

"I think he's there, Sarge. He just doesn't want to talk to us."

"We can't force our way in," he said sensibly. "Let's go have some lunch and we'll come back again afterwards. He might be feeling more sociable then."

He chose a sandwich and juice bar and ordered a tuna salad sandwich while I went for the chicken salad, carefully counting out my change. It was still another week until payday and I was currently skint. The sulky over-pierced emo cashier swept up my coins with contempt and dumped them into the register, shooting me dirty looks the whole time through heavily eye-lined eyes. She wasn't a fan of the boys and girls in blue, I decided. We sat at one of the small tables to eat, although I was finding the curious stares of everyone who came in and out off-putting after a short while.

"I'm sick of everybody looking at me. I'm grotesque," I complained, slumping down in my chair.

"You're not at all grotesque. You need to ignore them," he advised.

"That's easy for you to say. They're not gawking at you." My self-esteem was taking a belly-dive.

"Tess, it's good for people to see such a stark reminder that policing can be a very dangerous occupation. It's easy for people to forget that, when all they notice is us giving them speeding tickets and breath tests."

"I suppose," I conceded reluctantly and we finished our lunch in silence. On the way out, I remembered something that I'd promised to do.

"Sarge? Can we make a detour before we go back to Murchison's place?"

"Okay, as long as it won't take too long."

"Nah. I'll be quick." I gave him directions to the store I needed and ducked in and out before he even had the chance to miss me.

"What did you buy?" he asked, leaning over to peer in my bag.

"Aren't you a nosy sergeant? You ought to be a detective," I teased and pulled out my purchase. It was another brown mug with 'Kenny' written on it in gold lettering.

"You're a very nice person, Tess," he commented as he drove off.

"Not really," I admitted honestly. "But I promised Young Kenny I'd buy him a new mug and I'd be letting him down if I didn't deliver."

"Most people wouldn't care if they didn't keep a promise to an old homeless man."

"Well, I do care. It means a lot to him."

His eyes slid sideways to me. "Like I said, you're a nice person."

I remained silent. He didn't know the first thing about me.

Back at Stanley Murchison's place, we received no response at the door again.

“We’ll try his office,” suggested the Sarge. We made our way there only to be told by a nervous, frizzy-haired bespectacled woman, who couldn’t tear her shocked eyes away from my face, that Mr Murchison wasn’t in the office today. He was working from home.

The Sarge sighed impatiently. “I want you to ring Mr Murchison and tell him that we want to speak to him now.”

The woman looked at him, her eyes huge behind her glasses, and quickly did as he asked, picking up the phone and ringing.

“Hello, Mr Murchison, this is Deidre from the office. I have two police officers here who wish to speak to you.” She listened for a moment. “Certainly . . . Yes . . . Thank you, Mr Murchison.”

She hung up. “Mr Murchison would be more than happy to talk to you, Officers. Do you know where he lives?”

“Yes,” said the Sarge curtly, and stalked out.

“Thanks Deidre,” I smiled and followed him out. It didn’t cost anything to be nice. The Sarge should remember that now and again.

We drove back to Murchison’s house and stood at his door, pressing on his buzzer again. No response.

“This man is seriously starting to give me the shits,” said the Sarge angrily. “What the hell game is he playing at?”

“He clearly doesn’t want to talk to us.”

“I don’t give a flying fuck what he wants,” he spat out. “I’ll –” His phone rang, halting the impending tirade and he answered snappily. “Maguire . . . Yes . . . Great . . . Okay, thanks.”

He turned to me. “That was forensics. They just finished dusting Mrs Villiers’ windowsill and managed to lift a couple of prints from the window glass.”

“Our peeper?”

“Possibly. They’re going to run them through the database for us. But they want us back in Little Town straight away so they can also do Miss Greville’s house and the station for our safe-buster while they’re there. We’re going to have to abandon Murchison for now.”

The forensics team was waiting patiently for us on the front veranda of our police station, eating a late lunch of meat pies and Cokes from the bakery. We let them inside and watched, well out of their way, while they dusted the safe and back door for prints. When they’d finished, they promised to go straight to Miss Greville’s house and then be in touch as soon as possible.

“Now that we’re back in town, let’s go walk the beat for a while,” said the Sarge, so we drove to the main shopping strip and did exactly that. Where he was mobbed yesterday, today it was my turn and we progressed slowly down the street as every person I crossed paths with wanted to hug me or chat to me and commiserate on my injuries, telling me just what they thought of those Bycraft brutes.

We strolled past the town’s small primary school at the exact moment that school ended and the kids streamed out of the gates. Of course they were curious when they saw my face and crowded around me, the little girls holding my hands and giving me hugs. The Bycraft brats slinked past, casting me hostile looks, which would make them the fourth generation of Bycrafts in Little Town to personally hate me. I couldn’t blame the young ones about that today though. Because of me, some of their dads were now in the watch house in Big Town.

“What happened, Officer Tess?” the kids asked in various ways, their mothers

also coming over to talk to me, or maybe it was to check out the Sarge.

"I had a fight with some bad guys," I told the kids solemnly.

"Did you win?" asked one big-eyed little girl.

"I sure did. They're all sitting in jail right now."

"Was it some Bycrafts?"

"Yes, it was."

"Someone told me you killed one of them with your gun," said one seventh-grader.

"That's not true." I responded quickly. "They're all still alive."

Abe's little daughter, Toni, came up, gave me a big hug and clutched my hand.

"Hello Tessie," she said shyly.

"Hello, cutie-pie," I smiled and leant down to drop a kiss on the top of her head, sliding my arm around her shoulder. She was a darling little girl with her parents' dark eyes, a tender temperament and dark brown hair naturally curled into the sweetest ringlets I'd seen since I watched an old Shirley Temple movie on TV one night. "Are you waiting for your dad?"

She nodded and looked up at the Sarge in awe. He must have seemed like a giant to her.

"Kids and mums, this is Sergeant Maguire. He's the town's new police officer. He's my boss now." The mothers smiled in a friendly way at him, while the kids regarded him with all of a child's blunt curiosity.

"Do you have a gun too?" asked one inquisitive fourth-grader.

"Yes, I do. All police officers have a gun, but we try never to use them," he said, looking down at the kids tolerantly.

"Have you ever shot anybody?" asked the same curious kid.

"No, but I don't think we should talk about things like that. It's not a nice thing to talk about in front of the little kids," he reproved gently. The child's mother grabbed his hand, embarrassed by his questions.

"Oh Tessie, look what's happened to you," said a familiar but upset voice from behind. I turned to find my friend Gretel, one of the two teachers at the school gazing at me, aghast. She gave me an awkward hug, Toni still clinging to me and some of the other little girls hanging off my arm. I was a bit of a role model to the young girls in town for some reason. They were always mobbing me. Maybe it was the uniform? Or maybe because I gave regular talks at the school on stranger danger, crossing the road safely, fire safety, bike safety and other kid-friendly topics and handed out lollies at the end to the kids who had listened.

"I'm okay really, Gretel. It was nothing. Just another day at the office," I dismissed airily with the best smile I could muster. She laughed with me at my mock toughness and then noticed the Sarge standing next to me. The change that swept over her face was embarrassingly transparent. I think it was love at first sight for her. I guess I should be grateful that she'd noticed me first, otherwise I don't think I would have got a look-in.

"Gretel, this is Sergeant Finn Maguire, the new officer to replace Des. Sarge, this is my very good friend, Gretel Harcourt. Gretel is one of the two teachers here at the primary school." They shook hands politely but Gretel's eyes didn't leave his face for a second. She was completely dumbstruck and only managed to splurt out some inane greeting in response to his that I knew she'd be kicking herself about for the rest of her life.

Oh dear, another heart I was going to have to shatter by telling her that he was already engaged. *Why couldn't men wear an engagement ring like women did, I*

thought in irritation. Then everybody would instantly know they were taken and someone like me wouldn't have to go around breaking hearts as I broke the bad news. Gretel was single, but left nobody in any doubt that she wanted to change the status of that situation as soon as humanly possible. Being a reasonably sensible woman though, and in close contact with Bycraft brats every work day, she refused to have anything to do with the Bycraft men, so her options in Little Town were significantly limited. A man like the Sarge turning up in town would have been a dream come true for her. If he hadn't been taken already, that was.

The man I really hoped she would end up with, Abe, came strolling down the footpath at that moment to pick up Toni. I had tried everything I could think of to get those two hooked up, but it never seemed to pan out. I know they liked and respected each other, and had even gone on some dates. And from the coy hints they'd both dropped, I think they'd maybe even slept together a few times, but there didn't seem to be that spark between them needed to set a friendship on fire to something hotter.

He stopped in shock when he saw me and I gave him a rueful half-smile. "My God, Tessie." His face grew grim. "I'm going to kill those fu—"

"Abe!" I said sharply, reminding him that we were surrounded by little children with big ears.

He pulled me into his arms and hugged me tightly. I let him for a minute, but then struggled to free myself. I was always very circumspect around him, knowing that he had amorous feelings for me that I wasn't keen to encourage in any way. But he was a dear friend and a great support for me and I didn't want to hurt his feelings either. It was a difficult balancing act at times and I wasn't sure that I always managed it well.

"Why don't you and Trev come to dinner at the bistro tonight?" he suggested. "On the house."

"Thanks Abe, that's so nice of you. But I'd put all your paying customers off their dinner looking like this. Can I take a raincheck until I'm more presentable?" It killed me to turn down a free meal. Especially when I hadn't had a chance to do the grocery shopping for the week.

"Sure Tessie, if that's how you feel, but I couldn't care less what other people think. It pains me to see you hurt like this."

I was sincerely touched by the sentiment and reached up to give him a pat on the cheek. "Thanks Abe, that's such a sweet thing to say. But I'm just doing my job."

"No you're not, Tessie. And we both know that," he said seriously, his big palm affectionately cupping my cheek in return. Our eyes met, so full of dark emotion, the ghost of Marcelle between us, that we both needed to look away immediately. Then he deliberately lightened up before bending down to Toni, tweaking her nose, "Let's go home, little possum. I need you to set the tables in the bistro this afternoon for me before you do your homework. We have a big group booked in tonight celebrating a wedding anniversary."

"Okay Daddy," she smiled, slipping her hand into his. They both gave me a kiss on the cheek in farewell and I watched them walk back towards the pub fondly, hand-in-hand, waving back at them when they turned to wave. He was a great father and a good man and would make a lucky woman a wonderful partner. I looked over to Gretel, hoping she was paying attention to his many sterling qualities. She wasn't, her concentration and eyes firmly fixed on the Sarge. Unfortunately for her though, he hadn't noticed because he was too busy shooting me meaningful glances

that I correctly interpreted as “come on, I’m bored, let’s get moving”.

I said goodbye to everyone and the Sarge and I headed off again, Gretel watching after us as we did. We walked around for another three-quarters of an hour, being stopped every few minutes by someone who wanted to talk to me.

“You’re well-loved in this town, Tess. I’ve never seen a cop hugged and kissed so much in my life. Not even on New Year’s Eve in the city, surrounded by drunk people,” he commented neutrally.

I shrugged, smiling. “I was born and raised here and I’m not a Bycraft, and that’s pretty much all you need to do to be well-loved in Little Town.”

“There you go again, being modest. You’re an outstanding local community cop, but I’ve been thinking that you should definitely consider leaving Little Town at some point to build up some experience in the city. It would be good for you – help you develop professionally. Take you out of your comfort zone. Maybe when I return to the city in a few years, I could take you back with me?”

I turned to him with a thousand-megawatt smile. “What a great idea, Sarge. Thanks for thinking well enough of me to offer.”

At that, his eyebrows knitted together and his eyes changed colour to that darker stormy blue. I barely noticed though as I watched the school bus from Big Town pull up at the bus stop, releasing its load of pushy and rowdy teenagers, a fair few of them Bycrafts. We were on a direct collision course with them.

I nudged him and nodded towards the bus. “Sarge, trouble at twelve o’clock.”

Romi spotted us immediately as she stepped off the bus and forgetting her heartbreak from this morning, ran up to us, giving me a quick hug and looking up at the Sarge adoringly. Her best friend Tina was in tow, and was also instantly captivated by him. Again, unfortunately for them, he was too busy eyeing off the Bycraft teens to notice them. He never seemed to pay much attention to other women and wasn’t one of those guys who compulsively checked out every female body he came across. *His fiancée was a lucky woman*, I thought. He must be deeply in love with her.

The Bycraft juniors came sauntering past us, casting me derisive and amused glances, muttering to and elbowing each other and laughing rudely, obviously at my expense. I didn’t really care what they said because they were just kids, and hey, stick and stones *et cetera*. But the Sarge was on full alert, hostility bristling from him, not prepared to put up with any rubbish from them today. It wasn’t him who went into battle for me though.

“Don’t you dare laugh at Tessie like that, you bunch of ignorant bogans!” Romi screamed at them unexpectedly, her fists clenched, looking as though she was prepared to launch herself onto them at any second.

“Go fuck yourself, pub slut!” yelled back Larissa, laughing, and then they all spent the next minute taunting her, which made her even angrier.

“You kids watch your language!” bellowed the Sarge, taking a few steps towards them. They shut up but their attitude remained aggressive and unpredictable. Unbelievably, Romi took a step forward herself.

I placed a calm, restraining hand on her arm. “It’s all right, sweetie. Don’t worry about them. They don’t bother me at all.” She looked up at me uncertainly, not quite believing me, but I smiled to reinforce my lack of interest in what the Bycraft teens said to me. “And I don’t want you ever getting involved between the Bycrafts and me. I’m serious, Romi. Understand? It’s my business, it’s adult business and it’s police business. Nothing you can help with. Okay? Promise me.”

She nodded, her lovely blue eyes large and moistly emotional as she looked up

at me. "Okay," she said quietly.

I patted her arm and kissed her forehead. "You better run off home now. Abe's got Toni setting the tables this afternoon, so he might need your help as well. And Tina, isn't that your dad over there waiting for you? He's looking a bit impatient. Better get over there quick smart. You know what he's like when he's kept waiting too long."

The two girls obediently departed, heading off in different directions, the Bycraft teens further down the street in the direction of their houses, jostling and teasing each other, not causing any further trouble for us either. I released a breath and turned to the Sarge, wondering why he wasn't moving – we were free to keep walking once more.

"Why do you let me patronise you, Tess?" he asked, a barely hidden undercurrent of some strong feeling in his voice. Anger?

"What do you mean?" I asked, eyes wide in surprise.

"Before, when I suggested you go to the city for a while for some experience? You've already done city time, haven't you?"

"Yes," I admitted.

He sighed impatiently. "Then why not tell me that I'm being a patronising arse again?"

I shrugged and turned away, walking down the street. He grabbed me roughly by the arm to turn me around again. Angrily I jerked my arm away from his, my temper flaring.

"I didn't feel like explaining myself. People will think what they want about me. I can't stop that. You met me and immediately assumed, probably because I'm younger and female and from the country, that I was some kind of clueless sleepy yokel cop with grass behind my ears and sheep shit on my boots, and that's your prerogative. But you don't know the first thing about me and I don't think I should have to justify myself to you because of that."

"How can I ever know anything about you if you don't tell me anything?" he shouted and strode off away from me in temper. I wasn't sure if he was angry with himself or me, but I sure as hell wasn't going to run after him soothing his ruffled feathers. If he couldn't take a bit of plain honest speaking, he had no business being a sergeant or a cop. And as for me not telling him anything, all I had to say to him was pot meet kettle.

Instead of worrying about him, I detoured over to the cafe/bakery where the owner, Fran, was out the front. She was sitting on a bench, taking a smoko, dragging blissfully and deeply on a cigarette, and probably gawking at all the drama with the Bycraft teens and between the Sarge and me.

"Don't go anywhere, Tess," she demanded, crushing her cigarette out and tactfully not staring at my ruined face. She ducked into the bakery and returned with a paper bag that she pressed into my hands. "I want you and Trev to test this new flavour of focaccia for me. It's olive and chorizo with a topping of caramelised chilli-onion jam and a sprinkle of smoked paprika."

"Yummo!" I said enthusiastically. "But I don't think you need to test that on anyone, Frannie. It sounds like a sure winner."

She pushed it on me and I knew she didn't really want the flavour tested. She was showing her appreciation to me, and while I guess that technically it could be considered as a bribe, I often had small gifts such as this given to me by the townsfolk. Someone would forever be at the station dropping off a watermelon or some strawberries or an extra cake they'd just made. It would have been

unforgivably rude of me to refuse such small acts of kindness, so I closed my eyes to the ethical considerations of the situation and accepted each gift with profuse thanks. My own dad and Nana Fuller had often done the same for the local cops, so it wasn't anything new in town. I also occasionally accepted a free meal from Abe or from the lovely couple from Guangdong who ran the Chinese takeaway.

"I need you to tell me if it's too spicy for the normal palate," Fran insisted, keeping up the charade. She didn't like to admit that she gave me gifts, but I'd been asked to 'test' some things more than once over the couple of years I'd been back in town. When I'd pointed out that inconvenient fact to her, she'd always insisted, rather unconvincingly, that she'd fiddled with the recipe a bit and that particular product needed to be retested.

I thanked her again and took my time strolling over to where the Sarge was waiting for me, leaning against one of the beautiful, almost century-old fig trees planted down Timber Street in memory of every local boy killed serving his country in World War I. There were eleven of the trees originally, although the town had lost one in a ferocious storm during the 1950s and one had to be chopped down by the Council last year as it had become dangerously unsound with disease. That had been a very unpopular decision and we'd almost had a riot when the arborists arrived from Big Town to do the deed. I'd had to call in extra help from the Big Town cops and four locals had been arrested for public disorder, most of them from the nearby hippy commune. I'd been rather unpopular myself in town for a while after that little incident, but everyone eventually forgave and forgot, the court-imposed fines were paid and life went on as usual. Nobody went to jail over it and, sadly, the tree was chopped down.

"Bribery and corruption in Little Town, Senior Constable?" he asked me, focussed on the paper bag I was clasping, an eyebrow raised, a faint ironic smile on his face. He was obviously struggling to overcome his bad mood. "Or are you going to tell me that you're about to swim across a raging flood-swollen river to hand-deliver it to a widow with ten starving children as another act of the pious small-town police work for which you are renowned throughout the state?"

I laughed, relieved he was teasing, not angry. "No, I'm not that saintly! Dad and I are going to eat this with dinner and if you're nice to me I'll share some with you too. It's guaranteed to be delicious." Frannie had never made anything that wasn't. We were spoiled with her living in Little Town, because I thought her food would knock the socks off city folk. He raised his eyebrow again. "People want to give me things, Sarge. As long as they're fairly insignificant and perishable I accept, otherwise I'd offend the townsfolk. And that's not a good idea in a small town. You'll be offered the odd thing now and then too."

He didn't respond, but instead turned to pat the trunk of the tree. "These trees are simply beautiful. Gracious, elderly ladies."

"Oh Sarge, that's so lovely. That's exactly what they are," I agreed, impressed again by his turn of phrase. "That one you're leaning against was planted in memory of Dad's great-uncle, Arthur Fuller, who died at Gallipoli. That one across the road is for Dad's grandfather's cousin, Bertie Fuller, killed at Fromelles. That one next to it is for Walter Greville, Miss G's uncle, also killed at Fromelles. And that particularly lovely one on the corner there, with its own small park around it, is for Jake's relative, Cyril Bycraft, killed at Pozieres."

A stab of bitter sadness jolted through me when I pointed out that specific tree, because it had been behind it that I had found the body of Marcelle, Abe's murdered wife, that terrible cold winter evening that I could never forget. I pushed that

distressing thought aside and continued with fake cheerfulness. "Cyril was a real hero. Before he was killed, he managed to save three other men by himself, including Dad's grandfather, John Fuller."

He couldn't hide his surprise. I smiled. "I know. It's unexpected, isn't it, that a Bycraft could ever do something heroic? But it's well known in Little Town that every couple of generations or so, the Bycraft family throws up someone who is not like the other Bycrafts. Everyone thinks that my Jakey is this generation's 'Changeling Bycraft' as we call them. I think they're right because God knows there hasn't been one for an age. Not since Cyril, in fact."

"Jake's a hero too, like Cyril?" he asked, mockingly sceptical.

"Yes, he is," I said simply but proudly, determined not to become riled by his scorn. "He would never tell you himself, but he has an award from the Minister for Police, Corrective and Court Services for outstanding bravery in the course of his duty."

That particular minister was an attractive older woman with designer suits and \$300 haircuts. Her portfolio covered the police and the prison and court systems, including the state's public prosecutors. But because of that cynical expression from him, I didn't bother to explain to the Sarge how Jake had risked his own life to save the lives of two other prison officers during a violent riot in the maximum-security prison he'd worked at in the city before he was transferred back to Little Town and the more cushy job at the low-security prison. The Sarge was probably imagining Jake receiving the award for rescuing some prisoner from drowning in the prison's luxurious swimming pool or from getting a paper cut in its library or from slicing themselves on a knife during one of their frequent gourmet cooking classes. And I took offence at that on Jake's behalf. He *was* a real hero.

"Oh, an award from *that* Minister? You don't come by one of those easily," he snapped unpleasantly and stalked off in the direction of the patrol car without another word. I stared after him in surprise for a moment, not sure what I'd said that had made him act so rudely.

After a tense and silent trip, we returned to the station. There was a cornucopia of fresh produce on the veranda waiting for us, a show of united support for the town's police force after the brutal attack by the Bycrafts yesterday. I was touched by it. There were berries, fresh greens, root vegetables, stonefruit, melons, muffins, biscuits, homemade chocolates and fresh cheese. The Sarge flicked me a cold look and stalked into the station, conspicuously stepping over and around the produce. I quietly picked it up and transported it inside, giving the gifts the respect they deserved, putting what needed to be refrigerated into the station's tiny bar fridge.

"Sarge?" He was so unfriendly at that moment that I didn't want to, but my conscience forced me to approach him hesitantly to tell him that Des and my normal practice had been to share everything, even though in reality Des had done little to deserve any gratuities. He was aggressively plugging in and unplugging the cables in the back of Abe's computer, turning it on and off, an irritable frown creasing his forehead and pulling his mouth downwards.

"What?" he snapped, without even looking at me. I almost suggested then that he shove a sweet potato somewhere that would prove exceptionally painful for him, but managed to restrain myself. But I couldn't contain my indignation over his disparaging dismissal of the gifts from the good people who lived in this town. My blood boiled. I confronted him passionately.

"You think these are bribes, but they're not. They're a simple 'thank you' for what we do for this town. If you don't accept, the townsfolk will start thinking that

you're just here for another reason. Like getting some country time up so you can go for a senior sergeant position back in the city." I paused significantly. "You don't want the townsfolk thinking that about you, otherwise they'll question all your motives. If you show them you are one hundred per cent behind the town and them, they'll be one hundred per cent behind you. And I can't tell you how important that can be sometimes."

He cut me an icy stare, face rock-hard. "Thank you very much for your extremely unsubtle message, Fuller," he sniped, turning his back on me, his attention on fiddling with the computer again, trying to coax it back to life.

I didn't think that I deserved such a level of hostility from him. Perhaps I'd hit a raw nerve with the senior sergeant jibe.

"I'm going home," I decided, grabbing my keys.

He spun around. "You'll leave when I tell you to, Fuller. You've got a desk to sort out," he said frostily. "I want that desk cleared before you go home."

I was infuriated by that imperious order, because we both knew very well that it would take me hours, if not days, to do that. I thought I should be given a bit of consideration and leeway because of my injuries. I went over to my desk and staring at him angrily the whole time, shovelled up an armful of paper and flung it straight into my little bin, without even looking at it. Then I went back and did another armful, then another. The last few papers I swept off carelessly with the back of my arm until my desk was completely clear, but my bin was flowing over, papers toppling and spilling over each other, covering the surrounding floor in an avalanche of documents.

"There! My desk is cleared! Happy?" I shouted at him and grabbed my keys and as much of the produce as I could carry in my two hands and one backpack. Ignoring his strident demands that I come back and clean up the mess I'd made, I drove off, spraying up gravel in my haste to depart.

I blared the radio all the way home. But it wasn't any good for releasing my anger because it was livestock hour. There was much deathly dull discussion of cattle prices and only two old soft pop songs from the sixties played to break up a monotonous interview with a stud breeder who spoke with the slow consistency of refrigerated honey. I wanted frantic modern music to sing along with at the top of my voice, but the Land Rover didn't even have a cassette player, let alone a CD or MP3 player. I screamed out loud in frustration.

Back home, Dad was loving, welcoming, kind and wonderful and all the nice things I needed to feel better again.

"Bad day, love?" he asked sympathetically as I leaned down to kiss him on the forehead.

"I hate that stupid man!" I said vehemently, flinging my cap carelessly across the room like a frisbee, ripping my hair free from its bun, fluffing it out into a hideous mess and flopping down on the lounge, boots still on.

Dad leaned over to stroke my hair gently back to normality. "Problems with Finn?"

I sat up, indignant again. "He became ridiculously angry because the townsfolk left me some produce. I mean, how's he going to survive here with that attitude? I tried to tell him that it's just country kindness, but he was so rude to me. I'm never speaking to him again," I declared decisively.

The phone rang. Dad, on his way to the kitchen with all the produce I'd brought in and dumped in the doorway, wheeled over to it and answered. His eyes flicked to me, and he held his hand over the mouthpiece to tell me in an exaggerated whisper

that it was the Sarge on the phone for me.

“Dad! Tell him I’m not home,” I instructed through gritted teeth. “I don’t want to talk to him.”

Dad told the Sarge I wasn’t home, then put his hand over the mouthpiece again. “He said he could hear you saying that.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake!” I snatched the phone from his hand. “What do you want?” I snapped tersely into the receiver.

“I want to say I’m sorry.”

That threw me. I grappled for a moment with my incredible anger. “I need to shoot a few things before I can talk to you. I’ll call you back. Home or the station?”

“The station,” he said, startled. “For another hour or so. I want to try to get this computer working again.”

I hung up without a farewell and stalked out to the backyard, pulling out my Glock. I first detoured to the bottom drawer of the kitchen cabinet to grab some of my own personal ammunition. I had a reasonable shooting gallery set up in the backyard for my own personal practice, trying to mimic the length, if not the conditions, of the professional ones in the city as much as possible. I bought targets and ammunition online for half-price. I wasn’t entirely sure that was even legal, but hey, they were half-price and I loved to shoot, but it was an expensive hobby.

The chickens rushed over when they saw me at the back door, hoping for a treat. I very gently nudged them away with my boot.

“I’m in a shooting mood, girls. Don’t get in my way,” I warned them and calmed myself by breathing in and out. Then I loosened my shoulders by rotating them and clipped on, then hauled out, a target on a pulley system that Jake had rigged up for me. When it was at the maximum distance prescribed in police training, I started shooting.

It was a reasonably safe operation. Behind us there was nothing except the gentle rise of the lowest part of Mount Big and there was nobody to either side for at least an acre. If Denny Bycraft popped up unexpectedly one day and I shot him, then the entire town would stand up to applaud me. God knows, I’d warned him enough times that I practiced shooting in my backyard. My only difficulty was the weather. If it was windy, I had to bail – it was too difficult to shoot at a flailing target, though I tried on occasion to test my skills.

I aimed and shot rapidly at the target, then pulled it in towards me. Almost perfect. I was a good shot. No, like the Sarge said, that was being modest. I was an absolute sharp shooter, a natural talent for judging distances, conditions and velocity finding its perfect match in weapons training. In a war situation, I’d have made an ideal sniper. I’d topped my year at the police academy for shooting. In fact, I still held the record for the highest score in shooting for any female recruit at the academy, and was ranked third overall for all recruits in the whole history of the academy.

I shot at a few more targets in the same calm, measured way and felt calmer and more measured myself in response. The concentration, the control, the coolness needed to be a good marksman had always proven itself to be excellent therapy for me since I’d first started learning on the range at twelve years of age. Finished, I packed everything away safely and threw my girls an extra handful of feed for scaring them with the shots. After I’d hustled them inside their safe run, I rang the Sarge back.

He answered the phone immediately, as if sitting next to it waiting for my call. “Tess, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so bad-tempered with you.” A pause.

“Especially after everything else. It was the last thing you needed.”

“Okay, see you tomorrow,” I replied and went to hang up.

“Tess!” he stopped me. “What were you shooting? Not your dinner, I hope?”

I frowned to myself, not quite over it yet. “I’m not sure if you’re making a joke or patronising me again.”

“It was a joke,” he said. “Or was it?”

I laughed reluctantly and offered an olive branch. I had to work with the man, after all. “Why don’t you come for dinner and see if I have buckshot bunny on the menu tonight?” In fact, I had planned a lamb casserole and Fran’s lovely focaccia. “There’s enough for three.”

“Sounds good,” he said doubtfully, “but maybe next time. Thanks anyway.”

I laughed again. “Bye Sarge.”

Another pause. “Don’t forget that you can call me Finn now and then,” he said, conciliatory. “When nobody’s listening and it’s just you and me.”

“I won’t. Bye Sarge,” I said deliberately. “See you tomorrow.”

“You’re a very hard woman, Teresa Fuller.”

Smiling to myself, strangely pleased, I hung up on him and went to prepare dinner, regaling Dad with the day’s activities. Afterwards, we played two games of chess, winning one each, then he spent a frustrating hour trying to tutor me on the guitar before we jointly decided to give up and chatted over a last cup of tea. Before long, we both started yawning and headed to our beds.

Chapter 22

I was a soldier in World War I stuck in the horrible mud somewhere in France, a full battle raging over my head and around me. I was sinking first to my knees then quickly to my stomach and shoulders. Either side of me, Jake and the Sarge knelt on duckboards and leant down to grab one of my arms, each trying to haul me out of the morass. But instead of working together, they were bickering so much about which way to pull me that I was sinking lower and lower into the thick, cloying, diseased, stinking mud. It lapped over my chin and began to fill up my mouth. I called out in alarm to the two men, my voice smothered, but neither noticed in the heat of their argument. The mud clogged my throat and I couldn’t breathe and I couldn’t shout out to them to help me anymore. Then the mud rose over my nostrils and eyes . . .

I woke up at that point, jolting upright in bed, afraid, wide-awake. I was breathing heavily, choking and coughing as if I’d really been swallowing mud. My eyes darted wildly around my room, my heart pounding and my hand on my knife.

I sensed something and went to my window to fling up the blind and yell at Denny Bycraft. But instead of haring off in a scared panic at being caught out like Denny always did, this person remained perfectly still, nothing seemingly out of place as I peered intently into the darkness. I left the blind up, not convinced I’d imagined anything. I lay down again for ten minutes, pretending I’d fallen back to sleep, listening keenly. I heard the faintest crunching of the gravel that I’d deliberately landscaped under my window and knew that I’d been right – I had an unwanted night time visitor. Again.

I slipped out of bed, grabbing my gun and mobile as I did. I had nowhere to stow either in my short nightie, so held the gun in my right hand and thrust my mobile uncomfortably into the waistband of my panties for safekeeping. I opened the back door and silently crept up on my intruder from behind.

I could see him in the luminous beam of the moonlight. *Bastard!* I didn't recognise him, so knew he wasn't a Bycraft and it definitely wasn't the Sarge this time either. My visitor was trying to grab onto my windowsill and find a foot purchase in the tiny gaps of the timber lattice battening covering the lower part of the house between its stumps.

I approached him. He didn't hear me because he was swearing under his breath in a continuous soft stream of obscenities as he held precariously onto my windowsill and flailed around for foot grip.

I pulled out my gun and aimed it at him. Then I smiled to myself. I loved this bit.

"Police. Don't move," I said quietly. "I have my gun out and you better believe that I know how to use it."

He stiffened so much in fright that he released his grip and fell back onto the ground, scrabbling instantly to his feet. Then he foolishly made a run for it.

Luckily for me, I knew this yard back-to-front and chased him until he tripped over the stockpile of firewood that Dad had bought half-price at Christmas for winter this year and had dumped inconveniently at the side of the house. My tackle was quick and painful for both of us. I sat, straddling his back, my gun trained at his skull. I reached into my panties, bringing out my phone and calling the Sarge.

"Tess?" he asked sleepily. "What's up?"

"Sarge! I need you at my place now. Got an intruder, and for once it's not a Bycraft. Or you." I couldn't resist, even at this hour of the morning. "I'm down the left side of the house as you face it."

He didn't even say goodbye before hanging up. Ten minutes passed, during which the man squirmed, struggled and resisted the whole time, trying to buck me off his back. I was seriously considering knocking him unconscious with a piece of firewood when the Sarge finally arrived in the patrol car, squealing to a stop in the gravel drive and jogging over to me, puffing slightly. He was wearing crumpled jeans, a plain black cotton t-shirt that was probably part of his pyjamas, runners with no socks and had a shocking case of bed hair that made him look much younger, almost cute. He had his gun out in one hand, torch in the other. Tucking his torch in his armpit, he hauled the intruder to his feet, put away his gun and pulled his cuffs out of his back pocket. He cuffed the man, advising him that he was under arrest on suspicion of breaking and entering.

"Who's this?" he asked me, as we dragged the shouting guy into the back of the patrol car.

"No idea," I said, baffled. We sat in the front seats, while the man banged on the separator furiously.

He checked his watch. "It's three in the morning. Down to the station or off to Big Town with him?" he asked, yawning.

"If we take him to the station, one of us has to stay with him for the rest of the night. But if we go to Big Town, both of us will be caught up in paperwork for hours and hours. Let's lock him up here, one of us on guard and then interview him in the morning before we haul him off to Big Town."

"Are you tired right now?" he asked.

"Not right now," I admitted, adrenaline pumping through my veins.

"Let's interview him now then, since we're already both awake."

I looked down at my nightie and bare feet. "Can I have a minute to get changed first? I'm a little underdressed for work."

He nodded in amusement, so I ran up around the back of the house and quickly

changed into some jeans and a t-shirt, tied my hair up and grabbed my runners, some socks and my utility belt. I left a short note for Dad letting him know where I was and sprinted down the stairs, throwing myself into the front seat. While he drove, I pulled on my shoes and socks.

"Fill me in on what happened," he said.

I told him about waking up to hear the noise and sneaking up on the man.

"But you don't recognise him at all?"

"Never seen him before."

"Maybe he's Mrs Villiers' peeper, deciding to find someone younger and prettier to peep on."

"Younger and prettier than Mrs Villiers?" I repeated with a smile, peering up at him from where I was contorting myself to tie up my shoelaces. "Aw Sarge, you say the nicest things sometimes."

He grinned for a split-second. "Not that I'm convinced for a minute that we have two peepers. That's just too much to believe, even for this town."

"So maybe this guy in the back here is our one and only peeper, making him also the person who tossed Miss G's place. But why would he be creeping around my place?"

"Maybe he was genuinely peeping this time?" he suggested.

I gave him a withering glance. "I think he'd pick someone who looked a bit better than me to peep on if he was."

Back at the station, we had some trouble getting him out of the car and he struggled and fought us the entire way up the stairs and inside the building. The Sarge handcuffed him to the leg of his desk, where he twisted and thrashed and swore at us.

"Sit down and shut up!" the Sarge yelled at him in frustration, having had enough. "It's three-thirty in the morning and I don't want to be here, and my partner certainly doesn't want to be here, so you've pissed off both of us straight away. And that's not a good start to an interview."

The man shut up and sat still, his eyes shifting nervously from the Sarge to me and back again. He had the look of a small furry wild animal caught in a trap, the image enhanced by his large front teeth, big timid brown eyes, trembling mouth, bushy unfashionable sideburns, pointy ears and overall frightened demeanour.

"Good," said the Sarge and pulled up a chair in front of him. I smothered a yawn and went over to the kitchenette to make us coffee, pleased to notice that all the fresh produce I'd left behind earlier had been taken. The Sarge had decided to cave into corruption and bribery in a small town, after all.

The Sarge politely waited until I'd finished. I handed him a cup of coffee and cradling my own, pulled up a seat near, but not too close to, the handcuffed man. He introduced the both of us to the man, repeated why he'd been arrested, and told the man his rights. I took out my notebook to record what he told us.

"What's your name?" the Sarge asked.

The man didn't speak, just glared at both of us defensively.

"What were you doing at the Senior Constable's place?"

Silence.

"You're not a local, so where do you live? Are you from Wattling Bay?"

No response.

The Sarge turned to me. "Looks like we've got ourselves a non-communicator here."

"Chuck him in the lockup, Sarge. I can't be bothered trying to get him to talk," I

said in an uncaring voice, then deliberately yawned before taking a careful sip of coffee through my busted lip.

“Senior Constable, that lockup is too primitive to leave a man in for long. There’s nothing in it but a lumpy ancient mattress on thin metal. And there’s nobody here when we both go home,” he said with fake concern. “What about the wild animals?”

I shrugged and stood up, giving our man the once over. “He looks like a tough guy, Sarge,” I bluffed. “He’ll cope out there. There’s probably been enough rain this summer to provide sufficient food for the foxes. They haven’t had to start attacking humans. Well, not yet at least.”

Foxes wouldn’t go near a human, but I figured that this guy wouldn’t know that. He didn’t and I could see his large Adam’s apple bobbing up and down nervously.

“Okay,” the Sarge agreed and uncuffed the guy from the desk, clamping the cuff on his freed wrist and hauling him to his feet. “I don’t want to hang around here all night either. We’ll lock him up until morning. He might have remembered his name by then.”

I followed them out the back of the station, flicking on the lights as I did. When the man spotted the old, badly lit lockup, he struggled furiously again and I rushed to the Sarge’s other side to grab our man’s arm and forcefully propel him forward.

“I’m not going in there,” he shouted wildly, genuinely frightened. “I’m claustrophobic. You can’t lock me up in a little room alone in the dark. It’s a violation of my human rights!”

“We haven’t got a choice, mate,” the Sarge grunted, narrowly dodging an elbow in the face. “We’ll take you to the watch house in Wattling Bay tomorrow, but until then, you’ll be sleeping here for the rest of tonight.”

“No!” he screamed as if in physical pain. “Please! I can’t!”

We didn’t have any option but to lock him up, and when the Sarge had slammed the cell door on him, we moved to the bottom of the stairs to confer, ignoring his terrified screams for a moment.

“Sarge, he’s not faking,” I decided. “I’ll stay with him. You get some sleep. I’m wide awake with adrenaline, anyway.”

He rubbed his face tiredly with his hands. “Okay, you stay with him until I return, then I’ll take him to Big Town in the morning.”

“Okay. Night Sarge,” I said as he strode away towards his house.

He turned. “Tess, you have your mobile on you, right?”

“Sure.” I held out my phone for him to see. He continued towards his home and turned around again.

“You’ll lock the station door when you’re inside?”

“Yes Sarge.”

“What about when you go outside to the cell to check on him? You’ll take your gun and your mobile with you? And your spray?”

I sighed to myself. “Yes Sarge. I’m wearing my utility belt.” I pointed to it so he would notice.

“My bedroom window’s just over there. Yell really loudly if you need me. I’ll sleep with one ear open, okay?”

“Okay.” *Bloody hell!* He was starting to annoy me. I could tell that he was torn between over-ruling me and staying himself and desperately wanting to show that he respected my competence as a colleague.

“Will you be spooked here by yourself, Tess?” His voice was so full of earnest anxiety that I felt my irritation evaporating immediately. You should never be angry

with someone for caring about your safety.

"No Sarge," I answered patiently. "I've been here by myself a million times. I'll be fine. Go get some sleep."

He finally made it all the way to his house, although he did turn around another couple of times. I waved goodbye to him, went into the station, retrieved my coffee and took a bottle of water from the fridge. Then I went to the man's cell and pushed the bottle of water in through the bars. I told him I would sit right outside his cell on the stairs if he cooperated. And for the Sarge's sake, I kept my utility belt on and took my phone with me. Not because of our man, but because there was a whole town of Bycrafts out there and I was in no shape to deal with them.

"Thank you so much," he whimpered and gave a watery sniff. I felt ashamed, not liking to bring a man down to the level of tears, but we needed some answers and he had been very uncooperative so far.

He looked at me through the bars with a tear-reddened face, taking a sip of water, trying to calm himself down. "What happened to you?"

"I was beaten up by some Bycrafts."

"Oh, them. I hate that family. They're nothing but savages. I work in a law firm and we've represented a few of them from time to time. They never pay their bills and they threaten to chop off your . . . you know, boy things . . . when you try to get them to." I presumed he was speaking from personal experience as his face flushed a deep red. He took another sip of water. "Will you be okay? Why'd they beat you up?"

I shrugged. "I'll live. They're all in the watch house in Big Town. You can ask them yourself later this morning."

"No! I can't be locked up with animals like them." He began panicking again.

"Why not?"

"I'm not a criminal like them."

"I'm not seeing much difference between you and them from my point of view."

"I'm a paralegal, not a criminal," he confessed, leaning against his cell wall in despair, tears springing to his eyes once more.

"And yet again, at the risk of being repetitive, what's the difference between you as a law breaker and the Bycrafts, regardless of your occupation?" I asked calmly as I watched the man slowly unravel in front of me.

"Officer, please!" he begged.

"Who do you work for?" I asked coldly.

"I refuse to speak," he insisted, blinking away his tears. "You can't force me to. It's a violation of my human —"

"All right," I butted in. "Good night."

"Don't go!" he screamed in fear. The panic in his voice grabbed me by the heart and squeezed.

"See that buzzer on the wall. Press that and I'll come to see what you want. Otherwise, I'll check on you every half-hour. Have a good sleep, Mystery Man."

"No! Officer! Please don't do this! You said you'd stay. Please stay with me! Please!" he begged. "Don't turn out the light."

"I said I'd stay if you cooperated. You don't want to, so I'm going," I said. "Anyway you need to sleep. I don't want anyone saying that you were questioned unreasonably or unlawfully."

"No!"

"I'll turn off the cell light, but leave the veranda light on. Okay?"

“Thank you,” he sniffled unhappily.

I walked down the stairs, blocking out his sobs of agony. Back in the office, I locked the door and sat in the chair placing my feet on my bare desk. I sipped my coffee and wished I’d brought a book with me. I looked over at the pile of paper I’d bad-temperedly dumped earlier in the day.

The buzzer rang and rang. I ignored it.

I looked over at the pile of paper again and sighed hugely. If I didn’t have the time now to tackle it properly then when would I, I reasoned with myself. I did hate mess and it had bothered me for months. Reluctantly, I commenced the tiresome task of sorting it out, ignoring the buzzer the whole time.

Each half-hour I checked on the man in custody, carefully writing notes in the observation book afterwards.

“You said you’d come if I pressed the buzzer,” he accused tearfully at my first check-up.

“I guess it’s busted,” I lied. “What’s your name and who do you work for?”

“I don’t have to tell you anything. I want a lawyer! You’re violating my human rights!”

I turned towards the stairs.

“I hate you!” he yelled petulantly.

“I don’t care,” I said over my shoulder and left him alone again, heading back to my paperwork. By the time the sun poked its head over the horizon, I’d checked on him and asked him the same question five times and had filed or dumped every piece of paper. I was extraordinarily proud of myself as I ran the final unwanted piece of paper through the station’s ancient shredder. My chickens would have nest linings for ages now.

The last time I checked on the guy, he was asleep on the lumpy mattress, snoring loudly, so I knew he was still alive. And that was more than I could vouch for myself, being half-asleep at that point. I tidied up the station a little, dusted, swept the floor and cleaned and restocked the kitchen and bathroom. By the time I’d finished doing that bit of housekeeping, the sun was up, the dew on the grass was glistening prettily and a chorus of birdcalls was brightening the morning.

I was sitting on the back steps of the station, drinking another coffee, yawning hugely, when the Sarge returned in uniform. He had a quick check on our man who was still sleeping, made himself a coffee and joined me on the back steps. From a bag he handed me one of the muffins left for us yesterday and took out a tub of yoghurt and a banana each as well.

“Thanks Sarge! This is nice,” I said, appreciating his thoughtfulness, biting into the muffin. It was blueberry and strawberry, made with fresh berries, and was delicious. We ate in silence and when I’d finished, I stood up and brushed muffin crumbs off my jeans, picked up the rubbish and took it to the bin at the side of the station.

The Sarge stopped in surprise when he spotted my workspace. “What happened to all those papers?”

“I filed the ones we need to keep and the rest have been shredded.”

“You’ve been busy,” he commented. “Good work, Tess.”

“I had to do something to keep me occupied and awake last night,” I shrugged. I told him that our guest hadn’t been very forthcoming during the night and the only thing I’d learned was that he was a paralegal with a law firm.

“And what’s the bet that he works for a certain Stanley Murchison? That’s one gentleman we need to speak to urgently.” I nodded in agreement. “Go and wake up

our man. We'll give him some breakfast and take him to Big Town straight away."

He wasn't very happy to be woken up, complaining that he'd only just got to sleep and was tired. I gave him a muffin and a bottle of orange juice. He begged me for a cup of coffee and as I left to make it, he yelled through the bars that he liked a cafe latte made with fresh medium-ground Arabica beans, but not too milky and not too strong, with two level teaspoons of demerara sugar.

"I'm not a bloody barista," I yelled back over my shoulder. "You'll get it how I make it."

And while I carelessly dumped instant coffee and white sugar into a mug and poured over the boiling water, the Sarge escorted him to the bathroom and back to the cell again. He held the door of the cell open for me to bring in the mug of coffee. I entered the cell, my concentration on the mug that I'd filled to the brim in my usual impractical way. The man jumped up from the bed and suddenly lunged at me, flipping my hand up so that the hot coffee spilled over my t-shirt. As I shrieked in pain, he shoved past me violently, pushing me in the chest, forcing me to stumble back against the cell wall. He made a run for the door, shouldering past the Sarge desperately as he did.

The Sarge automatically reached out an arm and managed to grasp the man's t-shirt, brutally hauling him backwards, almost choking him in the process. I righted myself and ignoring my scalding, grabbed his other arm and we manhandled him, struggling and kicking out at us, back into the cell. The Sarge slammed the door hard.

"You're a very stupid man," he said sharply, through the bars, breathing heavily. I was holding my burning t-shirt out from my body. He turned to me and threw me his house keys. "Quick, get up to my house and get into a cold shower."

I didn't wait another second, but jogged as best I could to his place and headed straight into the bathroom, not even sparing a second to look around at his furniture. I threw off my clothes and jumped into his shower, letting the cool water play over the reddened skin on my chest and stomach. I stood for a while until the stinging went away, then thought while I was there I'd have a proper shower using his expensive, handmade soap. It was lemony and lathered up with luxurious silky bubbles. Lovely. I had just rinsed off the last of the soap when there was a knock on the door. I turned off the taps.

"Yeah?" I asked, anxiously trying to remember if I'd locked the door behind me.

"There are towels in the tall cupboard next to the basin," the Sarge said through the door.

"Thanks."

"I've left a clean t-shirt for you outside the door. Are your jeans okay?"

"Yes. It was just the shirt that got wet."

"I've left burn cream with the shirt too."

"Thanks, but it's not too bad. Just a bit red. I'll be fine."

I stood on the fluffy bath mat and leaned over to the cupboard to grab an even fluffier soft white towel with a label that told me it was hideously expensive. But, oh boy, it felt nice on my skin. I dressed in my panties, jeans and shoes again, and wrapping the towel carefully around me, I opened the bathroom door, leant down and grabbed the t-shirt and cream, and quickly shut it again. I rubbed on some burn cream even though I didn't really think that I needed it and slipped on his designer t-shirt. But I had a little dilemma that he wouldn't be able to help me with – my bra had been soaked in coffee as well as my t-shirt. I was forced to go bra-less until I

could go home to get another one and I'd been blessed with a generously portioned pair of boobs, so it was going to be quite noticeable.

I was alone in the house when I opened the door to the bathroom, and this time I did give myself some time to satisfy my curiosity. I prowled around his house shamelessly. He had nice furniture, very modern and probably as costly as everything else he owned. It would have suited a smart city apartment much more than it did the old timber police house, because it looked out of place in these modest surroundings. He had the largest wall-mounted flat screen television I'd ever seen, but it wouldn't be much use out here because we only received three channels, sometimes four if the weather was absolutely clear and the mountain wasn't interfering with reception. There were framed photographs set out on the side table that the Bycraft boys had tried to steal. And being the nosy creature that I am, I was inevitably drawn directly to them like a shopaholic to a Myer sale.

The first photo was of him and two other men, all very young in their early twenties, and all dressed in university robes, smiling with self-satisfaction towards the camera, arms around each other's shoulders. I recognised the background in the photo as the same university that I'd attended, the state's premier sandstone. A graduation photo? One of the other men had straight fair hair and was shorter than the Sarge with an attractive square face and nice smile. The other guy was gangly and even taller than the Sarge with freckles, long ginger dreadlocks and a patchy ginger goatie. Perhaps they were his besties? I smiled at how young he was in that photo. He looked pretty cute.

The next photo I picked up was of him and a handsome older man with the same dark curling hair, nose and chin as the Sarge. But the older man also had an incredibly cheeky smile and an unmistakable twinkle in his eye. Their arms were fondly around each other's shoulders, at some kind of celebration. I wondered who the man was. Some kind of relative, I'd bet. The photo next to it was of a beamingly proud, overdressed elderly couple, with the Sarge towering in the middle of them, at what appeared to be his police academy graduation. They were presumably his grandparents.

The last photo was the most interesting to me and I examined it closely – it was of him and a pretty young woman, arms around each other's waists, smiling happily at the camera, with an older couple standing either side of them. Everybody was dressed formally and I wondered if it had been taken at his engagement party. I peered intently at the couple standing next to the Sarge and could see a resemblance in the woman, so thought perhaps it was his parents. His mother looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't put my finger on it. The Sarge's fiancée was barely medium-height, with a rounded figure, lush, long dark hair and huge brown eyes. She looked quite young and I wondered what the age gap was between them. They certainly made an attractive couple, despite their difference in height. Everyone in the photo looked perfect – well groomed and expensively dressed. He obviously came from a moneyed background, so what on earth was he doing in Little Town? And why on earth was he a cop in the first place? It wasn't a career that normally appealed to the well off.

I put the photo down and kept prowling. The police house was set out in an identical plan to a lot of the houses in town, including mine, but reversed to my plan. There was a hallway that ran from the front door straight through the house to the kitchen with three bedrooms, a lounge room, a bathroom and a dining room directly off the hall. The kitchen ran the width of the house at the back, allowing for a generous eat-in area. He had set up one of the three bedrooms as a gym, and had

an impressive array of equipment, including a bench press and treadmill. The other bedroom was a spare, well furnished with a queen-sized bed and silky oak dresser. His bedroom, one of the large rooms at the front of the house, was stylish with a king-sized bed made up with smart, masculine sheets and cover. The bed, bedside tables, dresser and wardrobe formed a matching bedroom suite also in silky oak. The other large room was his lounge room. Like Dad and me, he'd set up his dining table in the huge kitchen and was using the dining room, not as a music room as I did, but as an office, with a desk, filing cabinets and bookcase. Not to mention a laptop and what looked like a brand new printer.

The whole house was neat and clean, calm but with a reserved feeling, not revealing a great deal about his personality. Feeling guilty about being such a stickybeak, I gathered my dirty clothes, gave the bathroom one last check to make sure I'd left it in pristine condition, hanging my used towel up neatly to dry and headed back to the station. I carefully locked the front door of his house behind me.

Back at the station, I asked if he would mind if first I dropped home before we headed off to Big Town with our man, keeping my arms securely across my chest the whole time I spoke to him.

"Why? You'll be fine to go as you are. Come on, let's just head off. It doesn't matter if you're in jeans. I don't want to waste any time."

"Sarge, *please*," I implored, trying to sway him with my eyes, not wanting to be forced to explain myself.

"Tess, why do you want to go home so badly?" he demanded, impatient.

Why did he always have to make everything so damn embarrassing for me? I took a deep breath. "Because, Sarge, I don't like to be on duty without a bra. It was soaked in coffee too, okay? I need a replacement," I replied bluntly.

"Oh." And almost as if not of their own volition, his eyes drifted down to my chest taking in my unfettered boobs, before hurriedly moving back up to my face again. His cheeks reddened slightly.

"That's unless you have a spare one you can lend me?" I asked with a half-smile.

That coaxed a reluctant half-smile from him in return. "Even if she was here, my fiancée isn't as –" He stopped himself suddenly, turning away. "No, I don't have a spare, I'm sorry."

Chapter 23

We experienced some trouble forcing the man into the patrol car again.

"You're not locking me up with those Bycrafts. I'm not a criminal! You're violating my human rights!" he shouted as he squirmed, kicked and twisted in our grip. Just when we were both about to lose it and I was sure that the Sarge was seriously thinking about kneecapping him, he stopped fighting suddenly. He stood in the carpark, staring at me, blushing an ugly beetroot red. "You know, I can't concentrate with your breasts jiggling around like that. Shouldn't you wear a bra at work? It's unprofessional of you as a police officer not to. Your boobs are very distracting. How's a man supposed to focus?"

"Yes, I should be wearing one!" I snapped at him. "But you spilled hot coffee all over it. Remember?"

"Oh sorry. I didn't think about that when I did it. I should have poured it over him instead." He nodded towards the Sarge.

In an arctic tone, I said, "And if you don't mind, I'd prefer it if you would stop

perving at my breasts.”

“Well, you better tell him that too,” he said defiantly, nodding his head towards the Sarge again. “I’ve seen him sneaking in a few looks as well.” I glared over at the Sarge.

“I have not!” he protested immediately, but another reddening of his cheeks belied his words.

“Oh, for God’s sake!” I snapped in disbelief and roughly pushed the man into the back seat.

“Not that you haven’t got very nice breasts, because you have, believe me,” the man continued, his face blazing red and a sweat breaking out across his forehead as I leant over him to do up his seatbelt. “And normally it would be a real pleasure to stare at them. It’s just that I’m trying to escape at the moment, and I need to concentrate and I can’t do that if there are jiggly boobs in my line of sight.”

“*Will you shut up about my boobs, you little creep?*” I shouted in his face, frightening him. I slammed the door, throwing myself into the car in temper. I crossed my arms and slumped in the seat. “Hurry up and take me home,” I ordered the Sarge.

We drove in silence all the way, and I suspected that the Sarge was too afraid to even look in my direction in case I accused him of perving on me. That almost led to us being t-boned by a speeding car when he pulled out onto the highway without properly checking to his left because that’s where I was sitting. Back home, I quickly changed into my uniform, my most practical and least sexy bra firmly fastened, pulled my hair up into its customary bun, gave Dad a speedy rundown of the morning, kissed him goodbye and headed back to the car, fixing on my utility belt as I did.

“You’re allowed to look at me now,” I said to the Sarge with a friendlier smile. “I’m all bra-ed up again.”

“Glad to hear it. Maybe you should keep a *complete* set of spare clothes at the station?” he suggested.

It was a good idea – we never knew what was going to happen to us from day-to-day. I would bring some clothes in the next day. We drove in silence for a while.

“I made a very tasty pasta and salad dinner last night,” he told me conversationally as we sped towards Big Town, both of us ignoring the man yelling in the back. “I used some of that fresh produce we were left. The vegetables were so crisp and flavoursome. Nothing like what I used to buy at the supermarket in the city. And I thought I was buying fresh produce then. But those tomatoes . . . Wow! They were simply delicious.”

“Sarge!” I exclaimed, delighted. “We’ll turn you into a grass-chewing, wood-whittling, banjo-playing, slack-jawed, cousin-marrying yokel like the rest of us in no time.”

“Do I get a choice about that?” he asked, amused.

“Not really,” I smiled. “The only choice you get is whether you prefer to hold your potato-sack hessian trousers up with braces or a belt made from string.”

He laughed, a pleasant, warm chuckle. *He should smile and laugh more often*, I thought. It made him look much nicer.

“You have lovely furniture, Sarge. The old police house has never looked so stylish,” I complimented sincerely.

“My furniture doesn’t really match the house though, does it?”

“No. But your furniture’s still lovely to look at.”

“I bought it all for my apartment. It looked good there. Maybe I should have left

it behind for my tenant,” he mused, almost to himself.

I jumped swiftly on that new piece of information. “You have an apartment?”

“Yes. In the city.”

“You’re renting it out while you’re here?”

“Yes.”

“Mortgages can be killers, can’t they?” I said knowingly, even though I’d never had a mortgage in my life and judging by my current bank balance, would never be eligible for one either. I understand you have to have a decent deposit first before the bank would lend you any money and that ruled me out straight away. Dad and I pretty much lived hand-to-mouth, my pay coming from the government into our bank account and then straight out again to cover all the bills.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said, smoothly overtaking a slow moving vehicle in front of us. “I’ve never had one.”

What the hell did that mean? He paid *cash* for a city apartment? Who on earth can afford to do that? I was dying to ask him a million questions, but I didn’t think he’d answer any more about his financial situation. So I changed the subject.

“You have the softest, fluffiest towels I’ve ever used.” I hoped I didn’t sound as wistful or envious as I suspected I did. I thought I could get away with a few more questions if I kept them less personal. “I’m sorry, but I’m very nosy and my attention was captured by your photographs before I left your house. Are the elderly couple your grandparents?”

“Yes.”

“Was that your fiancée with you in the group photo?”

“Yes.”

“She’s very pretty.”

“Yes, she is.”

“What’s her name?”

He seemed surprised by the question. “Melissa.”

“Were they your parents with you in that photo?”

“My mother and stepfather.”

God, squeezing information from him was like squeezing a tip out of a pensioner, I thought in frustration. He should have been a spy, he was so tight-lipped.

“Your mother looks familiar, but I can’t think why. What does she do?”

“She’s just a public servant, like us.”

“Oh. I could have sworn I’ve seen her face somewhere before,” I said. “It’s a lovely photo though. You’re all so happy in it. It must have been a very happy time in your life.”

“Our engagement party. Almost two years ago.”

Bingo! I was a good cop, I congratulated myself smugly, doing a small victory dance in my mind. Then what he said struck me. *Two years!* That was a long engagement period. I wondered why they hadn’t married already. I really wanted to ask more questions, but I sensed he was tiring of my third-degree already. I was a patient woman though, and let it go for now.

“We want to interview *him* ourselves, don’t we?” I asked, moving away from his personal life and indicating our guest in the backseat.

“Definitely. We’re not handing this case over to Big Town. They can deal with your Bycraft assault because there’s a conflict of interest involved with us dealing with it, but the Little Town peeper is all ours.” He glanced at me. “You agree?”

“Yep. Especially after that coffee incident. I want to nail his butt to the floor,” I

said and noticed with interest his shoulders relaxing. *Hmm, had he started caring about my opinion?* That might be a promising development.

We pulled into the parking lot of the police station in Big Town for the umpteenth time this week and again we drove around the back to where the watch house entrance was located. When the Sarge killed the ignition, our man in the back decided to be difficult again. As we opened the door, he thrashed and fought us furiously. I stopped fighting against him, took my hands away and leaned my elbows casually on the roof of the car, watching him. After a minute the Sarge noticed me and did the same, so we ended up with the spectacle of our man wriggling and fighting nobody. He was loudly screaming about police brutality and human rights, wrestling and struggling with himself, eyes tightly shut. The Sarge and I both raised our palms to the heavens in a ‘wtf’ moment, much to the amusement of the curious audience that had gathered at the ruckus.

Eventually the man opened his eyes and realised that neither the Sarge nor I had our hands on him. He stopped fighting and screaming, looking around him sheepishly.

“Police violence,” he complained in a small, unconvincing voice. The cops nearby shook their heads contemptuously and moved on with their business.

“You ready to get out, Johnny Depp, or do you want to finish Scene Four?” I asked sarcastically.

He huffed, “I’m not an actor.”

“We can tell that,” I said unkindly. “But your cellmates might enjoy some entertainment.”

“No! Don’t. I’ll talk,” he promised, as the Sarge dragged him from the car.

“Oh, you’ll talk, sunshine. No matter what we do to you,” I threatened.

“No! Please. Not in the watch house. No Bycrafts. They won’t warm to me. I’m not like them.”

“Sarge, we have a right royal prince here. He can’t be locked up with the common peepers, perverts and flashers where he belongs. He’s special,” I said sarcastically.

“I’m not a pervert!” he yelled and struggled again. Two bored uniforms came over to help subdue him and bundle him into the watch house, glad to have something to do. I thought resentfully that we could have used the extra manpower back in Little Town.

We followed them into the receiving area. In charge of the watch house that day was a uniform that I liked – Senior Sergeant Daisy Yu. I introduced the Sarge to her.

“What’s he here for, Tess?” she asked, indicating our man, fingers poised on the keyboard ready to enter data.

“For being an asshole, Senior Sarge.”

She laughed – a hard, sharp yap. “That would cover all the men we know, darl. But there’s no law against that, unfortunately. One day, let’s hope.”

“I caught him peeping on me in my bedroom and he’s resisted us about four times now *and* thrown hot coffee on me. I’ve been scalded and I was just trying to be nice to him! Look!” I demanded and unfastened the top two buttons and pulled my shirt apart to show her a glimpse of my pink chest skin. All the men nearby leaned over to have a good old look too, including the Sarge.

“That’s just unforgivable,” Daisy said as I rebuttoned, shaking her head sadly at the bad manners of criminals these days. “Don’t you have a mother?” she snapped at the man.

"Of course I do," he protested.

"She's rolling in her grave at your awful deeds."

"She's not dead!" he protested again.

"Are you contradicting me?" she asked with practiced menace.

"No ma'am," he said immediately, his voice shaking at her contemptuous stare, Adam's apple bouncing up and down like a tennis ball at Wimbledon.

"Don't call me ma'am! I'm not an officer and I never want to be one of those butt-kissing brown-nosers either. Your mother is turning in her grave over your terrible crimes. First, peeping on the Senior Constable here for a cheap porno thrill."

"I never –"

"*I'm talking now!*" she shouted. He recoiled in fear and I seriously thought for a moment that he'd soon cough up his Adam's apple it rose so high in his throat.

"You peeped at the Senior Constable through her bedroom window, am I wrong?"

"No. Yes. Well, I was trying to see –"

"Did you hear that everybody? Condemned by his own tongue as a pervert!" she shouted, looking around the room, making sure everybody in the vicinity was listening. And when Senior Sergeant Yu shouted, you listened. Our man flushed a dark red again.

She continued her rant, tapping on the keyboard as she did. "Not only did you try to peep on poor, injured Senior Constable Fuller, when she was at her most vulnerable, you then resisted her and her partner trying to arrest you. That's a mountain of offences, right there." She looked up and pinned him with her black eyes. "Let's get some details on you, sport. What's your name?"

"I'm not saying anything until I get a lawyer." He crossed his arms, his face set in stubborn mode.

"Oh God," she groaned. "We've got one of those, have we?" She turned to us. "Have you searched him yet?"

"No," the Sarge admitted, exchanging an embarrassed glance with me. It was the first thing we should have done. I blamed the late hour of his apprehension for our negligence.

She scalded us with a scornful look that said a lot about what she thought of the abilities and brainpower of country cops. "Take him into that room and search him. He might have a driver's licence on him or something. I can't process him without a name."

The Sarge grabbed him by the arm and dragged him towards the room.

The Senior Sergeant called out after us. "There are gloves in the cupboard if you need to do a full cavity search."

The man shouted out at that and continued to shout the couple of minutes that the Sarge spent patting him down.

"Can you shut up for a while?" the Sarge asked him, exasperated. "You're giving me a headache."

"You're violating my human rights!" the man shouted at the top of his voice. "I want a lawyer."

"Don't be ridiculous," the Sarge responded impatiently. "Anyway, you're the one who violated Senior Constable Fuller's rights by peeping on her and scalding her with hot coffee."

He pulled out a wallet from the man's pants pocket and threw it to me.

"That's stealing! I want a lawyer!" he shouted again.

I opened his wallet and looked inside.

"Jackpot!" I smiled triumphantly. "Sarge, this troublesome man's name is

Graham Mundy and, by some strange coincidence, he lives at exactly the same address as Stanley Murchison himself.”

“Graham Mundy, huh? Son of Lionel Mundy, nephew of Stanley Murchison.”

“I want a lawyer,” was all he would say. We took him back to Daisy to be processed into custody, advised that he was being charged with unlawful stalking and assault of a police officer. We tried again to interview him when that was done, but he refused to cooperate without a lawyer present, so we had to cool our heels until a duty lawyer was dug up for him and he had time to consult with her.

In the end, finding him a lawyer turned out to be a good thing, because the level-headed woman who turned up in a plain brown tweed suit, sensible shoes and with a conservative brown bob, convinced Graham Mundy that it was in his best interest to start singing for us. She stared at me curiously as we all settled into one of the station’s interview rooms, probably hoping that her client hadn’t been responsible for my injuries.

And once Graham started talking, he couldn’t stop, his nervousness making him garrulous. We soon learned that he worked for Stanley Murchison, who was indeed his maternal uncle, as a paralegal even though he didn’t have any formal qualifications for the job. Uncle Stanley had instructed him to find both Miss G’s diaries and a particular land title. He admitted spying on Miss G on four occasions in an attempt to determine where she hid her diaries with no luck, being foiled by Miss G’s sharp eyes and my subsequent searches each time. He admitted breaking into and tossing Miss G’s place, looking for the diaries and the title.

“Title to what?” asked the Sarge.

“A property on Mountain Road.”

“We were told that all the Greville properties had been sold,” I commented.

Graham squirmed evasively. “I don’t know anything about that. Uncle Stanley looks after all that side of things. He’s the trustee for the family.”

“Why was this title at Miss Greville’s house and not in safe storage with your uncle?” I asked.

“I don’t know.” His eyes flitted from the Sarge to me nervously and back again.

“I think you know more than you’re telling us,” said the Sarge bluntly, leaning back with his arms crossed.

I pressed him. “You must have known that peeping on a frail elderly woman and tossing her house when she wasn’t there are both unlawful activities.” I frowned at him. “Not to mention despicable.”

He flushed, sighing, and glanced desperately at his lawyer, who nodded at him encouragingly. He looked down at his hands that were twisting together anxiously and sighed again heavily as though he had come to some difficult inner decision.

He talked again. “Look, Uncle Stanley thought he might have misplaced the title to the Mountain Road property and didn’t want to ask Miss Greville directly if she had it at her house.” At the Sarge’s raised eyebrow, he hastened to explain. “Because that would be admitting potentially incompetent behaviour, and you don’t want that kind of reputation when you’re a lawyer, especially an ageing one like him. So he came to me with his problem. He suggested that I go to her house and see if I could find the title, without her knowing anything about it. But she was always at home, and I only got the chance to go through her things when you took her away.”

So he had been watching us.

“And you believed Uncle Stanley when he gave you that reason for breaking into Miss Greville’s place – that he didn’t want to seem incompetent?” I asked

sceptically. "You didn't think that sounded rather weak?"

"He's my uncle. Of course I believed him," he defended strongly, but slightly less sure now that I'd raised the doubt in his mind.

I pushed on. "And what reason did he give you for wanting Miss Greville's diaries?"

Graham was flustered by that question. "He . . . he didn't really give me one. He only said he didn't want to appear incompetent."

"So did you find the land title?" asked the Sarge.

"No."

My turn again. "Why did you trash Miss Greville's lounge room? That wasn't a very nice thing to do. You left her with a terrible mess to clean up and you ruined her furniture too. She's ninety-three years old. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"I . . . I was frustrated when I couldn't find the title. I didn't want to let Uncle Stanley down." He flushed and glanced sideways at his lawyer. Her eyes lowered to the legal pad she had open in front of her, professionally covering her disgust with him. The Sarge and I didn't bother to hide ours.

"Why did you peep on Mrs Villiers too?"

"After you came to see him, Uncle Stanley told me to spy on some other women in the town to make it look as though it was a genuine peeping tom, not just someone targeting Miss Greville in particular."

"So that's why you made it so obvious that you'd been peeping on Mrs Villiers?" Sarge asked. Graham nodded.

I asked, "Is that why you peeped on me as well?"

"No. Uncle Stanley told me to. He wanted to know if you had Miss Greville's diaries at your house."

"Do you do everything that Uncle Stanley tells you to?" derided the Sarge. "How old are you? You must be about thirty-five. Why don't you grow a pair of your own?"

"He's been very good to me," Graham replied in a small, self-conscious voice. "He gave me a job and somewhere to live. I didn't get along with my parents."

I asked, "Why don't you live in your parents' house? It's standing vacant."

"My mother won't let me. She says I need to grow up and stand on my own two feet for a change," he said, jumping up in agitation.

"Sit back down again!" barked the Sarge.

When he'd resettled himself, I asked him sweetly, "Got a few mother issues, have you, Graham?"

"I don't want to disappoint her," he answered in that small voice before becoming angry again. "I love my mother! What's wrong with that? You make it sound wrong!"

"Your mother is going to be very disappointed in you when she finds out what you've been up to."

"You . . . you can just *shut up*!" he shouted at me, half-standing. I smiled at him innocently. He lowered his rear to the chair again, calming down slightly when his lawyer placed a restraining hand on his arm. He eyed me with loathing. "I don't like you one little bit. You're . . . you're," he turned to his lawyer beseechingly, before back to me. "You're a . . . a female dog!" His skin mottled red at his daring.

"Aw, you've hurt my feelings now, Graham," I mocked. "And here I was hoping we could be friends."

His lawyer shot me a jaded glance and restrained Graham again with that hand on his arm. "Can we please return to questions relevant to the matter at hand?" she

requested in a cool, efficient tone. I shut up for a while, suitably chastened.

The Sarge changed direction. "What do you know about a company called Traumleben Pty Ltd?"

Graham looked at him blankly. "Never heard of it."

"Your father is listed as the sole director."

He snorted with unamused laughter. "My father running a company? Don't make me laugh! He was completely gaga for the last five years of his life and he's been dead for three years, so somebody's pulling your leg if they tell you my father is the director."

The Sarge glanced over at me, eyebrows raised in surprise. "I wasn't aware that ASIC had such a devilishly cheeky sense of humour, were you, Senior Constable?"

"No Sarge, I had no idea. You live and learn."

We didn't think we'd get much more from him after that so ended the interview, adding another charge of break and enter on Miss G's place to his charge sheet.

"Do you think we've got enough ammunition to apply for a warrant for Murchison's arrest on suspicion of fraud?" I asked doubtfully when we debriefed afterwards.

"We haven't got *any* evidence that Murchison is the one behind Traumleben Pty Ltd. But one thing I do know is that the whole story about him wanting that other land title and diaries because he was afraid of being seen as incompetent is a load of horseshit as far as I'm concerned. Maybe Graham Mundy believed him, but I sure as hell don't."

"Yeah, Graham doesn't strike me as the sharpest tool in the shed. He's very trusting of his crafty lawyer uncle. But if Murchison's the one behind Traumleben, then he probably wants to buy that land cheaply and sell it to the government for a massive profit as well."

"Hmm," he pondered. "If you think about it logically, Murchison has to at least be facilitating the sales because he's the one with his hands on the titles and intimate knowledge of the properties. He's acting fraudulently in some way."

"Let's try Google again and see if there is any mention of a government department being interested in land on Mountain Road," I suggested, and bagged the use of one of the receiving area's computers for a little while, typing a number of combinations of words into the search engine, hoping to hit the jackpot. I wasn't that lucky but I did find an interesting little article from the *Wattling Bay Messenger*.

"Sarge, look at this. It's an interview with the Minister for Defence discussing the government's intention to build a new field training facility for army recruits. There's a number of locations mentioned as being possible, including guess where?"

"A rugged parcel of land on Mountain Road, near Mount Big Town, by any chance?"

"No wonder you're a sergeant!" I said cheekily. "You're so clever."

He pulled a face. "What date was that interview?"

"A couple of months ago."

"So maybe the sale has come to the pointy end, which is why there's been the mad scramble to find the title paper?"

"You think Murchison's been negotiating already with Defence for Traumleben to sell the land when it doesn't even own it yet?"

"He's either working for Traumleben or he *is* Traumleben. Let's ring someone in Defence and see if we can find out any more."

Chapter 24

The Sarge rang the Defence media advisor mentioned at the end of the article. And after much professed ignorance, being transferred, and repeating of who he was and what he wanted, he was finally put through to the haughty head of the Department's legal section. That man refused to tell him anything because "departmental contractual matters are commercial-in-confidence, Sergeant."

"Look mate," he said, getting stropky. "I don't want to know any confidential contractual information. I just want to know who the Department is negotiating with in relation to the land sale near Mount Big Town. Just a name, that's all. It's public information that this particular piece of land was being considered by the Department for the training centre – we just read about it in an online newspaper from an interview with the Minister."

"Why do you want to know?"

The Sarge sighed, and replied through gritted teeth. "I've already told you ten times. It's in relation to a current investigation."

"Produce a warrant and I'll think about it," the lawyer said and hung up, and the Sarge spent the next half-minute pointlessly swearing at the phone.

"You're starting to sound like the Inspector," I teased. While he had been on the phone, I'd interrogated the land titles database again, accessing individual records for the two land sales that Miss G didn't remember. When he had calmed down a smidge, he came to stand behind me and peered down at the screen over my shoulder.

"What are you doing?"

"We know that Lionel Mundy is not the real director of Traumleben, but whoever is the brain behind it must have given some genuine information about their contact details when registering the sale of those properties with the various government departments. Otherwise how would he or she receive mail or phone calls in connection with the sales?"

"Great thinking, Tess," he said, sounding genuinely impressed. "What do we have?"

"Unhelpfully, we have a post office box address here in Big Town, so we could go down and heavy the manager of the post office to tell us who's renting it. But we also have a mobile number and it's the same one listed for both sales, so I presume it's real."

"Let's not rush into this," he mused, sitting on the desk and lifting both his feet to rest on my chair. I winced in pain as his boots pressed on my bruised hip.

"Sarge! Move your feet. You're hurting me."

"Oh sorry," he said, removing his feet quickly, but less than a minute later, one had crept back up onto my seat, poking me again. I bit off my sharp comment and shifted over, looking up at him expectantly.

"Will I ring the mobile?" I asked, prompting him impatiently.

"How about we ask the Senior Sarge to ring for us? If it's Murchison, he might recognise one of our voices."

"Okay." I pushed my chair back suddenly, almost making him tumble off the desk as his foot lost its purchase. We waited patiently until Daisy had finished railing at a poor probationary cop for stuffing up some paperwork. He looked as though he was on the verge of tears as he redid his report, eyes flying to Daisy every second minute in fear.

I explained what we wanted her to do and what we were trying to find out about Stanley Murchison and gave her a rough script to follow. Her eyes sparkled at the opportunity to do something different than processing the steady stream of petty crims which came to her, day in, day out. She picked up the phone and rang the number. She listened for a moment then hung up without saying anything.

"No luck," she said flatly. "Nobody answered. It went to voicemail for a Lionel Mundy of Traumleben Pty Ltd. I didn't bother leaving a message."

The Sarge and I looked at each other in frustration.

He said, "We're just not getting anywhere with this case."

"Time for a visit to the post office?"

He agreed and asked Daisy for the number for the Big Town post office. She tapped on her keyboard and wrote it down for him. We found a quiet desk and he rang, making an appointment with the post office manager in forty-five minutes time.

"Let's go have a coffee," he suggested.

"Okay," I said. I stopped at the front desk again to talk to Daisy. "Senior Sarge, we're done with Graham Mundy. You can let him go when he's processed and has his court date."

"Goodo Tess. I need the space, frankly. It's crazy here today – must be a full moon or something."

As we headed out the door, my phone rang and I answered. It was the police prosecutor, Pinky Kowalski, wanting me in court the next day for the committal hearings for the Bycrafts.

"Their lawyer doesn't want you in court, but I bloody well do," she croaked in her gravelly voice. "The magistrate will take one look at you and commit the four of them to trial straight away and keep them on remand in custody. The last thing we want is those Bycrafts released on bail, even though I'll bet my right tit they'll be applying for it."

"There's no chance Red Bycraft will get bail, surely? He was already on parole when he attacked me."

"In a fair world, no, but who knows with some of these bleeding heart magistrates," she said with caustic contempt. "A few of them believe every sob story they're fed. Even when there are Bycrafts involved."

I blew out a sigh. "Thanks Pinky." I hung up.

"No magistrate is going to give them bail, Tess. Stop worrying," soothed the Sarge, patting me on the shoulder.

"I'm not worried about them," I lied calmly. "I'll be ready for them if they return to Little Town."

He searched my face. I returned his stare steadily. I'd had a lot of practice in not betraying my emotions.

"You're a hard person to read," he said finally, frustrated.

"Good," I smiled in satisfaction. "So are you."

"Good," he said in return.

"Two clams, huh?"

"Evidently." He unlocked the car and we climbed in. My eyes flicked to him as we did up our seatbelts.

"Maybe it would be better if we were more open with each other? As partners?" I suggested, a little hesitant, watching his face carefully, not sure if he'd embrace the idea or reject it. And I wasn't sure how I'd feel about either response – offended or relieved?

“That would certainly stop me putting my foot in it all the time,” he noted dryly and we shared a quick smile. “It would good to know you better because we depend on each other so much at work. And being able to second guess each other could be critical one day. But I’m not sure if I can. I suppose I want to keep my private life private. If you know everything about me, then it’s as if –”

“You grew up in Little Town with me?” I asked, interrupting, and we exchanged another smile. *We’d better stop doing that soon, I thought, or we might find ourselves becoming friends.*

We drove for a while and I took a deep breath and offered him another way to help crack that thick ice sheet between us. “We could share some information about ourselves. How about if you ask me something about myself and I’ll do the same to you?”

He wasn’t thrilled by my suggestion as he nosed out of a side street onto the main road. “All right,” he said after a while. “Nothing too personal though.”

I nodded agreement.

“Good. Me first,” he insisted.

I braced for his question, but there was nothing but silence.

“Well?” I encouraged. “I’m waiting with bated breath.”

“I can’t make up my mind between two questions.”

“You only get one,” I reminded him.

“I know, I know.” He concentrated on navigating a congested roundabout.

“Sarge? I’m going to withdraw the offer if you don’t hurry up!” I said impatiently, on edge.

“Okay, I’ve decided. Where were you placed during your city service?”

“Benara, for the whole time, from leaving the academy to returning to Little Town,” I admitted reluctantly. I knew my answer would spark a predictable reaction. And it did.

“Benara? Are you kidding me? What in God’s name were they thinking sending a probationary cop, especially one from the country, to a hellhole like Benara?”

“Gee Sarge,” I said sarcastically, “that wasn’t in the slightest bit patronising to me, I promise.”

He braked sharply for a young P-plater who cut in front of us without indicating. “Who teaches kids to drive these days?” he grumbled to himself.

I was boiling mad about him being so condescending. “I *volunteered* for Benara. Nobody *forced* me to do it. In fact, my instructors at the academy tried to talk me out of it. But I needed to know if anything could possibly be as bad as living with the Bycrafts here in Little Town. And do you know what? It wasn’t. Because those communities in Benara have self-value, organisation and respect for their own history and culture and you could at least negotiate with the community elders. You can’t do that here, because the Bycraft elders are the worst of the bunch. How much success do I have negotiating with Lola Bycraft about the behaviour of her children?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but I didn’t give him the opportunity, cutting him off with a snort of unamused laughter. “Well, you’ve already seen how well that went! Do you think I was fazed by being spat on or sworn at in Benara? Having shit thrown at me? Being punched, kicked and scratched? Having my property vandalised and destroyed? Having guns held to my head and people running me down with their cars? Trying to inject me with their dirty needles? Trying to rape me? Threatening to kill my family? Trying to burn my house down? Stalking me? Hunting me? It was water off a duck’s back. Half of those things didn’t even happen

in Benara, but they've bloody well all happened to me here. And much more. And not just as an adult either."

"Jesus, Tess . . ." he began, but stopped for a moment when he saw my face. "But *why* do they do it? What *is it* between you and the Bycrafts? Normal people don't behave like that."

I didn't know if he was referring to the Bycrafts or me as not being normal, or maybe even all of us, and all of my insecurities rushed to the surface.

"I answered your question," I stated with sullen stoniness, feeling miserable and wishing I hadn't said anything.

"God!" he said, flaring with instant heated frustration. "You don't answer anything. I feel like I'm working in the dark here. We're supposed to be a team, but you don't tell me *anything*!"

I rounded on him. "You don't tell *me* anything!"

There was total silence between us for a long time.

"I really liked working in Benara," I mulled, my mind returning to my former post, forgetting him, almost lost in my own memories. "I miss it. It was a great place to learn hands-on policing. I'm still in contact with a lot of the cops who work there because I expect to be back again, one day. When . . . you know." I looked out the window sadly, not wanting to think about poor Dad. "I want to go back there when I leave Little Town. We had a tight and supportive police team working that suburb. We had each other's backs, one hundred per cent guaranteed."

"Not like Little Town?"

"No," I said bluntly. Des had never had my back, and after this week I was reserving my judgement on whether the Sarge did either. And I had the feeling that he was conscious of my doubts.

He parked the car out the front of a strip of shops that contained a franchise for a large international coffee chain. We went in and ordered, ignoring the unmistakable change in atmosphere that happened whenever we were around. Uniformed police always made people uncomfortable – even decent, upright, law-abiding citizens, who suddenly remembered every small transgression in their recent lives when they set eyes on us. There was also an amount of slight disapproval that some people directed towards cops who dared to take a coffee break and do something that ninety-five per cent of the workforce did everyday without thinking twice.

My battered face didn't help matters and I was positive I saw one over-protective mother actually clamp her hand across her young child's eyes so he wouldn't see me. Her hurried departure soon after, her coffee only half-drunk and most of a piece of carrot cake left on her plate, only reinforced that impression. It didn't improve my mood.

We took our coffees to the darkest corner of the brightly lit store we could find.

"Did you see that woman?" I hissed indignantly as soon as we sat down.

"I did," he said sympathetically.

I moped for a while, staring at my coffee, watching the steam rising from the cup.

"Tess?"

"What?" I asked sharply, not looking at him. I was still miffed at being treated like some kind of freak.

"You haven't asked me your question."

"It doesn't matter. I'm happy to know whatever you want to tell me," I said, not caring at that moment. I couldn't believe how thrown I was by that anonymous

woman's reaction to me. Didn't she realise that I was another human being, like her, with feelings? I grabbed a napkin and shredded it into small strips. And when I'd finished that one, I grabbed another and gave it the same treatment.

"You're angry," he noted.

I glanced at him in surprise. "No, I'm not. What makes you think that?"

"What's all that about, then?" he asked, nodding towards the small mountain of shredded napkins in front of me.

"Oh," I said, looking down at them, embarrassed. "Maybe I am, after all." I pushed them to one side and took a sip of coffee through my sore lip, wincing at the pain.

"Ask me your question."

I couldn't care less about him right then. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me," he insisted. "I forced information out of you. You have to do the same or you might never find out anything about me."

"I kind of hoped that you'd begin to trust me and tell me things of your own accord," I said honestly. "That's how I'm used to working. Well, it was until I met Des." I laughed suddenly. "He told me way too much about himself. Especially about him and Foxy." I pulled a face, remembering the mortifyingly intimate conversations I'd had with Des. Well, not conversations as such – more like monologues. He'd always done the talking and hadn't expected or even really wanted me to respond.

"Please ask me, Tess," he persisted, serious and intense. I stopped laughing straight away. We eyeballed each other for a long moment, and then I realised that it was a trust thing with him, and it was important for the future of our partnership.

"Where's Melissa?" I asked him bluntly.

He leaned back, an unhappy expression settling on his face. "She's overseas, backpacking with a group of her friends. I don't know *exactly* where she is right now, but it's in southern Greece somewhere. I'm waiting for her to ring or email me again to tell me." Then it was his turn to avoid emotion by taking a sip of coffee, looking everywhere except at me.

He probably thought he'd given me nothing with that answer, but I felt as though I'd learnt a lot. Like the fact that he wasn't pleased about his fiancée being overseas and that she was an irregular correspondent. And why wasn't he overseas with her enjoying the experience, anyway? If I'd done the whole European backpacking rite-of-passage when I'd had a fiancée instead of with my girlfriends as I had, I would have wanted him to be there with me. Who were the friends she was with and how could they be more important than her fiancée? And to go backpacking without your fiancée soon after you became engaged did not scream of maturity or commitment to me. Hmm, the mystery only deepened.

"Why didn't you go backpacking with her?" I asked, not able to help myself.

"That's two questions," he said firmly, refusing to answer. He looked at his watch. "We've been yapping too long. We have to get to the post office."

I checked my watch and he wasn't trying to sidestep me – we were going to be late. We hastily gulped our coffees and made a dash for it, jumping in the car and driving off. He glanced at me sideways as he drove.

"I'll answer your second question if you answer mine," he offered slyly.

"Okay," I agreed pleasantly. "But me first this time. Why aren't you overseas with Melissa?"

"Because I'd already done the whole backpacking thing a long time ago with my mates before I went to uni and before I met her. And also because I didn't want

to take such a long time off work. My career is important to me. But she's younger than me and told me it wasn't fair if she didn't get the chance to do it before we were married." He smiled unhappily. "Satisfied?"

"Sorry," I said instantly, wishing I hadn't pushed him. "What's your other question?"

"Why *do* you go out with a Bycraft?"

I looked at him in despair. Of all the questions to ask me, he had gone straight for my soft spot. But I had made a deal with him and I wouldn't renege on it. Plus I really wanted him to know how sincere I was when I gave him my answer.

"People have given me a lot of reasons over the last couple of years why I go out with Jakey. Some of my favourites are that I'm looking for a thrill or I'm rebelling against Dad or I'm trying to keep myself safe or I'm taking a subtle form of revenge. But the answer is the simplest one of all – I love Jakey. I would never be in a relationship with him if I didn't love him as much as I do and was convinced that he is a good person. He's had to jump over a lot of hurdles and has copped a lot of abuse and insults to get to this point. But he puts up with it all because he loves me too and thinks I'm worth it." I smiled. "And besides, we have loads of fun together and that's important to me. I haven't had a lot of fun in my life and I love the way that Jakey makes me laugh."

"That's what I thought, Tess," he said quietly and to my eternal gratitude he said no more. I was feeling very uncomfortable for divulging something so personal to someone I barely knew and I wondered if he felt the same as we drove in silence to the post office.

"We shouldn't do that again, Sarge," I said in a muted tone, even though I'd been the one who'd suggested it. "I've said far too much and I guess I feel a bit exposed now."

"I disagree. I feel the same, but I think it was a valuable exercise for both of us," he contemplated. "And as I said before, the more we know about each other, the better we can work together."

I felt guilty then. "I hope you don't mind me telling people that you're engaged. The gossip will be flying around, *especially* now that Lavinia knows. And it's for your own protection anyway – otherwise every unattached marriageable woman within twenty kilometres will be honing in on you."

"I've never been so popular," he smiled fleetingly.

"We don't get a lot of new talent in town."

One eyebrow raised and his eyes slid from the road to my face. "You think I'm a bit of talent?"

Aw geez, how'd I get myself into that one? "Um . . . well . . . um . . ." I spluttered uneasily.

"You don't have to answer that. For the sake of our partnership," he laughed softly as he pulled into the carpark of the post office and snared the last free spot. "Anyway, I'll be a married man soon and whether or not anyone in town considers me to be a bit of talent won't be an issue for much longer."

"Oh, so you do have a date for your wedding?" I was delighted for him. "Are you going to be married in the city? Where will you honeymoon?" And then being selfish, I asked, "Who's going to fill in for you at work when you do?"

A pause before he answered. "No, we have no plans for anything yet. I have to convince her to come home first," he said with a touch of bitterness and stalked to the entrance of the post office, politely asking for the manager at the counter.

We both showed our identification to the prissy overweight man with an

obvious comb-over who presented himself in response. He'd added a hideous yellow and red checked bow tie to his tightly stretched uniform and wore an unappealing superior air as he queried our business, addressing only the Sarge. I took an instant dislike to him and would bet my next pay that he bullied his staff, especially if they were female.

I requested politely that he take us somewhere private so we could discuss our investigation and he shot me one brief disdainful glance before leading us past the counter to a miniscule office, bouncing on his toes as he walked. We settled on the visitors' chairs, his office so small that our knees were almost touching his under his desk. I was curtly businesslike as I explained what we were after.

"Do you have a warrant, Officer? We do have a privacy law in this state, you know," he sniffed, looking down his nose at me.

"Yes, we do have a privacy law," I replied patiently, "which states that you can disclose information to us for the reasonable purposes of law enforcement." I leaned back in my chair and regarded him coolly. "And I believe that we have just proven reasonable purposes to you. Do you disagree?"

He gave me an uncooperative and bureaucratic look, positive he had the upper hand. I sighed impatiently and turned to the Sarge. "Maybe we should get Detective Inspector Midden down here instead, Sarge? She's good with public servants. Got a real skillful way of cutting through the red tape."

"God no!" the manager said immediately, pushing himself back into his chair as if being attacked personally. "I had to deal with her last year in relation to a drug-related investigation and I *never* want to experience that again. I'll tell you anything you want to know as long as you keep her away from here. And from me. The things she said to me. About me." His eyes moistened in memory. "She made me feel like a deviant."

The Sarge cut him a sympathetic glance. "We're sorry, sir. You seemed somewhat reluctant to help the Senior Constable."

"You're imagining things, Sergeant," insisted the man, sitting up straight in his seat again. "I'll be glad to help . . . you." He threw me a spiteful glance. I received his message loud and clear. For some reason he didn't like women and he would gladly assist those members of the human race graced with dangly genitalia, but the other fifty per cent of us could go jump. No wonder Fiona had gone to town on him. She wouldn't stand for that kind of rubbish for a moment. I stared back at him blandly, masking my dark thoughts.

"In fact," he grovelled sycophantically, "let me get that information for you right now, Sergeant." He scrambled to his feet, almost knocking over his chair in his eagerness to help, trotting off towards the main office area. The Sarge and I exchanged glances; his rueful, mine resigned.

"Tess . . ." he said.

I calmly glanced at the uninspiring vista of a grungy alleyway running between the post office and its neighbour visible from the office window. "It's a man's world sometimes, Sarge. Luckily I have you here to negotiate with him."

We didn't get to say anything else before the post office manager came flying back in, triumphantly clutching a piece of paper in his hand. He flung himself into his chair and thrust the paper into the Sarge's face.

"One of my girls printed this for me. I hope it helps your investigation," he said with squirming enthusiasm.

"Thanks." The Sarge glanced at the print out, then groaned out loud. "You've got to be kidding me!"

“What?” asked the manager, afraid he’d failed to please.

The Sarge handed over the piece of paper to me. I read and groaned as well. The owner of the post office box was listed as Mr Lionel Mundy of 5 Acacia Court, Wattling Bay, with the same mobile number we’d already rung. We were chasing our tails. Again.

“Don’t you demand proof of identity when people open post office boxes?” the Sarge snapped.

The manager was uncertain. “Yes . . . I’m sure we do . . . I hope . . . Yes! Of course we do!”

I was annoyed. “Then how can you explain that you’ve been renting a PO box to a dead man?”

“What? Of course we haven’t,” he insisted belligerently.

“Lionel Mundy has been dead for three years and had Alzheimer’s for the previous five,” informed the Sarge. “How long has this box been rented?”

The manager stormed out of the office and came back rather less antagonistic. “Four years,” he admitted, embarrassed.

“You might want to review your box renting procedures with particular attention to establishing an annual identification process,” I suggested coolly.

He ignored me, waiting for the Sarge to speak.

The Sarge slyly winked in my direction. “For future reference, sir, you might want to review your box renting procedures with particular attention to establishing an annual identification process.”

The manager grovelled again. “Of course, Sergeant. Thanks for your helpful suggestion.”

As we walked out the Sarge elbowed me gently. “I always say the right thing, don’t I?”

“I don’t know whether to laugh or cry,” I admitted as he unlocked the car. We plonked ourselves into our seats and looked at each other. And we both laughed.

“I admire your resilience, Tess. I’m not sure I’d be so forgiving in the same circumstances,” he confessed, starting the car and concentrating on pulling out of the carpark into the traffic.

“I told you I’m used to being patronised. But if I let it bother me every time it happened, I’d spend my life moping. It’s only when it starts impacting on an investigation that I do something about it.”

We drove in silence before he spoke up. “What now?”

“Try to talk to Stanley Murchison again?” I suggested. “He’s meant to be the trustee of Miss G’s properties, so he should tell us what he knows about those sales to Traumleben Pty Ltd.”

“Do we want to tip off our hand at this stage?”

I shrugged. “As soon as Graham Mundy is released, he’ll tell Murchison that we were asking about that company anyway.” I looked at my watch and took out my mobile. I had a quick conversation with Daisy before returning my attention to the Sarge. “The Senior Sarge just told me that Graham was processed out of the watch house five minutes ago.”

“Okay, let’s try to get to Murchison’s house before Mundy does.”

Chapter 25

There was no answer again at Stanley Murchison’s place, but this time the house felt empty and I didn’t have that impression I’d had before that there was

anyone home.

"He's probably at work," I said as we returned to the car. A taxi pulled up behind us and Graham Mundy stepped out after a few moments. He wasn't pleased to see us.

"This is harassment," he seethed. "I'm the one being charged with stalking, but you're the ones stalking me!"

"We wanted to speak to your uncle, not you," the Sarge told him coldly.

"He's at work, isn't he? Which is where I should be too. I've had a few days off lately and he's going to give me a bollocking when I get there. But I have to have a shower first. I feel dirty after being in that cell. It's a horrible, humiliating experience. You shouldn't put people through it," he complained in a whingey voice.

I had no sympathy for him. "You shouldn't break the law then."

"I really don't like you," he muttered to me as he made his way inside the house.

I turned to the Sarge. "I don't think he likes me."

He smiled as he unlocked the patrol car. "I don't think he does either. I'll bet he'll be on the phone to Murchison the second he's inside. Should we bother going to his office?"

I pulled on my seatbelt. "Let's go, regardless. Uncle Stanley has to start answering some questions some time."

We drove to his office and went inside. The same nervous woman was at reception. *What was her name*, I thought frantically. Diane? Dana? Deidre, that was it!

"Hello Deidre. It's us again. Could we speak to Mr Murchison please?" I asked pleasantly.

"Oh dear," she said anxiously. "You've just missed him. He's gone home. He wasn't feeling very well."

The Sarge could barely contain his irritation at hearing that. As we walked back to the car, he held his index finger and thumb up in front of him, a centimetre apart. "I'm *this* close to arresting that man just for being a pain in the arse," he spat out through gritted teeth.

We drove back to Murchison's house, but received no response to our knocks, the Sarge thumping on the front door with his fist in temper.

He was fuming. "I've fucking had enough of this cat and mouse game."

My phone rang. It was Miss G letting me know that she'd scanned her diaries for the last four years and had no entries relating to the two sales she couldn't recall. That convinced her that she definitely hadn't signed any contracts relating to them. She sounded downcast and I felt sorry for her. She had obviously realised that she'd been swindled in some way by someone she had trusted and respected her entire life. That would have come as a huge blow to her. I spent a few minutes uttering some soothing and consoling platitudes, promising to keep in touch.

For once, I was thinking sensibly. "Sarge, I think we need to hand this case over to the Inspector. It's clear that there's been some kind of fraudulent activity and we just don't have the resources to investigate it properly, especially if Murchison doesn't want to cooperate with us. It's time for the detectives to take over. We need to get back to Little Town. Who knows what the Bycrafts have been up to while we've been gone?"

"No, Tess! It's our investigation and we're going to crack it. I'm not stopping now," he insisted stubbornly.

I rolled my eyes. *Oh God, here we go again*, I thought in exasperation. I'd been lumped with Mr I-Know-Everything as a partner.

"Sarge, you're not listening to me," I declared, hands on my hips, head craned up the five or so inches that he was taller than me. I slowly enunciated each word, giving extra emphasis to the word 'listening' so that it would sink into his thick skull. "It's time for the dees to take over."

"Don't use that tone of voice with me, Fuller," he shot back, moving his hands to his hips as well.

We confronted each other, eyes clashing. His eyes shifted from mine to rest on my forehead stitches, my bruised nose and my busted lip before returning to my eyes. His face muscles stiffened and released, then stiffened again, his eyes turbulent. I watched him, alert and wary, willing to exploit any weakness he showed. I didn't have to this time though, because he relented first.

"Look, if we haven't progressed any further by the beginning of next week, we'll hand it over to the dees then. Okay?"

"Okay," I agreed after a tense silence, reminding myself a partnership involved give *and* take, and that I couldn't expect everything to go my own way. My phone rang and I answered as we went back to the car.

"I heard on the fucking grapevine that you were skulking around town, scaring the locals with your hideous face like some sheep-shagging hillbilly Phantom of the Opera," Fiona growled into my ear.

"I've never shagged a sheep in my life, ma'am," I said honestly. The Sarge nearly gave himself whiplash turning around to stare at me in surprise at that comment, his eyebrows up in his hairline. "But otherwise your intelligence is correct."

She laughed loudly. "That'd be right. You wouldn't need to resort to ovine intercourse with that stallion Jake Bycraft bending you over the kitchen table every chance he got."

"Ma'am, you've been peeping on me again," I smiled and considered the idea. *Hmm, Jake, me and the kitchen table*. I'd be texting him later today with that suggestion, to be sure.

"Tessie, I'm about the only person around this place who hasn't been, from what I hear. You must have a fucking queue at your window. Who's this latest pervert? Not Denny Bycraft?"

I explained who Graham Mundy was and our investigation as succinctly as I could.

"Sounds like you two fucking hayseeds are going nowhere fast with this case. Time to hand it over to the big kids," she ordered.

"Give us a few more days, ma'am," I begged on the Sarge's behalf. "Please."

"Don't start pleading with me, Tessie. It's demeaning for you, especially if you're doing it for Maguire." I could hear her inhaling as she took a suck of her cigarette and blew the smoke out noisily into the receiver. "Tell me, who's running Bumfuck Town if you two Inspector Clouseaus are here every day, bumbling around, thumbs up your arses, pretending you've got a fucking clue what you're doing?" she demanded. "Get back there right now and start preparing a report for me on this investigation. Got it?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Oh, and Tessie?"

"Ma'am?"

"You have until nine on Monday morning and not one fucking second longer."

Then you hand it over if you haven't made significant progress. And I mean like having someone in the watch house. I'll see you in court tomorrow. Don't be late. And make sure you look tragic. I want that magistrate to shed genuine tears over you as he's throwing those motherfucking Bycrafts back into custody."

She hung up on me, leaving me smiling. She'd just indulged me hugely and I wasn't about to abuse the privilege.

"Well?" asked the Sarge anxiously.

"She's given us till nine, Monday morning, but not one second longer. Plus we have to go back to Little Town right now, and that was an order."

He shook his head in frustration, but we did as we were told and returned to Little Town, chewing over the investigation as we drove.

"Where does the hundred grand come into it?" I pondered. "Maybe it isn't related after all." On an impulse I rang Miss G and described the suitcase the money had been found in to her to see if she recognised it.

"It does rather sound like a suitcase my mother owned, dear," she said cautiously. "But I haven't seen it for an age. Not since she died back in 1982, in fact."

"It had a monogram – EAG."

"That's my mother's initials. Edith Agnes Greville. It must be her suitcase, but why do you need to know?"

"Would you be able to come to the Big Town police station tomorrow to look at it?" I asked. "I have to be in court tomorrow morning, but we could pick you up after that. I'll explain everything then."

"Of course, Officer Tess. Anything to get to the bottom of this." She paused and I sensed a great deal of emotion being suppressed. "I always thought Stanley Murchison was an honourable gentleman. I suppose that I've been wrong all this time and he's just a bald-faced liar and swindler."

"Aw Miss G, you mustn't blame yourself for trusting a con man. They're highly talented at appearing to be reputable and believable. That's what they do for a living."

"I consider myself to be a very good judge of character, Officer Tess," she said with a small hint of pride. "But I'm afraid I've let myself down badly this time." Her voice was tinged with such sadness and regret that my heart flew out to her.

"Miss G . . ." I just didn't know what to say to her. She sounded heartbroken over the whole matter.

"Never mind, dear," she rallied with a little bitterness. "Life is made up of such challenges and troubles and if we fall at the first hurdle, we either give up or we pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off and finish the race with pride and determination. Even if we come last."

"Well said, Miss G. You're a brave and inspirational woman," I complimented sincerely and we said farewell to each other. I slumped in my seat afterwards. When a few minutes had passed, I turned to the Sarge. "You know, there's no such thing as a victimless crime."

"No, there isn't, Tess. Even if a person gets away with a crime and nobody notices what they've done, they become a lesser person with each crime they commit. Getting away with it only increases their confidence and makes them more prone to offending again. And that makes them even less redeemable, which eventually has an impact on society and all of us in general."

"Well said, Sarge," I said quietly, echoing what I'd said to Miss G. Maybe that was why I cared so much about the younger Bycrafts. Surely there had to be some

point where that family decided to stop the hating and the violence and could become reconciled to Fullers living in the same town as them? The Fullers had all suffered so much over the years because of the Bycrafts, especially the Fuller women.

“You’re very subdued,” the Sarge commented, as we turned left onto the highway, heading into Little Town.

“Miss G was devastated at being taken for a fool. It broke my heart. She’s a good person who’s never harmed anyone in her whole, long life. It’s cruel. Life’s so unfair sometimes.”

“It is, Tess, and there’s no point trying to pretend otherwise. And as cops we know that better than anybody.” He paused for a moment, glancing at me slumped in my seat. “Last year I had to go to a man’s workplace and tell him some terrible news. The worst kind of news. He was a good, honest man, working hard, doing nothing wrong in life. He’d lost his wife to breast cancer only six months before and I had to tell him that his only children, twin daughters, had both been killed in a terrible car crash.”

We drove in silence for a few minutes while he overtook a road train, before he continued.

“They were on their way to classes at university one morning. Both were studying to be pharmacists. Bright, kind girls, lots of friends, very social. They were slammed into by a drugged-up, unlicensed truckie who’d been driving all night, speeding and running red lights. When I told their father, he broke down completely, collapsed to the floor and started . . .” He cleared his throat. “Not crying, kind of wailing, I guess you’d call it. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t know what to say. What can you possibly say to a poor man like that?”

He took a deep breath, remembering. “It was the worst thing I’ve ever had to do in my life. I stayed with him for the rest of the day until his family arrived from interstate, but I’ve never forgotten.” He stared straight ahead at the road, his knuckles white on the steering wheel.

“Oh Sarge, how awful!” I sympathised immediately, one hand automatically reaching out to gently pat his tense forearm in support. As a cop, I’d never had to break any news that terrible. Yet.

He glanced at me, an unreadable expression on his face. “I’ve never told anybody about that before.”

I was shocked by his confession. Where the hell was the support base in his life? You can’t survive as a cop without one. I was lucky to have a loving father and boyfriend and loyal friends, including other cops, to turn to when I needed to vent. Not to mention my chickens as well. They’d heard a lot of bad stuff in their short lives.

“Why haven’t you ever told anyone that before?” I asked without thinking. “You should have talked about it with someone when it happened. Maybe your mother or your friends. Or Melissa. Why didn’t you?”

“I think that you’re very nosy,” he rebuked, “and that you’ve just asked me another question.” His eyes were directed straight ahead, not even the glimpse of a smile on his face. I withdrew my hand and sunk back into my seat. He was good at pushing people away. I knew that folk like that sometimes hoped deep down that others would persist and force them to share. So I tried again.

“Sarge, if you ever want to talk about anything, then I want you to know that I’m here for you. I’m a good listener. Quite a few people have told me so,” I said hesitantly, not sure how he’d take that, but feeling compelled to offer. For some

strange reason, I felt as though he had desperately needed to unload that story to somebody, but hadn't been given the opportunity before. Maybe he was too busy being the strong, tough guy? Maybe he didn't want to share the ugly side of his job with his loved ones? Lots of cops were like that. Who knows, but I'd heard enough stories about cops falling to pieces to ignore any hint of strong emotions being bottled up.

He didn't glance my way. "I didn't mean to tell you that at all. I just blurted it out for some reason."

"It's important to share sometimes. Especially with someone you trust. I'm probably not that person for you, seeing we virtually just met, but I want you to know that I will never pass on anything you ever tell me."

"Thanks Tess," he said unemotionally. "I don't doubt that and I appreciate the offer." He stared ahead solidly as he drove, an impenetrable barrier around him.

I felt as though I'd been put back in my box, subtly but surely. He obviously didn't think that I could ever be of any support to him. I shrugged to myself. He didn't like me. I couldn't help that, but I could still try to be a good work partner.

My phone rang. It was Jake. I brightened up immediately.

"Honey-boy, how you doing?" I asked, and then listened to how he would be doing so much better if I was there with him. I smiled broadly at that. "You are the world's number one charmer, Jacob Bycraft."

"Who wouldn't want to charm you, Teresa Fuller?" I could hear the matching smile in his voice.

"You'd be surprised," I replied enigmatically, eyes sliding over to the Sarge.

"What have you been up to, babe?"

"Fiona gave me a great idea about you, me and my kitchen table. I can't wait to talk to you about it, or better still, maybe I should just show you when I see you next," I teased, turning to the side in the futile hope that the Sarge couldn't overhear every word I was saying.

"Tessie darling, you are a very naughty girl. How am I supposed to concentrate on work now?" he complained. "All the prisoners will escape while I'm day-dreaming about you, me and that kitchen table."

"But that's why you love me, isn't it, because I'm such a naughty girl?"

"You betcha, baby doll, but I'm warning you that kitchen table better have strong legs," he joked and we laughed together conspiratorially. It was incredible how easily he could lift my spirits.

I didn't want to spoil his playful mood, but I had to tell him. "I'll be in court tomorrow morning, Jakey. For the Bycraft committal hearings. They're being done as a bunch."

"Oh," he said, quietening. "I guess Red will go down for more time again."

"I hope so. He deserves it. He's a menace to women everywhere and to me especially. You know I haven't relaxed since he got out on parole."

"I know, but I don't think he'd ever really do anything to you." He didn't sound as if he was even convincing himself with that statement.

"He already has, Jake. He recently beat the crap out of me, remember? And do you know what he said to me when he did it? He said he wanted to finish the job that Bobby and Craig Bycraft left undone. His exact words! How do you think that makes me feel?" I was becoming agitated as I did every time I thought about that particular threat.

"Calm down, babe," Jake soothed, smart enough to know that he was treading on dangerous ground. "He was just being a tool. He knows how to press your

buttons.”

“That’s not *pressing my buttons*, Jake!” I hissed into the phone angrily. “That’s threatening me with rape and a brutally violent death.”

How dare he try to brush off that kind of threat? I hung up on him. I just could not be reasonable about something so personal.

“What was that all about, Tess?” asked the Sarge, curious.

“I think that you’re very nosy,” I replied furiously, mimicking what he’d said to me only minutes before, “and that you’ve just asked me another question, Sergeant.”

He gave me a wry glance. “Ouch! Did I really sound as much of a pompous prick as that?”

“Yes, you did.” I was raging from Jake’s badly chosen words. My phone rang. It was him, but I didn’t answer. I was still too heated to talk to him. He knew the topic of Bobby and Craig Bycraft affected me strongly. And I would never talk to a Bycraft about it anyway, not even him.

“Your phone’s ringing.”

“I know,” I bit back irritably. “I can hear it.”

We pulled into the carpark of the station and I jumped out of the car. My phone started ringing again. I yanked it from my pocket and flung it with passion onto the grass lawn that surrounded the carpark. I stalked up the stairs to the station, unlocking the door and throwing it back so hard that it smashed into the wall with a loud bang, loosening flakes of paint and leaving behind a dent. I clamoured over the counter, not waiting to unlock the hatch, heading straight for the cupboard in the kitchenette. Opening the door, I snatched a packet of Tim Tams from the shelf, ripped it open carelessly and jammed three of them into my mouth at the same time, munching them greedily and with some difficulty. And when the Sarge cautiously came into the back room with my phone in his hand, he was greeted with the sight of me, my cheeks bulging and crumbs on my chin and shirt, struggling to chew on my enormous mouthful with half the biscuits poking out of my mouth.

The startled expression on his face made me laugh suddenly and pieces of unchewed biscuit flew out of my mouth like missiles. I had to run to the sink to spit out the detritus, taking in a deep breath and unfortunately inhaling a piece of chocolate-coated biscuit as I did. I choked and coughed, my eyes streaming and my face turning lobster red as I gasped for oxygen. He banded me firmly on the back until the caught piece dislodged.

“Thanks Sarge,” I gasped as I hung onto the sink, turning on the tap to wash the evidence of my greed down the drain.

“How many Tim Tams did you have in your mouth then, Tess?”

“Three,” I confessed, laughing again, my good humour restored. “What was I thinking? They didn’t even fit.”

“You’ll never beat the world record with just three of them, you know,” he said lightly before turning serious again. “You need some lunch.”

“Yes. I guess I do.”

“Do you want your phone back?”

“Is Jake still ringing me?”

“Yes.”

“Then no, thank you.”

“I’ll put it in my pocket for a while, will I?”

“Thanks Sarge.”

While I cleaned up my mess, he went to the bakery and bought both of us a

salad sandwich and a juice. We ate our lunch sitting on the back steps, staring at the rising slopes of Mount Big as we did.

“You’ve really seen me at my worst since you’ve been here, Sarge. I’m not normally this temperamental, I can promise. I have to apologise to you,” I said ruefully, mortified about my immoderate reactions to everything that had happened in the past few days. I suppose I could have blamed PMS, but I was reluctant to talk about something so personal with him. I barely knew him.

He stared at me in amazement. “Tess, are you serious? I’m only surprised you haven’t curled up into a corner yet, a screaming mess, after what you’ve been through since I arrived here.”

“I don’t like being too emotional,” I admitted, not wanting to meet his eyes, suddenly finding something compelling in the ancient iron nails holding down the wide floor boards of the back veranda.

“Neither do I, but sometimes I can’t help it because I’m only human. We can’t be robots, no matter how much we might want to. And no matter how much it would make life simpler for us.”

I glanced up and we met each other’s eyes. There was so much sympathy and understanding in his face that I felt overwhelmed with unwanted emotion again. I began to wonder if he was much warmer and kinder than I’d ever imagined possible and jumped to my feet in discomfort at the thought. So did he. We faced each other.

“Do you want your phone back now?” he asked, breaking the awkward silence. He fished it from his pocket and held it out.

“Thanks,” I said coolly, taking it from him and moving to the end of the veranda to ring Jake. We made up over the phone, but I could feel his longing to be with me in person as we did. I felt the same with him. I found it difficult to do things like that over the phone or email, because it was never the same. I wanted to touch Jake, to see his face when I talked to him and to kiss him – which made me think of the Sarge and his fiancée. How did he handle her being on the other side of the world, not being able to see her or touch her? And how on earth did he survive for so long without sex with the woman he loved? Maybe that was why he was always grumpy? Maybe when she returned, he’d become a different person? Maybe happy and relaxed?

I would never dare to ask him those questions though, so instead I took our rubbish to the bin at the side of the station, before joining him in the office.

“Tess, we have to force Stanley Murchison to talk to us tomorrow, no matter what.”

“Agreed.”

“Tomorrow’s going to be a big day for you. Are you going to be okay in court?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I admitted. “It depends on how the Bycrafts behave.”

“I’m sure you can safely assume that they won’t behave, and prepare yourself to be abused and threatened.”

I smiled grimly and busied myself at my desk. I wasn’t looking forward to the following day at all, hoping my worry wouldn’t stop me from getting a good night’s sleep. I had a feeling I was going to need it.

The counter bell and phone rang simultaneously. The Sarge reached for the phone, only to impatiently tell the caller that, no, it wasn’t the Saucy Sirens Gentlemen’s Club, while I headed out to the counter to find an outraged Gwen Singh wanting to report the theft of her son’s expensive bicycle by one of the Bycraft boys.

“Do you know which one of them it was, Gwen?” I asked, jotting down the

facts on an incident report form. We were probably the only station in the whole state that still used the forms, not having a computer at the counter.

"Tess, I wish I could tell you, but they all look the same to me. I only caught the barest glimpse of his face as he rode past me on the stolen bicycle, giving me a *very* rude gesture with his finger as he did! Those Bycrafts are absolute savages, even the young ones."

"I'm fairly sure it will be Timmy Bycraft we're after. He has a thing for bikes. He stole my bike tons of times before it went permanently missing and he's taken Romi Stormley's new bike that she got for Christmas six times this year already and it's only February," I told her.

"That would be because he's mad about Romi. She's a very pretty girl."

"She certainly is," I agreed.

"He's trying to get her to notice him in the only way that Bycrafts know how. She needs to get out of town as soon as she can and never return. Those Bycrafts are obsessive, especially the males, and that's not a good trait for people with poor impulse control like them to have. It's just lucky there aren't any young Fuller girls besides you left in town anymore, Tess," she said gently, placing a sympathetic hand on mine. We exchanged a glance.

"And I won't be here forever either, Gwen. Just until . . ."

"I know, love. And let's hope nothing happens to you until that sad day." She patted my hand.

"Amen to that!" I agreed again, wholeheartedly. "The Sarge and I will go interrogate Timmy as soon as we can. I'll get back to you about Deepak's bike when we find out anything."

"Thanks Tess."

Chapter 26

In the car, on our way to Timmy's house, the Sarge turned to me. "You know a lot about the Bycraft family."

"I'm an unwilling expert," I admitted coolly.

"Why? And why do they harass you so much? It *is* personal, isn't it?"

"So many questions, Sarge. You're confusing me. I'm only a simple country girl."

"Tess, just cut the bullshit for once, will you?" he said angrily.

"Why do you care anyway? It's my problem, not yours." I was pretty good at getting angry myself.

"It's my problem now as well. That's what being part of a team means," he explained with insulting slowness.

I couldn't let that go without some sniping. "Well Sarge, and maybe it's just because I *am* a simple country girl, but you seem to switch between telling me we're a team and telling me that I have to follow your orders because you're the senior officer, depending on what's most convenient to you at the time."

"I do not."

"Whatever," I muttered to myself, gazing out the window.

"What did you just say?" he demanded.

I swung around and glared at him. "I said 'whatever'."

His voice was cold. "You have a real attitude problem, Fuller."

"And you, Sergeant Maguire, have a gigantic stick up your --"

I stopped, barely in time to save myself from making a huge career blunder.

“You’ve something you want to say to me?” His voice could have cracked glass it was so frosty.

“Nothing Sarge. You are the source of all wisdom and I acknowledge that humbly,” I replied evenly, if not sincerely.

He banged his fist on the dashboard, making me jump. “God damn it, Tess!”

As soon as Timmy Bycraft, perched boldly on the stolen bike in his driveway, saw us approaching he pedalled furiously in the opposite direction on the wrong side of the road.

The Sarge pulled a violent u-turn that had me flying in my seat and planted his foot on the accelerator. He overtook Timmy and cut him off with the patrol car, coming to a halt at an angle in front of him. Timmy, taken by surprise, had three choices – veer right, veer left or head straight on into the patrol car.

Now Timmy Bycraft wasn’t the brightest crayon in the box and faced with that massive dilemma, his tiny brain shut down. He kept pedalling straight ahead towards the car. It was going to be a head-on. I jumped out of the car and waited for him to get closer before hooking him around the neck with my arm and jerking him off the bike just as it hit the patrol car. He wasn’t wearing a helmet and would probably have slid over the bonnet and impacted head first onto the road the other side. As it was, my actions caused him to land hard on his butt, the force also bringing me down on top of him. He immediately grabbed my breasts in a painful grip, despite being winded by the fall.

“I’m touching her tits!” he shouted out victoriously to his various relatives as they ran towards us. They cheered him on as they soon swarmed around, trying to kick me, even as I struggled away from Timmy’s iron grip on my boobs. I jumped to my feet, kicking out viciously with my boots in return, hitting a few body parts as I did. I hauled Timmy to his feet. Grasping him around the throat with my hand, I pushed him up hard against the patrol car, my face mere centimetres away from his.

I was furious beyond any point of professionalism. “You ever touch any part of me again, Timmy Bycraft,” I hissed into his face, “and I’m going to take these,” I kneed him in the scrotum as I spoke, “and feed them to you.”

He stiffened in pain at the aggressive contact and tried to spit on me, but was too scared to produce any more saliva than a thick globule that dangled unattractively from his bottom lip. This was his first solo encounter with crazy old me.

“*Do you understand?*” I screamed into his face, squeezing his throat tightly. He choked and wet himself then in fear, nodding. I let him go, watching in disgust as he ran away before anyone in his family could see what had happened to him. I picked up the bike and placed it in the boot of the patrol car. It was damaged, no doubt about it, but at least we would return it to its owner.

The first person in the crowd who hassled me as I did that copped a vicious elbow to the face that made them retreat in pain, blood flowing from their nose. I didn’t even bother to turn around to see who it was. I didn’t care. When I dumped the bike in the boot, I slid my baton out and turned to the gathered crowd, brandishing it with intent and eyeing them balefully, just waiting for someone to give me an excuse to use it. The Sarge was on stand-by, everything happening too fast for him to intervene, but he pulled out his baton as well. Everyone backed away, muttering and resentful. I hadn’t made any friends with the Bycrafts today.

Back in the car as we drove away with the retrieved bike, the Sarge tried to catch my attention. I deliberately looked out the window.

“You hate the Bycrafts,” he commented simply.

I shrugged, uninterested in talking about them.

“And yet you saved that boy from serious injury.”

I didn’t respond.

“How old was that boy?”

“Fifteen,” I said quietly as we crossed from the bad to the good side of town.

I wasn’t proud of myself for assaulting a teenager, even if he was a little dropkick who deserved it. I wasn’t a violent person by nature, but I had found myself being violent by necessity – for my own survival. But I hated being violent because there had been too much violence in my life already, and it only served to add to the tally sheet. It took an immeasurable toll on me each time I reacted violently, just as the Sarge had said earlier. It was if he had spoken about me personally when he’d made that comment about a person being irretrievably damaged by each bad thing that they did. I was becoming less of a good person each time I hurt somebody. Before too long, I was going to be nothing but a brute, just like the Bycrafts. I had to get away from Little Town as soon as possible. I was slowly losing my self-respect as a decent human being and a good cop.

I was becoming irredeemable.

We didn’t speak as he steered the car to the Singhs’ place. I had nothing to say at all. I don’t know what he was thinking about the whole situation, but he was probably appalled at how lawless I was. When he parked, I jumped out and pulled the mangled bike from the boot, hefting it onto my shoulder. The Sarge immediately snatched it from me and threw it over his own broad shoulder, an exasperated expression on his face.

There was happiness and despair in the Singh household. Gwen and her husband were glad that the bike had been recovered, but poor Deepak, one of the good kids in the town, was angry about the damage. His bike’s front wheel was bent out of shape and it was no longer operational. I patted him on the shoulder and recommended a good bike mechanic in Big Town. I’d needed him a few times after Timmy Bycraft had stolen my brand new road bike and crashed it doing stunts in the Lake Big carpark. That was before he had dumped it into the depths of Lake Big. I didn’t know that for a fact, but that was what I suspected had happened to it when it went missing for good. I’d been real upset about that loss – I’d saved up for ages to buy that bike and couldn’t afford to replace it.

Back at the station, after another silent drive, I escaped from the car almost before he had stopped. I was full of nervous energy and needed to do something physical to burn it off, but running was out of the question in my condition and I’d already cleaned the station the night before. What could I do? And when my eyes lighted on the ankle-length grass starting to run to seed surrounding the police house and station, I headed away from the station as the Sarge headed into it. I went up to the back of his house to a rickety old timber garden shed and pulled out an ancient mower. I refuelled it and started it up, after five attempts. It was temperamental and if you didn’t handle it exactly right, it refused to cooperate. *Just like Miss Chooky*, I thought ruefully as it finally spluttered and choked, the noise ripping through the afternoon peace.

I began pushing it back and forth across the expanse of grass encompassing the police house and station in the mindless and repetitive task of cutting grass. It was a very therapeutic activity and I hummed to myself as I mowed, always finding that it relaxed me and gave me time to mull over my problems. All I could think about today though was the court hearing tomorrow. How would I feel when I set eyes on those four men again? Would the magistrate make me testify? Would the Bycrafts

turn out in force to support their relatives? Would they be granted bail? What would I do if they were, because they would come for me during the night. Of that, I had no doubt.

A quarter of the way through the grass, a hand on my shoulder scared me. I spun around to find the Sarge, his face dark with fury, his mouth moving angrily. Reluctantly, I turned off the noisy mower so that I could hear him.

“What the hell are you doing?” he demanded to know, incensed.

I answered him patiently, as if he was a simpleton. “Mowing. What does it look like?” Perhaps his apartment block in the city didn’t have a lawn?

He closed his eyes, and by the movement of his lips I could tell that he was silently counting to five. His eyes flicked open again. “*Why* are you mowing?”

I stared back at him uncertainly. Was it a trick question?

“Um . . . because the grass has grown too long?” I replied with hesitation, wondering if that was the right answer.

It wasn’t.

He clenched his jaw and when he spoke his voice was almost incomprehensible through his gritted teeth. “You’re not paid to mow the grass, Fuller.”

“I’m paid to look after the station. That’s what Des always told me,” I argued. I’d known he’d been scamming me at the time, but didn’t mind the physical exertion, so I’d gone along willingly. Plus, we had no budget for a gardener and it didn’t look good for the town’s police station to be swallowed up from neglect by rampant vegetation.

“I couldn’t care less what he said. You don’t even live here,” he argued back, exasperated again. “It’s *my* responsibility to mow the lawn now.”

“Oh, okay,” I said, not really caring one way or the other. “Should I finish?”

“*Leave it!*” he shouted at me in his loud voice. I flinched at his unwarranted anger – I’d been doing him a favour after all – and without a further word pushed the mower back into the shed. I’d had enough of him for the day, so headed not back to the station as he did, but to the carpark to go home. But then I remembered that I’d come here in the patrol car very early in the morning, bringing Graham to the station. I had no ride home.

Biting off the obscenity that sprang to my lips, I walked off home. It was a long trek, five kilometres at least, but what choice did I have? I wasn’t going to ask *him* for a lift home and it wasn’t like the city in this place. There was no public transport system here. You either had a car or a bike or you walked everywhere.

As I drearily trudged along the highway to my home, in a shockingly bad mood, a frog-green hatchback came hurtling towards me, swerving dangerously across the road as the driver noticed me. I groaned to myself. Couldn’t I just have five minutes of peace in this damn town for once?

The car pulled up haphazardly on the verge, its butt sticking out precariously onto the road. Martin poked his head out of the window, a huge smile across his face.

“Do you need a lift, Officer Tess? I’m going in your direction,” he lied brazenly, the bonnet of the car pointing towards town, the opposite path to mine.

“Martin, I’m not getting in that car with you,” I said calmly. “You don’t have a licence, remember?”

His face fell, but before either of us could say another word, the patrol car pulled up, screeching to a halt, skidding in the gravel on the verge.

The Sarge wound the window down and shouted out at me. “Fuller, where the hell do you think you’re going? I didn’t say you could leave work. Get back to the

station now!”

“I’m going home, Sergeant Maguire,” I yelled back at him. “And if you don’t like that, then too bad for you! Martin has offered me a lift, so you can just piss off!”

Martin’s face lifted with indescribable joy. He jumped out of the driver’s seat to gallantly open the door to the passenger seat for me. Ungraciously, I pushed him into it instead and quickly stalked over to sit in the driver’s seat.

“Fuller!” shouted the Sarge, impatiently.

“Officer Tess,” complained Martin, at the same time.

I paid no attention to either of them and slammed the door, spinning the little car around, its wheels screeching on the bitumen. I spun off, thirty kilometres over the speed limit, down the winding mountain road to the mental health clinic to return Martin. The Sarge tailed me the whole way in the patrol car.

I pulled into the carpark and braked hard. Martin, realising that his little jaunt was over, turned to me, his bottom lip wobbling.

“Officer Tess, I only wanted to give you a lift home,” Martin howled, tears pouring down his face. I leaned over and patted him on the shoulder.

“I know, Martin,” I soothed. “But you’re not allowed to drive and I can’t let you because it’s against the law.”

The Sarge opened Martin’s door and grasped him by the arm, dragging him ungently to the director’s office, poor Martin crying the whole way. The Sarge pushed past the personal assistant who protested weakly that the director was too busy to see us at the moment. But we found him with his feet up on his desk, playing a racing game on a handheld PSP console. He jumped up when we burst into this office, hastily shoving the PSP into the top drawer of his desk. He greeted the Sarge warmly, which didn’t save him from a well-deserved reaming over Martin’s latest escape. I listened impassively for a while, arms crossed, but soon grew bored with hearing it all again for the umpteenth time. I left quietly.

“Shit.” I realised when I got to the carpark that I still didn’t have a car, and now I was even further from home. I wanted to curl up into a little ball somewhere dark and safe until life got better.

“Get in the car,” ordered the Sarge, hastily abandoning his lecture to follow me out to the carpark.

“No thanks. I’m fine,” I said coolly, and strode off down the road without looking back. Ten kilometres wasn’t that far to walk, if you thought about it. I’d be home in no time at all, I told myself with desperate optimism. And, to look on the bright side, it was good exercise for the fun run.

He sped past me angrily, burning rubber as he did.

A few kilometres further down the road I was feeling sore, my feet aching. Police boots weren’t designed for hiking, especially uphill, and my injuries were reminding me unsightly that I hurt everywhere. I was in a lot of pain and feeling exceedingly sorry for myself.

I saw the patrol car from ages away, the section of the road it was parked on being straight and long before the highway headed back up the mountain range. The Sarge was waiting for me and eventually I drew up next to the car.

“Get in the car, Fuller,” he demanded impatiently. “I haven’t got all bloody day to wait around for you.”

I walked right past him, ignoring his repeated demands for me to get inside. He sped off again in a temper when he realised that I wasn’t going to comply.

Another few kilometres later though, when I caught up to the parked car again, I

climbed into the passenger seat silently. I was too tired and too sore to argue any more. We didn't exchange a word as we drove to my house. When he pulled into my driveway, I slipped out of the car, carefully and quietly closing the door behind me, not thanking him and not saying goodbye.

Dad was spending the night with his long-time girlfriend Adele, who worked at the supermarket, so I was alone that evening. *Yay, freedom*, I thought sadly. I wouldn't have minded some company – anything to take my mind off the next day.

I threw off my uniform and changed into civvies, did a few loads of washing and made myself Vegemite on toast and a glass of milk for dinner with a slice of watermelon for dessert. I had a shower, and then in an unusual move for me, I grabbed from the fridge the second bottle of wine that the Sarge had brought me all those nights ago. Slumped on the lounge, I poured myself four glasses in a row as I watched some overly-dramatic reality cooking show where the contestants cried more than they cooked. Three-quarters of the bottle gone, I sent Jake a suggestive text message and received a positively obscene one in return from him that made me smile with anticipation. Then I collapsed into bed before nine, inebriated and exhausted.

Chapter 27

I was in the patrol car with the Sarge, Martin and Red Bycraft. We were cruising along the road to Big Town at night and the Sarge was driving. I was trapped in the backseat between Martin and Red, wearing the distinctive dark purple sheepskin jacket that I had lent to Marcelle, and in which she had been murdered. Martin and Red were each trying to drag me over to their side of the seat, Red winning. He slipped his arm around my throat, pulling out a sharp knife, its blade gleaming in the moonlight. I yelled at the Sarge in panic to stop the car but he wouldn't, reminding me haughtily as he drove that he was the senior officer and I would do what he told me to if I knew what was good for me. Laughing in nasty agreement, Red held the knife to my throat and pressed against it, a trickle of blood snaking down my neck and staining the yellow of my blouse orange.

Out of the window I saw Jake hitch-hiking by the side of the road and begged the Sarge to stop and pick him up to save me from Red. But the Sarge turned to me with his ocean blue eyes cold and distant and told me in a harsh voice that I was finally going to get what I deserved for letting Marcelle die. And Red thrust his knife into my chest again and again, while he grinned and shouted, "It should have been you, Tessie! It should have been you!"

I woke up screaming, in a sweat, twisted up in my sheets, panting loudly and feeling queasy. I ran to the bathroom and threw up until there was nothing left, before collapsing against the cold tiles, weeping silently. Immediately, automatically, I forced myself to stop and wiped the tears away from both eyes with the heels of my palms. I took some paracetamol and drank a few glasses of water, before falling back into bed, clutching my knife in comfort.

I didn't sleep much more until my alarm went off, when I hauled myself out of bed unwillingly. I sluggishly dressed in my running gear and drank my usual glass of juice before waiting at the gate, stretching. To my surprise, both Romi and the Sarge turned up that morning.

The Sarge and I greeted each other frostily. I had made it easier for myself to avoid any direct eye contact with either of them by wearing my sunglasses despite the early hour, conscious of my tears earlier that morning. Straightening my spine, I

walked off at a brisk pace. I answered politely when directly questioned, but otherwise made no contribution to the conversation. *Thank God for Romi and her endless teenage chatter*, I thought, or the walk would have been uncomfortably silent, because the Sarge wasn't very communicative that morning either. They left me in their dust a few times to break into a jog, which was fine by me. I wasn't good company today anyway.

On our return, I set out muesli and bread for their breakfast, pointing to the toaster and the fridge. I left them to go outside to tend to my chickens, finding peace in the mundane tasks of feeding and watering them and mucking out their run.

I really should have some breakfast, I thought. I had a big day ahead of me.

"You should have some breakfast," said a quiet voice behind me. "You have a big day ahead of you."

I swung around, surprised by his clairvoyance. "I'm not really hungry."

"You should eat." He regarded me closely. "You look tired."

"I didn't sleep well." I didn't mention my dream. How can you tell a workmate that they featured in one of your nightmares?

"Were you worrying?"

"If they're given bail, they'll come for me." I watched the chickens for a moment as they squabbled over the feed. "I don't know how I'll manage them in the state I'm in." I took in a deep breath. "I don't know how I'll protect Dad."

He was offended by that, judging by his clenched fists and tightened mouth. But his response was gentle enough. "There are two cops in Little Town now, Tess."

I flashed him a fake brittle smile. "There's always been two cops in Little Town. Never made a difference to me."

His eyes swept over me, his face sombre. "You're not alone anymore."

I shrugged noncommittally. I hadn't forgotten how he'd left me alone at the station when the Bycrafts came looking for Lola. Nor his promise not to let me down again. I guess I'd soon see which one represented the real Finn Maguire.

He pushed me gently towards the house. "Go have some breakfast. You'll need it."

Romi poked her head out the back door. "Tess, your phone's ringing!"

"Thanks Romi," I said, glad for the distraction and jogging slowly and painfully back inside. She thrust it into my hands as I stepped through the door.

It was Pinky Kowalski, letting me know that the Bycraft hearings had been pushed back until after lunch to fit in an urgent committal hearing of a murder case that had been cracked overnight by the Big Town detective team. When I told the Sarge, he wanted to rev right into action.

"Let's go catch Stanley Murchison before he heads off to work."

"We have to take Miss G to identify the suitcase as well."

"Murchison first. We have to get going, Tess. I'll be back here in twenty minutes. Can you be ready by then?"

"Sure," I said, wondering if I'd be able to fit in breakfast and a shower.

As they gathered their things and left, I blended a banana, milk, yoghurt and strawberries with my stab-mixer and quickly drank it, then jumped in the shower and dressed at warp speed. I was twisting my hair into a damp bun when, true to his word, the Sarge was honking the horn barely twenty minutes after he'd left.

I flung myself into the passenger seat and we zoomed off, well over the speed limit the whole way to Big Town. My phone rang and I answered. It was Jake, wishing me the best for the hearings. I told him that they'd been delayed, so I would now have to wait until after lunch.

"I wish I could be there with you, babe," he said sadly.

"I know."

"I'll be thinking about you all day. I'll give you a ring when it's all over. Uh-oh, here comes the boss. Better go. I love you, Tessie darling."

"I love you too, Jakey. Bye."

We drove in silence for a while, negotiating the unusually heavy traffic.

"A question about each other again?" suggested the Sarge.

I shrugged. Why not? We had some time to kill, after all. "You first," I offered.

"Why does the mention of Bobby and Craig Bycraft upset you so much?"

God, he hit hard, I thought bitterly. I was silent for so long, he thought I wasn't going to answer. "Tess?"

"That's actually two questions, Sarge. Pick one of them."

He shot me a puzzled look. "Okay. Bobby Bycraft?"

I took a deep breath. It didn't matter if he knew – someone in town was bound to blab to him eventually. But I hated telling people because they never looked at me the same way again afterwards.

"Twenty-five years ago, Bobby Bycraft murdered my mother in our house. And tried to murder me as well. I was only two at the time. My mother saved my life by pushing me under her bed, away from him. Poor Dad found us later that afternoon when he came home from the fields. I was critically injured. For a while, it was touch and go about whether I was going to pull through."

"I'm sorry." He was genuinely shocked, as were most people when I told them. And then they began avoiding me.

"Bobby Bycraft is Jake's uncle; Al and Grae's father. Well, he was, he's dead now. He was beaten to death in jail about ten years ago. Apparently he doublecrossed someone even worse than himself in a drug deal. I laughed until I cried when I heard that news." I shot him a quick look. "That's the kind of person I am, Sarge. I'm no better than them in the end. I'm just a monster too."

"That's not true at all," he said straight away. I smiled at him weakly, grateful for that little kindness. "Is that how you got those scars?"

"Yes. I was being honest with you when I said I didn't remember what happened when I got them."

"You were only a little kid."

"Yeah," I said sadly. "I don't remember my mother at all. But I know everything about her murder and the trial. I often dream about trying to save Mum, but I always get there too late to help her." I was quiet for a moment. "I hate those dreams."

We drove in silence again for another long time, both lost in thought.

"Tess, it's your turn," he reminded gently, but insistently.

Oh boy, I thought. I wasn't prepared. I couldn't think of anything to ask him. "Can I take a raincheck?" I asked. "I'm a bit edgy this morning and can't concentrate on much, so want to focus all my attention on work."

"No. Ask me your question."

I thought for a moment before speaking. "What makes you so sure you can get us more resources? I mean, no other cop working in Little Town has ever had any luck before."

He stared straight ahead, his hands clenching the steering wheel. "I'm not going to answer that. Ask me another question."

"What the hell?" I demanded with instant fury. "A minute ago, I bared my soul to you about one of the most traumatic and emotional things that has ever happened

to me in my life and you don't reciprocate?"

He was resolute. "I know it seems unfair, Tess, but I have a good reason for not answering. Ask me another question."

"There's no veto on the question!"

"I'm sorry. I'm not answering. Another question, please."

I had absolutely nothing further to say to him. I was burning with rage. I felt tricked and I felt used. I would never trust him about anything again.

"You're angry with me," he observed mildly. "I can understand that."

I couldn't answer. Anger didn't even come close to describing how I was feeling right now. We drove in silence the rest of the way to Murchison's house. When he parked, he tried again.

"Tess?"

I opened the door of the car and slammed it hard, stalking to the front door of Murchison's house, just in time to catch Graham leaving for work. He panicked when he came face-to-face with me and tried to duck back inside to shut the door on my face. I grabbed a handful of his shirt and forcefully pushed him backwards before he got the chance, until I ended up inside the house with him pressed up against a wall.

"This is unlawful entry!" he screeched. "I know my rights."

"You invited me in, Graham. Don't you remember, because I sure do," I snapped at him. "The Sergeant and I want to talk to your uncle and we want to talk to him now. So tell me where he is and I'll let you go to work. Don't tell me and I can't vouch for the consequences. I'm real cranky today."

He flinched as if I'd hit him. "Don't hurt me please."

I stared relentlessly into his eyes. "Tell me where your uncle is."

He stared back at me with scared defiance, repulsed by my facial injuries. I wasn't in the mood for any shallow judgements on my appearance today. I pushed him harder into the wall, my arm across his throat. He moaned softly in squirming discomfort.

"Stop being so cruel," he choked out, sounding as if he was going to start crying.

"*Tell me where he is!*" I shouted in his face. Graham flinched again.

"He's in his study, doing some work. He's not going into the office today."

I let him go and said nicely, "Thanks Graham. Have a great day."

"You're crazy! I hate you," he muttered, glaring at me with loathing. I smiled at him and he almost ran out of the front door, dodging the Sarge who was coming in.

I moved towards Murchison's office when the Sarge grabbed my arm. I was getting mighty sick of him doing that and shook him off violently.

"No matter what just happened before, this is a work situation and I don't want emotions getting in the way of us being professional. Is that understood?"

"Yes Sergeant," I replied frigidly, silently enraged. How dare he question my professionalism yet again? I made up my mind at that moment that he was a monumental prick of a man and I would be counting down the days until he achieved his senior sergeant promotion and got the hell out of my town and my life.

"Good," he said, equally cold. "I'll ask the questions. Understood?"

"Understood," I snapped back.

He pushed past me to Murchison's study and knocked perfunctorily on the door before entering, startling the man in the wheelchair. He was sitting behind his desk busily tapping on a laptop keyboard.

"Sergeant! Goodness, you frightened me. Did Graham let you in?" His eyes

widened when he noticed me. “Good God, Senior Constable! What on earth happened to you?”

I was confused because he was, if not exactly friendly and welcoming, then certainly not unfriendly and unwelcoming. I’d been sure that he’d bolt for it the minute he set eyes on us, particularly as he’d spent so much time and effort avoiding us over the last few days.

“Bycrafts, Mr Murchison,” I explained. “They –”

The Sarge butted in, fuming. “Mr Murchison, we’ve been trying to talk to you all week, but you’ve led us on quite a chase.”

Murchison seemed puzzled by that, his brows knitting together.

“I’m sorry, Sergeant, I’m not sure what you mean,” he said in response. “I haven’t been well this week and have spent a lot of time in bed, sleeping. I’m sorry if I’ve missed you calling on me. I’m a very heavy sleeper, especially when I take some of my painkillers.”

No doubt about it, I thought, giving him kudos. He was smooth. I almost believed him.

“Traumleben Pty Ltd,” said the Sarge flatly, sitting down on the hard lounge without an invitation. I chose to remain standing rather than join him. In fact I stayed next to the door, as far away from him as I could get and still be in the same room. I was making a point but I wasn’t sure that he even noticed, his attention all on Murchison. “Tell us what you know about it.”

The puzzled look intensified. “Can you spell that for me please, Sergeant?”

Sighing at the man’s delaying tactics, the Sarge spelt it out slowly.

“Never heard of it,” Murchison declared, sitting back in his wheelchair, eyes moving from the Sarge to me and back to the Sarge. Perhaps he could pick up the tension in the air between us? “Why are you asking me about it?”

He was doing a fantastic job of appearing ignorant. He was quite the actor, I marvelled. No wonder Miss G had trusted him so much.

“Because, Mr Murchison, Traumleben has been buying huge tracts of land from Miss Greville for peanuts and then selling them to the government for buckets of money.”

“I don’t understand, Sergeant,” he said simply, frowning faintly, eyes flicking back and forth between the Sarge and me again. He suddenly reached into a drawer on his desk, and the Sarge jumped up in alarm, his gun half out of its holster. Murchison pulled a box of tissues from the drawer, took one and proceeded to blow his nose, staring at the Sarge with composed surprise. The Sarge sat back down again, embarrassed. I smothered a smirk. “You seem a bit jumpy today, Sergeant. Do you have any evidence to back up this allegation?”

“Yes, we do. Quite a lot,” said the Sarge irritably and moved to sit across the desk from Murchison, pushing across the paperwork from our investigations.

Stanley Murchison took the next fifteen minutes to look it over carefully and thoroughly without making any comment, flipping back and forth between the pages to re-read something or to check a fact, jotting down his own notes. When he had finished, he had a thoughtful expression on his face and wheeled himself over to the huge picture window to stare out at the lovely bay. I would have wagered my next fortnight’s pay though, that he wasn’t registering the view at all.

“The evidence is quite conclusive, Sergeant,” he eventually said in a quiet voice. “There’s no point denying it. Miss Greville is being cheated by my law firm.”

The Sarge was taken aback. He clearly hadn’t been anticipating a confession as easy as this. Perhaps Murchison’s guilt at ripping off Miss G was overwhelming

him?

"Her touching faith in me has been sadly misplaced," he said sorrowfully, almost to himself. A genuine moment of remorse or more fine acting?

"Yes, it has," the Sarge agreed.

"I'm sure you can see this is a troubling day for me," Murchison mused and wheeled himself back to his desk. "This evidence you've shown me has come like a sledgehammer blow to me. It was very clever of you both to figure it out."

"Personally I find it extremely gratifying when a person's crimes are exposed, not troubling," said the Sarge, unsympathetic.

Murchison tapped on the folder holding the paperwork with his finger. "Lionel Mundy wasn't the director of this company, Traumleben Pty Ltd. He passed away three years ago and was *non compos mentis* for at least five years before that."

"We know that," Sarge dismissed impatiently. "That's why we're here."

"And I appreciate you warning me first, Sergeant, before you make your arrest. Otherwise it would have come as quite a shock to me, I can tell you. Especially at my age and in my condition."

The Sarge stood up, ready to take Stanley Murchison into custody.

"Do you know what Traumleben means?" he asked, out of the blue.

"No," said the Sarge frowning, momentarily distracted by the question. "What?"

"It's German for 'dream life'. I guess all that money would have funded a nice dream life." His voice turned hard. "That dream life's come to an end though."

Their whole conversation was tweaking my antennae. It felt as though they were talking at cross-purposes. Then it struck me with a jolt – they were.

"You're not the one who did this, are you, Mr Murchison?" I blurted out, just as the Sarge reached the other side of the desk, handcuffs out. He looked over at me appalled, as if I'd tipped his hand.

"What?" Murchison spluttered, his face a study in sheer, honest astonishment. "Me? How dare you even *suggest* that I would commit fraud against my own client? How dare you?" His face turned dangerously red and I feared he was going to give himself a massive stroke with his incredible anger.

"Senior Constable, what the hell do you think you're doing?" barked the Sarge at me, colouring up red himself in fury. He thought I was ruining his arrest. I suddenly feared that I'd just made an enormous mistake in front of the two men, but pressed on regardless. I'd gone too far to retreat now.

"You've been talking about *Graham*, haven't you, Mr Murchison? Graham's the one who's been ripping off Miss G?"

"Of course that's whom I've been talking about," he said emphatically, as if I was a cretin of the highest magnitude. "He's always been a weak lad, looking for the easy way in life. I only wish I'd been firmer with him about –"

I didn't hear any more of what he said, a scuffling noise in the hall outside the study attracting my attention. I poked my head out and saw Graham edging backwards, not as quiet as he thought he was being. He must have been eavesdropping on us. His rabbit features were distorted with fury. He no longer looked like a harmless little furry animal, his big teeth and huge glowing eyes reminding me instead of a predator. He had really fooled the Sarge and me with his gullible nephew act.

"Hey! Stop!" I yelled and then it all happened so fast.

He pirouetted and ran off down the hall. I sprinted after him, ignoring the screaming pain from my hip. I caught him before he escaped through the front door

by grabbing hold of the collar of his work shirt and hauling him backwards. He twisted around and threw a punch at my head, my grip on his shirt loosening as I ducked.

I attempted to get my handcuffs out of my belt with my left hand, my right still straining on his shirt when he threw another punch my way. I dodged and his fist merely slighted off my chin. He shoved his palm in my face to push me away causing me a great deal of agony as his hand pressed against my bruised nose and busted lip.

“That’s not very nice, Graham!” I protested, my voice muffled by his hand.

I tried to bite his hand as I pulled him closer to me by his work shirt. He responded by ramming my face even harder with his palm and I was thrust backwards, losing my grip on his shirt. I floundered and managed to take hold of his upper arms instead, pushing back at him. But he was stronger than he looked, and the week’s injuries had taken their toll on my strength and endurance.

And on my mental processes as well evidently, because he hooked his foot around the back of my ankles and tripped me, making me fall heavily on my back. He turned to run again but I twisted over on the floor and wriggled to reach out to grasp one of his ankles, causing him to stumble and fall to his hands and knees. I let go of him and struggled to my feet but he was faster and dragged himself upright, racing to the door again.

“Don’t move!” shouted the Sarge in his loud voice, his gun out covering Graham. I shifted out of his way, up against the entry wall, fumbling for my own weapon, somewhat dishevelled from the preceding scuffle.

Graham turned to glance back at us, his face twisted with ugly rage. He kept moving.

“Don’t do this, Graham,” implored Mr Murchison in a shaky voice, shock on his face. He’d wheeled himself up behind the Sarge. “Please hand yourself over to these officers. You’ll only make things worse for yourself if you don’t.”

“Shut up, Uncle Stanley!” Graham hissed with unconcealed hatred. “You talk too much. Especially to cops.” But instead of going through the front door as I expected, he slipped through a door to its left, slamming it behind him. We heard the lock click into place.

“God damn!” cursed the Sarge, dropping his arms, then said to Mr Murchison, “Where does that lead?”

“It’s the garage,” he informed us at the same time that we heard the unmistakable slam of a car door and the rattling sound of a garage door opening automatically.

The Sarge and I exchanged glances and both of us bolted to the door.

Chapter 28

It was locked of course – we’d heard him fastening it. The Sarge lifted his foot and rammed it against the door in an attempt to kick it in. I abandoned him and ran out the front door, around the path to the entrance of the garage, just as Graham came squealing out in a late model silver Toyota Camry, its tyres spinning up smoke in his haste to escape.

“Stop!” I yelled at him, but it was pointless. He couldn’t hear me and I had to jump out of the way or risk being hit by my second car this week. He roared down the driveway and onto the road at the same moment that the Sarge kicked the door open and stumbled into the garage.

I wasn't finished with Graham yet and knelt down on the driveway on one knee to steady myself, pulling out my Glock. Aiming it carefully with both hands, I pulled the trigger three times in rapid succession and blew out his right rear tyre.

"Great work, Tess!" the Sarge shouted, jogging down the driveway.

The Camry immediately swerved and smashed into a red Mitsubishi Lancer parked at the side of the road, stopping its momentum. The Sarge and I sprinted over to it.

In a panic, Graham threw the Camry into reverse and freed it from the tangle of twisted metal, before putting it into forward again and driving off, his speed limited by the shredded mess of black tyre at his rear. I caught up with the car first and it was going slowly enough for me to jog up next to it and smash a hole in the driver's window with my baton. I quickly cleared enough glass away to reach my left hand through, my fingers making contact with the ignition key. My plan was to turn the car off so we could arrest Graham. But looking back on the whole incident later, I'll be the first to admit that it wasn't the smartest plan I've ever had in my life.

Graham clamped his right hand around my wrist and pulled it away from the key. He was being careful and driving slowly, finding it tricky to steer the wonky car with only his left hand while he held onto me with the other. *We could go on like this all day*, I thought, jogging easily next to the car.

A neighbour came running out of his house towards the car, arms waving, perhaps thinking to stop Graham. But that only frightened him and his foot instinctively pressed down on the accelerator in response. The car thrust forward at double the speed it had been doing. My arm was caught inside the car, Graham's fingers still clutching me.

"Let me go!" I shouted in panic, struggling to run fast enough to keep up with the speed of the car. He stared out at me with huge dumb eyes, immobilised by wild fear.

My hip sent a horrible stab of pain down my leg and my right knee buckled under me. I lost my footing and couldn't recover it, the car starting to drag me beside it down the road. Graham let go of my hand and fumbled for the automatic window button, perhaps thinking to make it easy for me to free my arm by lowering the window. But I'd made a hole in the glass with my baton and had slipped my hand through that hole, so when the window lowered all it did was succeed in fully trapping my arm between the glass and the door. Desperately I clung to the side mirror with my right arm, trying to keep my body off the bitumen while my feet, clad securely in my strong boots, dragged uselessly on the road.

"*Graham!*" I screamed. "Stop the car, for God's sake! You're going to kill me!" I briefly registered more neighbours scrambling to the footpath, alerted by the crash and my screaming, their shocked faces a blur in my side vision. I began to panic about slipping under the tyres of the car. I didn't want to be run over.

Flustered, Graham pressed harder on the accelerator instead of the brake and, helpless, I was towed next to the car, the road flying beneath me at an alarming speed. Simultaneously, I tried to keep calm, wrench my arm free from the window and make sure that the only part of me in contact with the road was my boots, while I clung to the side mirror, my right arm straining with my weight. I prayed that my boots would bear up under the friction. They were tough leather, but they sure weren't designed for this sort of action.

I slipped once, falling down, my knees scraping on the bitumen of the road, making me scream in pain as the material from my cargo pants and the first couple of skin layers were forcibly removed by its roughness.

The Sarge sprinted after us, pulling up and running alongside me. He slipped his right arm under my chest, providing my body with much appreciated extra support and frantically tugged on my trapped arm with his left hand in an attempt to free it from the window. All this while running madly next to me.

“Wind the window up!” he shouted at Graham, who looked back at him with a stunned rabbit expression. “The window! Wind the fucking window back up, you dickhead!”

He ran hard for another hundred metres next to me, between us managing to keep all of me except my boots off the road, while his words finally penetrated into Graham’s frozen brain. He hastily reached for the electronic window button, pressing it. The window slowly made its way up and the Sarge and I yanked my arm free from the hole, scraping it badly as we did. The car continued on its path, but we both fell backwards onto the road in a jumbled heap, panting wildly with adrenaline and exhaustion.

Without thinking, I freed myself from him, rolled over onto my stomach, pulled out my Glock again and aimed it, shooting off five rounds before I hit the front right tyre. It exploded noisily and Graham veered crazily right, jumping the curb over the grassy footpath, ploughing through a beautiful patch of snapdragons before crashing into a brick letterbox. Both the car and the letterbox fared badly from the impact.

Graham flung open the car door and made a run for it. The Sarge and I both jumped up to chase him, but I wasn’t capable of anything faster than a painful limp and reluctantly let the Sarge bring him down and cuff him. Another patrol car turned up at that point, called by the concerned neighbours. We left those two constables to deal with the smashed cars and shocked witnesses while we frogmarched Graham back to our patrol car, shouting and struggling all the while.

Mr Murchison had wheeled himself to the front yard and stared with utter desolation at the destruction in his neighbourhood, his ruined car and then at his nephew.

“Graham, how could you defraud Miss Greville? And how could you disappoint me like this, after everything I’ve done for you?” he asked sadly, disillusioned.

“Just shut the fuck up, Uncle Stanley!” Graham shouted at him with bitter hatred. “It’s all right for you! You have this beautiful house, respect, a good career and money to burn. I have nothing!” Selfish tears of frustration fell from his eyes. “And I wanted my share. I wanted my dream life.”

“For once, you should shut up if you know what’s good for you,” snarled the Sarge and manhandled the still shouting Graham into the back of the patrol car. “You need a lawyer.”

Mr Murchison was clearly devastated by the ingratitude and blatant greed shown by his nephew. His face crumpled with emotion and I could see the glint of tears in the wrinkled creases of his face. *The poor man*, I thought. It was never easy to find out that someone you cared for was untrustworthy. I’d learned that myself from bitter experience a few years ago.

I glanced down at my shredded cargo pants and bleeding knees with resignation. They were stinging like a bitch, and I couldn’t possibly look worse if I tried. Fiona would be proud of me in court later. I only hoped there weren’t any photographers or TV cameras hanging around outside the courthouse. I wouldn’t want any reminder of today.

“I’m so sorry, Senior Constable,” I heard Mr Murchison say hesitantly. “I swear that I didn’t realise what Graham was up to.”

I shrugged, looking down at him. “You’ll have to convince us of that, Mr

Murchison. And Miss G as well.”

“I’ve been ill. Very ill.” He sighed. “I suppose I was too proud to admit that to my clients, and instead trusted a lot of my work to Graham, even though I wasn’t completely convinced that was the right thing to do.”

“You let Graham look after Miss G’s trust account?” I couldn’t hide my disbelief.

A pause of shame. “Yes. I thought it was a safe assignment for him. Nothing in it had changed for years. *Years*, Senior Constable! I thought all the property was sold. It was merely a matter of administering the interest each year and delivering it to Miss Greville’s bank account and answering any queries she had. I had that account audited carefully every year as well.”

“Graham found more Greville property to sell, Mr Murchison. How do you account for that? He set up a company using his deceased father as the director. This is not somebody who’s lacking in forethought or brainpower.” We were both silent for a moment. “Maybe you’ve underestimated Graham too. Just like his parents.” *Just like the Sarge and I had as well*, I thought humbly.

“Yes,” he said regretfully. “I always knew he was a feckless lad, but I didn’t expect him to be so conniving and dishonest. I’m distraught at the thought of Miss Greville believing that I’ve been robbing her. We’ve known each other all my life. Will you please tell her that it wasn’t me? I doubt she’ll feel like talking to me for a while.”

I told him I would and advised him that some detectives would be in touch soon to question him.

He nodded. “I must admit a certain reluctance to give evidence against my only nephew,” he replied sadly.

“You can’t choose your family, Mr M,” I consoled sympathetically and patted him on the shoulder, before heading at a snail’s pace to the patrol car.

The Sarge was leaning against the car, talking to someone on his phone, paying no heed to Graham who was yelling and banging on the divider in the back seat of the car. He looked up when I approached and wrapped up his phone call, walking over to me.

“We have to get you to a doctor, Tess,” he said, concern on his face. I told him that I’d get myself patched up back at the Big Town station. I was fairly sure I didn’t need medical attention. It was only a couple of grazes.

Although not forgetting how angry I’d been with him earlier, I felt a flood of warm gratitude towards him. I looked up at him earnestly, “Thank you so much, Sarge. You just saved my life.” I closed my eyes briefly and exhaled heavily. “That was a terrifying experience. I felt so helpless.” I breathed in and out again. “And I hate that.”

His eyes searched my face, his hand reaching up towards it before lowering again without making contact. He shrugged, embarrassed, not sure what to say or do. We stood in front of each other awkwardly, uncertain if we should embrace each other in sheer relief or not. So we didn’t, keeping our hands firmly to ourselves.

“Are you going to be okay?” he asked solicitously.

I avoided his glance, eyes on the ground, suddenly feeling shy, every part of me reminding myself that I was no oil painting at the moment. “I’ll –”

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” he interrupted rudely. “You’ll live.”

I smiled reluctantly at his knees. “I’m pretty sure that I will.”

“Your shooting skills are very impressive,” he complimented.

It was my turn to shrug as I peered intently at the paving in the driveway. There

were weeds poking through the pavers. "So are your running skills," I mumbled.

"I'm worried about something now, though."

I spoke to my ruined boots. "What?"

"I'm worried about what the Inspector will say to me when she finds out that I was trying to arrest an innocent, sick old man in a wheelchair," he said, with surprisingly charming self-mockery.

Despite myself, I laughed and peeked up at him. "Don't forget he was an innocent sick old man in a wheelchair armed with a box of tissues."

He pulled a miserable face. "You're a cruel woman, Fuller, you really are."

I laughed even harder, feeling better already.

He gave me a half-smile and held out his hand. "Truce?"

I regarded his hand thoughtfully, before reaching out to take it.

"Truce," I agreed and we shook on it.

"I didn't mean to be such a jerk before, but —"

"It just comes naturally?" I suggested, with a smile.

"Tess," he complained in an injured tone. "I was going to say that I will answer your question when I know you better. It will change the way you think of me permanently, so that's why I don't want to answer just yet."

Whatever, I thought to myself dismissively, as if finding out about my mother's death and my near-death hadn't changed the way he thought about me. Noticing that he still had a firm grip on my hand, I extricated mine from his and turned to glance unenthusiastically at Graham. He was still carrying on in the back seat, banging on the window.

"We'd better get Graham down to the station before he bursts a blood vessel with all that shouting. Do you think we'll have time to interview him ourselves before I have to go to court?"

"If not, he can just wait for us to return. I don't want to hand him over to the dees yet. I want to hear firsthand what he has to say for himself." He climbed into the car and I followed suit, wincing when I bent my knees. "Oh, by the way, I was talking to forensics when you came over. They managed to lift one fingerprint from our safe-cracking job and you'll never guess who it belongs to."

"Is it our little friend in the backseat, by any chance?"

"It certainly is. Doesn't he have a lot of interesting questions to answer?"

Back at the watch house, Senior Sergeant Yu was in charge again and exclaimed loudly in disbelief when the Sarge and I dragged Graham, still kicking and screaming, in the door.

"Oh gawd, not him again!" she groaned, covering her ears. "Doesn't he have an off button?"

"Apparently not," said the Sarge loudly over Graham's racket.

"What's he done now?"

"He's been ripping off a sweet little old lady and he just dragged poor Tess down the road with his car. Look at her! She's bloody lucky he didn't kill her."

I wasn't pleased that he'd drawn attention to my further injuries, everyone crowding around and tutting over my poor knees.

"You bastard," Daisy said, staring at Graham in disgust. "Not happy with just perving on her now, huh? Now you're trying to kill her."

She processed him into the system, and had one of the watch house officers take him to a holding cell, him shouting all the while.

"He'll be wanting a lawyer again, I presume," she said.

"Probably," I responded. "We should try to get that woman he had before. She

was sensible and calmed him down a lot.”

“You two better hand this over to the Inspector to deal with, especially now you have a conflict, Tess,” she ordered. “You shouldn’t interview someone who’s tried to kill you. And don’t forget you have court this afternoon. You’ll barely have time to interview him anyway, particularly if he intends to continue carrying on like that for some time. It could also take ages before a lawyer can be found for him.”

The Sarge and I exchanged glances. I knew he really wanted to finish this case himself, but I didn’t think we had much choice. I used the counter phone to ring Fiona, giving her a brief rundown on events that morning. After listening to me with unexpected patience, she made a decision to take it over and promised to send a couple of dees downstairs to us as soon as possible.

“We’ve lost it, sorry Sarge,” I said apologetically. “She’s sending down a team. We’ll brief them and then maybe we’ll have time to bring Miss G in to identify the suitcase.” I hesitated, unsure whether to ask or not. “Are you coming to court with me?”

“Of course I am, Tess. Did you really need to ask?” he replied, offended again.

Daisy cut off his further ire by looking me up and down scathingly, declaring that I wasn’t fit for court and would be an embarrassment to the entire force in my current scruffy condition. She handed over to her sergeant, Roger MacNamoy, a handsome, reserved and competent man that I didn’t know well. He gave me a sympathetic smile as he took over, leaving Daisy free to bustle around me like a very bossy mother hen, finding me a clean spare pair of cargo pants that were reasonably close to my size. She pulled off my boots, throwing them to a startled probationary constable and ordering him to polish them back to some semblance of respectability. He didn’t look happy about it – it wasn’t what he’d joined the police to do. But he sure wasn’t going to argue with her.

The Sarge took me into the watch house staff room and forced me to sit down on one of the comfy sofa chairs they had clustered together in a corner. He retrieved the first aid kit from the wall, and with an unwelcome audience of cops who seemed to have nothing better to do, he proceeded to torture me for fifteen minutes by giving me first aid. He began by patching up my scratched arm and then moved onto my knees. When I flatly refused to take off my cargo pants as he requested, he was forced to cut them away above my knees so that he would have good access to my wounds. It didn’t matter though, because my pants were ruined anyway. My knees were badly grazed, gravel embedded deep in the wounds. Blood was still seeping out, now joined by some icky clear fluid as well.

When he doused the first knee in antiseptic spray and dug around to remove the gravel with a pair of tweezers, I screamed out some extremely rude words, the pain was so intense. I leaned back against the chair, eyes squeezed together tightly, teeth clenched and clutched the armrests with such a death grip that I had sore shoulders the next day and would have sworn that I left my fingerprints permanently imprinted in the material. Tears of pain sprang into my eyes and I blinked them away furiously, but a few stray ones managed to trickle down my cheeks.

“I’m so sorry, Tess,” the Sarge said regretfully, before doing it to me again with the other knee. Then he puffed antiseptic powder on the sores, watching as the liquid oozing from the grazes made it all wet again. He added more and more powder until all the liquid was soaked up and padded each knee with a non-stick gauze before expertly bandaging them.

He held out his hands and pulled me to my feet. I walked around in my socks and ragged new shorts like a Frankenstein monster, my knees so stiff from the

bandages that I could hardly bend them. I clumped over to the kitchen to make myself a coffee, grabbing a mug from the collection of mismatched spares that huddled on a shelf. The mug I grabbed was plastered with the logo from some conference on deviant criminology held in the city all the way back in 1988. The Sarge followed me and did the same, randomly choosing a black mug that had *Sextravaganza '04* plastered on it in gold letters and a suggestive silhouette of a man and two women copulating enthusiastically underneath. When he noticed, he hastily put it back on the shelf and took down a plain green mug instead. Smothering a laugh, I opened all the cupboards, peering inside hopefully.

"You got any Tim Tams round here?" I yelled out to Daisy. After today, I thought I deserved one.

"Sorry. That fathead Bum ate the last of them yesterday," she yelled back, then groaned. "Oh shit, speak of the devil."

I turned around, spotted Bum and another man I hadn't met before heading straight for us. I groaned in dismay.

"Not you again," I complained. "Please, *please*, tell me that the Inspector hasn't given you our case to finish?"

Bum smiled smugly and leaned against the fridge looking down at me, his gigantic muscles straining against his business shirt when he crossed his arms, blocking my access.

"Get out of the way. I need some milk," I said grumpily. He shifted only far enough for me to open the fridge door ten centimetres and awkwardly reach my arm in to grab the milk carton, bringing me into uncomfortably close contact with him. I could even smell his minty breath.

"You decided to dump that loser Jake Bycraft yet and go out with me instead?" he strutted in front of everyone.

"I'd rather die than go out with you," I replied honestly, stirring my coffee with unnecessary vigour.

"Tessie, Tessie, Tessie. It's only a matter of time. You know you want me," he chuckled to himself as if I was flirting with him. God, he was so self-deluded!

"Bum, I want you as much as I want syphilis," I smiled sweetly and took a sip of my coffee. "Which, incidentally, I probably would catch if I did go out with you. So thanks, but no thanks." I indicated the man next to him who'd been watching the whole exchange in amused silence. "Who's your new friend?"

The man held out his hand to me and smiled disarmingly. He was real cute, in his early thirties, with warm brown eyes that crinkled attractively at the corners, wild, curling dark brown hair that was far too long for a cop and a friendly, open smile that showed nice teeth. I clasped his hand, feeling the warmth that flowed from him.

"I'm Xavier Guylen. You must be Tess Fuller. I've heard a lot about you," he said, his voice beautifully mellifluous. I could have listened to it all day long.

"All the good things you've heard about me are understated and all the bad things are nothing but a pack of slanderous lies," I said lightly, shaking his hand. I introduced him to the Sarge, in the process learning that he was a detective sergeant, recently transferred from a larger regional city up north.

"I haven't heard anything bad about you at all." He smiled again at me.

I smiled back. "You're quite the charmer, aren't you, Xavier? We don't get many of those around here." My eyes flicked involuntarily towards the Sarge. I hoped he hadn't noticed.

"Call me X. It saves time," he said, looking at me curiously. *X? Good grief*, I

thought. He glanced at my socks, ragged shorts and bandages, before his eyes rested on my poor damaged face again. "What happened to you? Looks like a building fell on you."

"I tripped over running away from Bum," I joked.

"Grow up, Tessie," Bum said sourly. "Are you going to brief us or not?"

I sighed. "All right, let's get on with it then. Believe it or not, the Sarge and I have to be in court this afternoon." I turned to Bum. "Hang on, don't you have to be in court too, as one of the investigating detectives?"

"Yes. X is going to do the initial interview with this suspect by himself while I'm in court with the Inspector."

We carried our coffees into one of the interview rooms and the three men sat and I remained standing while I told them everything that had happened since Miss G had first called me to report a peeping tom. I hadn't even met the Sarge at that point I remembered with surprise, glancing at him. I felt as though I'd known him much longer than just a week, so much had happened since he'd arrived in Little Town. I continued on with my story, the Sarge interrupting if I forgot something along the way.

The two detectives jotted down notes busily, Xavier asking intelligent questions as he did, picking up quickly on the salient points. Bum, as usual, was soon lost by the details, as smart as a pet rock. He spent most of his time doodling on his notepad.

"Sounds as though there's plenty to charge him with," said Xavier, leaning back on his chair, chewing thoughtfully on the end of his pen as he scanned over his notes. He glanced up at me. "Did you really shoot out his tyres? That's not easy to do when a car's on the move."

"She's a crack shot," commented the Sarge. "I've heard she even shoots her own dinner." I giggled at that hint of a sense of humour and he smiled over at me nicely.

"Our Tessie's the toughest chick you'll ever meet," said Bum proudly. "Besides the Inspector, of course. Oh, and probably the Senior Sarge too."

"I'm the third toughest woman in the district," I summarised for Xavier's benefit.

"I can see that I'll have to behave myself here with all these tough women around," Xavier laughed. "They must breed them strong in these parts. Were you born and bred around here, Tess?"

"I certainly was, Mr X. I'm just a simple country girl."

The Sarge snorted quietly and rolled his eyes. "Take my advice and don't fall for that line," he recommended. I scrunched my nose at him.

The three men stood up. The Sarge looked at his watch. "There's just enough time for us to grab some lunch before court, Tess. We'll have to leave Miss Greville until afterwards."

"Don't worry about her," said Xavier, walking us to the door. "I'll get some uniforms to bring her in for you." He looked over at me and winked. "Good luck, Tess. Knock 'em dead today." I smiled back at him, deciding that he was a nice guy. "Hey, how about I buy you a coffee next time you're in Watling Bay? Or maybe we could even have lunch?" he added.

"She's got a boyfriend," the Sarge and Bum chorused.

"I'm not surprised, but that's a shame all the same," he said and smiled at me again. "But the offer still stands."

"That would be great. I'd love to, Mr X," I replied, surprised anyone would

want to be seen in public with me looking the way I did.

"I like how you call me Mr X. It's cute."

"Come on Tess, we have to go," the Sarge said impatiently, pushing me out the door, his hand pressing between my shoulder blades.

I detoured to the ladies room to hurriedly dress in the fresh cargo pants Daisy had found for me, gingerly pulling them over my knees. I spent a few minutes tidying my hair and brushing the road dust off my shirt. But I found myself unable to bend enough to lace my freshly-cleaned boots, so had to pad out to the watch house entrance in my socks to ask the Sarge to do it for me. *How mortifying*, I thought, as he knelt down before me in front of everyone and did up my laces like I was four-years-old. The probationary cop had done his best to make my boots more respectable and I thanked him sweetly, making him blush, but I would definitely need a new pair. Mine were badly worn from dragging on the road for so long.

That done, the Sarge and I looked at each other.

"Ready?" he asked.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

Chapter 29

"I don't like him," judged the Sarge as we drove off. "What kind of name is 'X' anyway?"

"Lighten up, Sarge. It's just a nickname. I liked him. I thought he was really nice. He's warm and friendly." *Unlike you*, I thought.

"Not like me is what you're thinking, aren't you?" he accused, scaring me again with his uncanny ability to read my mind.

"Of course I wasn't. You're paranoid," I lied and stared out the window to avoid any giveaway facial expressions, wishing fervently that Mr X had come to Little Town instead of him.

"You're probably wishing he'd come to Little Town instead of me."

God! Would he stop doing that? It was freaking me out. "Don't be silly. Of course I'm not." I deliberately made my mind go blank for a while.

I wanted comforting junk food for lunch but he forced me to eat at an organic sandwich bar where I sullenly munched on the multigrain tuna and salad sandwich and plain mineral water that he bought me. I let him pay because, embarrassingly, I had less than a dollar to my name today.

"I need sugar," I moaned afterwards, thinking about Tim Tams again.

"Great idea. You need to keep your energy up for this afternoon. I'll get us something," he agreed and I happily returned to the car, dreaming of chocolate bars, ice-creams, lollies.

But instead, he brought back two tubs of fresh-cut fruit salad. I stared at mine gloomily. The day was getting worse and worse. I cursed him silently as I forked rockmelon, strawberries and kiwifruit into my mouth. We ate the fruit salad in silence, both of us thinking that it didn't taste half as nice as the farm-fresh produce we'd sampled recently. He threw the containers into the bin on the footpath when we were done before driving to the courthouse.

My nerves were making themselves known as we parked in one of the 'police only' bays, pulling up next to the unmarked car that Fiona favoured.

"The Inspector's already here," I advised him, taking a deep breath.

"Tess, are you okay?" he asked.

I gave a half-laugh. "I wish I had some money for every time you asked me that, Sarge. I'd be rich by now. And no, I'm not okay this time. I'm very nervous."

"You've been in court before, haven't you?"

"Of course I have! But I don't want to see those men again."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I should have realised. That was thoughtless of me. I forgot how personal this case is for you."

As soon as we entered the courthouse, I clomped in a detour straight to the ladies restroom where I didn't come out again until I felt more composed. Rosie Bycraft sauntered in the door just as I reached for it. We glared at each other with open hostility the entire time we crossed paths as she entered the bathroom and I exited. She was one of the smarter Bycrafts though and knew better than to pick a fight with me in a courthouse where her brothers and cousins were about to be committed to trial for the serious assault of a police officer. But gee, I could tell that she wanted to.

I could afford a bit of needling though. "How's Red enjoying being back behind bars? Must be like home sweet home for him? Hope his boyfriend was faithful while he was on the outside," I said sweetly.

"Fuck off, piglet. He should have killed you when he had the chance," she returned viciously.

"I should have killed *him* when I had the chance. I will next time. And I'll get away with it too." I winked at her and left the bathroom smiling, my good spirits renewed. I always loved to psych out a Bycraft whenever I found the opportunity.

A loud voice assailed me. "Fuck me sideways! Look at you, Tessie! Still managing to smile after everything that's happened to you. You must have been tasting more of Jake Bycraft's hot sausage," yelled out Fiona from the other side of the courthouse foyer, startling everyone nearby. I blushed as I straight-legged my way closer to the small group of law enforcement folk that had gathered in anticipation of the various hearings being churned through the court today. They were all staring at me with speculation, some of them snickering into their hands. Nobody was brave enough to laugh out loud at me though. Not in front of the Inspector anyway.

"No ma'am," I answered in a calm, discreet voice when I was close enough. "Jakey's on duty for two weeks. No hot sausage in my life at the moment."

She laughed and thumped me painfully on the back. "That's a fucking shame. A woman needs all the hot sausage she can get, especially in stressful times like today."

"Thanks ma'am," I said, wishing desperately she'd stop talking about it. "I'll remember that."

She quietened down and stood abutting me, examining my face closely. "Not bad. Good bruising on your nose and around your eye. Love the stitches on your forehead and those swollen lips make you look even more fuckable than usual. That's good – we've got a male judge today." She tilted her head and considered me critically. "But I don't much care for the way you're walking. You look as though you've got three dicks jammed up your arse and you're not enjoying any of them."

More sniggering from the other cops. I sighed, silently dying of embarrassment. "Well, who would, ma'am? And I'm sorry, but I don't seem to be able to walk any other way at the moment. My knees are bandaged."

She grew serious and clasped me to her tightly. "I'm so glad you're okay, sweetheart," she whispered quickly in my ear before pushing me away, turning to yell at Bum for bringing her the wrong coffee. She'd asked for a flat white with

three sugars, not a fucking decaf cappuccino with no sugar, and was he so brain dead from all the steroids he gobbled to make his dick bigger that he couldn't remember a simple fucking coffee order? And without minding being rebuked in front of colleagues, he placidly trotted off again to the court cafe to get the right coffee for her.

The door to the courthouse flung open and Pinky Kowalski burst in wearing one of her blindingly neon pink skirt suits and dangerously high pink heels that had earned her that nickname. The suit hurt my eyes to look at, it was so bright, and I wondered again if she had them made to order. Surely you couldn't buy something that hideous off the rack in a shop? As usual, she had her bright pink briefcase with her, her hand firmly clasping its fluffy pink handles – but there had never been a cow alive that would have naturally produced such a glaring leather colour.

Despite her penchant for pink clothes, accessories and high heels, Pinky was the least feminine woman I'd ever met. Her undyed gray hair was clipped close to her scalp and she wore no makeup and no jewellery at all. Not even a light dust of face powder. Not even a watch or a tiny pair of earrings. She was in her early fifties, was brusque, businesslike and the one lawyer I'd trust with my life because she was ferocious in defence of police officers. Although a police prosecutor, she was not a sworn officer, but a civilian employee and almost exclusively spent her time on cases that involved the assault of officers. And that kept her flat out, especially with a family like the Bycrafts living nearby. She'd gone into bat for me on numerous occasions, so we had a comfortably friendly relationship. She ran me through her planned argument, although she assured me it was cut and dried. The four Bycrafts would be committed to trial at a later date for their assault on me and would be ordered to be held on remand until then.

"It'll all be over in five minutes," she promised.

Joanna turned up not long afterwards as the other witness to my assault, dressed for the occasion in an alarmingly tight short-sleeved flowered mauve dress that showcased her bulging biceps and high heels that only drew attention to her lumbering gait and rock-hard calf muscles. She must have recently waxed her upper lip hair and the resulting red mark on her skin made her appear as though she'd just been sipping on a cough syrup milkshake. She was accompanied by her lovely husband, Mark, both of them even more nervous than me. I gave them a quick hug in greeting and answered their curious questions about my strange walk, before Pinky cornered them to explain what would happen today. Neither had ever previously been in court.

The Sarge hovered at my side the whole time we waited and whenever I turned around, he was there in front of me, in my way. But instead of finding his constant presence smothering as I should have, I found it strangely reassuring. I paced up and down anxiously, biting my nails down to a ragged edge. Finally they were ready to start and everyone was allowed to enter the courtroom, leaving Joanna and me outside. I waited nervously until I was called by the bailiff to enter the court.

It was a magistrate's court, with the gallery open to the public and as I'd feared, a crowd of Bycrafts had gathered in force to show support for their four kinsmen. The hostility radiating from them towards me was intimidating, concentrated as it was in such a small room. You would have thought that I'd be used to it after a lifetime of their abuse, but I was particularly tense today and it needled me. They hissed threatening and obscene things to me as I made my awkward way down the aisle to the front of the courtroom to be sworn in by the bailiff in the witness box. I looked over at the public gallery then and appreciated the support of Fiona and the

Sarge. And yes, even Bum's hulking presence gave me some comfort because despite being an obnoxious meathead, ultimately he was on my side.

The Sarge later told me that when the court officials brought in the four men through the main doors, the Bycrafts cheered and shouted, encouraging them to strut and grin cockily in response. They were all dressed neatly in suits for the occasion, freshly shaven and hair combed. Jake's aunt, Valerie Bycraft, in court to support her two monsters, Al and Grae, started weeping uncontrollably before anything had even happened. A dry-eyed, hard-faced Lola Bycraft had rushed down to hug Red tightly, clinging to his arms and whispering in his ear, before being pulled away from him by the court security. He'd always been her favourite, being her firstborn.

The Sarge told me that the judge had ordered quiet in the courtroom, but it still took a few minutes before the Bycrafts settled down, only the threat of being forcibly removed inclining them towards finally becoming silent. The hearing had proceeded as normal. The charges had been read out, the men, as expected, all pleaded not guilty and the defence lawyer requested bail. Pinky had opposed bail vehemently on the grounds of the seriousness of the attack, the clear intent to assault, the ongoing threat to me, and specifically for Red, the fact that he was already on parole when the assault occurred.

As I stood in the witness stand, Red's amused reptilian eyes remained set on me the whole time, his lazy confident smile threatening to derail my barely-held calm demeanour. Whenever I felt it slipping away, I looked over at the Sarge and Fiona, who smiled or nodded supportively at me, and I regained it again. The judge listened politely to my evidence, regarded my injuries with a grave face, shaking his head with obvious sympathy, asked me a few clarifying questions, and my ordeal was over. Red winked at me, kissed the air and waggled his tongue indecently as I approached the men to leave the courtroom.

I did what I was good at and I blanked him, not making eye contact nor giving any indication I'd seen what he'd done. That was my mistake, because I should have kept a close watch on him the whole way. As I walked past him, a loud clatter broke the hush in the courtroom and someone from the gallery called my name in panic. I think it might have been the Sarge. I glanced up at him, but the next thing I knew, a strong arm was crushing my throat and I was hauled backwards up against a man's hard body. A prick of something sharp in my neck drew some blood and a trickle of it tickled me as it meandered down towards my chest, reminding me of my dream the night before. Instinctively I reached for my knife, but of course I wasn't wearing it.

The three police officers in the courtroom with me all jumped to their feet in alarm, hands on their guns. Court security stiffened in alertness, their hands heading for their buzzers.

"Nobody do anything reckless," warned a voice. My instant emotion after the initial shock was fear, because Red Bycraft finally had his hands on me. "If you do, I'll be forced to do something awful to our lovely Tessie and I would just hate to have to do that after everything else she's suffered." His low, dirty laugh gave immediate lie to that statement.

He leaned his head down and licked the blood from my neck with unhurried relish, giving another laugh as he did. The touch of his tongue on my skin made me shudder with disgust.

"Mmm, I can't get enough of my lovely piglet's blood. I need more." He turned to his brother. "Karl! Haul arse!"

He took the hand holding the knife away from me for a second, tightening his

grip around my neck in compensation. He shook his sleeve and another knife fell to the floor from his suit. Karl swooped down and picked it up. Where the hell did they get the knives?

Red was choking me so hard that I was struggling to breathe. I fought against him, tearing at his arm with my hands, trying to loosen his grip and lashing out wildly, kicking backwards at his legs with my boot in desperation. He merely laughed in response and jabbed me hard enough in the neck with the knife that I thought twice about continuing. The trickle of blood had turned into a creek.

"I will slit your throat right here in front of everyone if you don't start behaving yourself, Tessie," he whispered in my ear. "Is that how you want to die? It's not how I want you to die. It's not how I plan for you to die."

I stopped struggling and concentrated on calming myself down, because I was in danger of hyperventilating with fear. I centred my thinking – my safety was up to me now, nobody else. My life was in my hands and my hands only. That was a lesson hard learned from my tough-as-nails ex-SAS martial arts teacher during my teenage years and I'd never forgotten anything he'd ever said to me. Not one word.

Karl pulled my handcuffs from my belt and clapped my wrists together at my front, then retrieved my gun, handing it to Red, who swapped it for his knife. Karl handed Red's knife down the line to Al, leaving only Grae unarmed.

"Listen up, people!" Red shouted to the court. "Officer Tess here has kindly agreed to act as our hostage to help us escape. What a fucking sweetie."

He kissed the side of my mouth and dropped his hand from my throat down to cup my right breast. I recoiled with revulsion at his intimate touch, making him laugh again.

"You are all going to back off and give us plenty of freedom to get out of this place. Let me make myself clear – any heroics will cost Tessie her life. On the other hand, getting out of here without any bother will put me in such a good mood that you might even get her back alive. Badly roughed up and fucked half to death for sure, but still alive."

His deep, evil chuckle threatened to turn my bones to jelly. He kneaded my breast ungently, squeezing my nipple hard between his fingers. I tensed, shutting my eyes, trying not to react. But then he bit me hard on the shoulder, near my neck. I flinched, involuntarily crying out loudly in pain, and he laughed once more. He loved to get a response from me.

Red suddenly twisted, shoving me forward to the back of the courtroom, towards the judge's door. Karl yanked on the handcuffs from the front as well, and I stumbled as my feet tripped over each other in my boots. Red's arm tightening around my neck was the only thing that stopped me from falling to the ground. I choked, spluttering in despair, trying to draw oxygen into my lungs.

"Stop . . ." I gasped. I wouldn't beg though. Not him. Never.

He righted me and released his arm enough for me to draw in huge gulps of wonderful, beautiful, welcome oxygen.

"Careful Tessie," he whispered warningly in my ear. "You don't want me thinking that you're trying to escape, do you?"

My eyes roamed the room frantically and images flashed into my view as we moved together – the judge's scared immobile face; Fiona furiously yelling into her phone; a pale, grim-faced Sarge moving forward stealthily, his gun trained on us, tracking us as we went. Bum appeared confused as usual looking around him frowning; the court security officers seethed with frustration; Lola Bycraft grinned from ear to ear; Rosie Bycraft stood watching, a self-satisfied smile on her lips;

Valerie Bycraft still wept; while Dorrie Lebbutt and Rick Bycraft tongue-kissed each other, oblivious to everyone else. Other Bycrafts were merely a blur of cheering faces and waving arms.

The five of us left the courtroom in a huddle and moved into a hallway running along the back of the courthouse. To the right were the judge's chambers and other offices, to the left the exit to the back carpark that was reserved for staff only. We went left, followed at a distance by the Sarge, Fiona, Bum and the court security.

We stepped outside the courthouse just in time for Greg Bycraft to pull up in one family member's rattly clunker. I was too tense and panicky to identify whose it was at that moment, but it was old and rusty like all of them. He left the keys in the ignition, engine running and jumped out, clapping his brothers Al and Grae on the shoulders, laughing with admiring approval at his relatives' daring escape. Greg spat on me in contempt as he disappeared around the front of the courthouse, his spittle dripping off my chin onto my shirt. "Make sure you give her a dose of hard cock for me," were his parting words, thrown over his shoulder. "The bitch has been asking for it for years."

There was one thing I was sure of at this moment that would prove fatally hazardous to my life expectancy, and that was for me to get into a car with four Bycraft men. I simply wasn't going to do it, even if it meant that they killed me right here in this carpark, this afternoon. I'd rather be killed in an honest fight in front of witnesses than be repeatedly gang raped and tortured to death by them, my body dumped somewhere afterwards like a piece of garbage.

I thought sadly of Dad and Jake, of Abe, Romi and Toni, of Miss Chooky and my other hens, and of my girlfriends. I was going to miss my life.

I sent a silent prayer up to my mother and Nana Fuller who had both died trying to protect me and to my friend Marcelle, who'd died in my place, telling them I'd see them soon. I only hoped that they all thought I'd acquitted myself in life to a standard worthy of their own sacrifices. I'd fought the Bycrafts like a demon because of them and I'd been a cat with nine lives, but it seemed that today all my lives were finally up. By God though, I was going out with a fight and maybe I'd be able to take one or two of those Bycraft bastards with me as I went.

The others had come to the door by then and I could hear sirens sounding in the distance. They would be too late to save me. I looked over and smiled sorrowfully at Fiona – she had always been a good friend to me. I nodded at Bum and exchanged a regretful glance with the Sarge, noting with some surprise the fierce expression of frustrated distress on his face. I'd never get to know him better now, would never know if I liked him or not, whether we made a good team. I winked at him, wishing I hadn't been so quick to judge him. He winked in return and turned his back on me, as if unable to face what was coming.

My phone rang. "Let me get that, Red," I begged. "It's Jakey. He promised he'd ring me after my testimony. It might be the last time I ever get to speak to him."

He hesitated.

"Please," I begged, hating myself.

He glanced at his relatives.

"Think of how upset he'll be not to speak to me for the last time," I cajoled desperately. "He'll never forgive you."

Everybody in the Bycraft family loved Jake unreservedly and Red was no different. Jake didn't backstab his relatives, didn't sleep with his brothers' partners, didn't cheat his family members and was always there if someone needed help. He'd helped Red out hundreds of times with no expectation (or hope) of return. He

was the family's golden boy and was one of the few of her children that Lola Bycraft genuinely loved. Red wouldn't want Jake to hate him. Nobody would.

"Make it quick," he relented, with wary reluctance.

"Can you undo the cuffs?"

"Not going to happen," he laughed, stroking my cheek with the back of his hand with unexpected gentleness. "Nice try though, lovely."

Karl let go of the handcuffs and Red covered me closely with his gun as I awkwardly reached into my pocket with my clamped hands, pulled out my ringing phone and answered.

"Hello Jakey," I said in my most loving voice, trying to control the tremble in my voice. "Yes, I'm with Red and the other guys. No, I'm okay. For now. I'm sure they'll look after me well." Red snorted with laughter. "I love you too, honey-boy . . . What? . . . Oh, okay."

I looked up at Red, holding out my phone. "Jakey wants to talk to you."

Biting back his impatience to get moving, Red took the phone and answered.

"What do you want, Jakey? Hello? . . . What? . . . Who the *fuck* is this?"

While he was momentarily distracted, I rammed my body into him as hard as I could, knocking him off his feet and the gun out of his hand. I made a run for it, kicking out viciously at Grae who tried to grab me and just dodging Al who slashed out at me with his knife. I vaulted and rolled over the bonnet of the nearest parked car, landing hard on my side, winded, my heart pounding.

"You fucking bitch! You *lied* to me!" Red screamed, jumping up and retrieving the gun, hurling the phone in my general direction, oddly upset by my deceit. The phone bounced off the car, frightening me with the noise and leaving a small dent behind in the roof. I hoped the Sarge had hung up before he copped that racket in his ear.

Duck-walking with some difficulty and keeping low, I edged along the side of the car before standing up and dashing quickly to one further away. Red shot wildly at me as I ran, rage twisting his face. He missed me by miles, the bullet smashing into the windscreen of a small white Barina, parked at the opposite end of the carpark from me. He was a terrible shot and there were going to be some pissed off car owners around after he was finished today.

The sirens grew closer. Al, glancing around him in panic, realised the futility of trying to recapture me and focussed on escaping instead. He jumped into the idling car and drove towards the exit, not even stopping to shut the driver's door or to wait for his brother and cousins. Red, enraged by the sight of that disloyalty, shot off a bullet with surprising accuracy for him, hitting Al in the arm. Al howled in pain and the car swerved dangerously, collecting Karl as it did, flinging him over the bonnet. Karl landed awkwardly on the bitumen and we all cringed when we heard the crunch of something breaking. Judging by the way he was lying on the ground, curled into a ball, screaming in agony, his leg sticking out at an odd angle, that something was Karl's leg.

The car kept swerving before it smashed into what could only be the judge's silver Mercedes.

Grae decided to cut his losses and made a run for it in the opposite direction. The Sarge pounded after him.

Red pulled a screaming Al from the car and threw him to the bitumen, jumping into the car himself, slamming the door. He reversed hard, almost running over his own injured brother as he did, and sped towards the carpark exit.

I made the mistake of standing up then and Red fired the rest of the clip in my

direction, forcing me to hit the ground again hastily. He threw the gun at me once it was empty. The last I saw of him was the car speeding through a red light, forcing a late model Nissan Patrol to veer wildly to avoid a collision with him and jump the curb, smashing into a small brick fence.

The Inspector and Bum raced out to cover Al and Karl, just in time for the backups to arrive. Fiona handed over to a couple of uniforms and sought me out where I was huddled on the bitumen, leaning up against a car, giving thanks to every deity I could name that I was still breathing after that madness. She hauled me to my feet, freed me from the handcuffs and hugged me fiercely.

"Jesus, Tessie! I thought we'd fucking lost you that time for good. Christ! Fuck! Look at me. I'm a fucking blubbering mess. Have you got a tissue on you?"

I dug in my pockets and found one for her. She quickly mopped her eyes dry of their lightly damp mist, not even enough moisture to form one full teardrop, her back to everyone else as she did.

Geez, I could teach her how to cry properly, I thought in amusement. A few moments later she was as dry-eyed and hard-faced as normal. As for me, for some inexplicable reason I felt like laughing, but I was afraid that if I started I might never stop. I probably needed some counselling after today, but I knew I wouldn't seek any. I hadn't ever before.

We walked back to the action. A couple of the uniforms had headed over to the distraught and tearful soccer mum who'd been driving the now-damaged Patrol, worrying about what her husband was going to say; two patrol cars had sped off after Red, lights flashing and sirens blaring; Al and Karl were being given some first aid before the paramedics arrived and the Sarge was dragging a struggling Grae back towards one of the remaining patrol cars.

"All's well that ends well, ma'am," I said light-heartedly, then without any warning, turned and threw up over the front tyre of the judge's smashed Mercedes.

"Aw, fucking hell, Tess! You spewed on my shoes," she grumbled, looking down at her expensive Italian leather before dragging me away from the mess.

"Sorry ma'am. That took me by surprise," I admitted, embarrassed, wiping my mouth on another tissue. I was weak and trembling after all of that. I needed to sit down.

"I guess anyone would want to chuck after having Red Bycraft licking you and biting you and feeling up your tit in public."

Queasiness rolled over me again. She called for one of the uniforms to go find my gun and he dutifully hunted it down and returned it to me.

When the ambulance arrived, the paramedics gave me the once over. They patched up the wound on my neck that Red had caused with his knife and repatched my knees that were weeping through the bandages after I had abused them so much. I waved them away after that because I already had so many bruises, bumps and cuts that the few extra I'd received today were hardly worth bothering about. They recommended that I take some of the strong painkillers that Dr Fenn had given me the other day as soon as possible. I assured them that was the first thing I planned on doing when I arrived home.

Exhausted and drained of all emotion, I leaned against the brick wall of the courthouse, closing my eyes. A gentle hand on my shoulder made my eyes fly open in alarm, my hand reaching for my empty gun. It was only the Sarge.

"Hey, Tess."

"Hey, Sarge," I said tiredly, body relaxing again.

"You okay?" He smiled as he said it to let me know he was joking.

"I'll live," I replied, a faint grimace the best expression I could muster.

"Come on, I'll take you back to the station. You don't need to hang around here. Everything's under control and you've done enough for one day."

We received Fiona's approval to scarper and he drove me back to the station.

I was subdued. "Red Bycraft escaped. I hope we find him soon, otherwise I'll be looking over my shoulder all the time."

He responded with certainty. "They'll find him."

I wished I shared his confidence. I leaned against the headrest, trying to find a comfortable position to accommodate my new neck wound. *Oh, forget it*, I told myself. There were no comfortable positions for me.

I pondered out loud. "How did Red get the knives? I know they're slack around here compared to the city, but surely the *prisoners* are searched before going into court at least?"

We both puzzled over that until the Sarge realised that there had probably been more than simple affection being transferred from Lola to Red when she'd hugged him so tightly and whispered into his ear. She'd obviously been pushing a knife up each of his sleeves. And it wouldn't have been difficult for her to smuggle the knives in – the Big Town courthouse wasn't the most vigilant in the state about security for the public.

"What a day," I sighed, closing my eyes.

He suddenly wrenched the steering wheel and pulled the car over to the side of the road, jumping out without any explanation. He strode into a small corner store. He wasn't gone long and when he returned he threw a packet of Tim Tams onto my lap and rejoined the traffic flow, without saying a word.

I was touched by the small gesture. He was proving himself to be a thoughtful man in a lot of ways.

"Thank you, Sarge," I said gratefully. "That's so . . . so nice. Thank you." I wanted to rip the packet open and stuff three of the delicious biscuits in my mouth again, but I forced myself to have the patience of a saint so I could savour them slowly back at the station. I clutched them possessively for the rest of the way.

Back at the watch house, I was trying to sneak my precious Tim Tams to the kitchen when the eagle-eyed Senior Sergeant waylaid me.

"What do you have there, Tessie? Looks like some Tim Tams."

Caught out, I glanced back at the Sarge and reluctantly laid the packet on the counter in front of Daisy. "A present from the Sarge," I told her. She flashed him a quick smile and snatched the Tim Tams, slipping them under the counter.

"I knew we'd finally get a gentleman here if we all prayed hard enough. Thank you, Sergeant Maguire."

"I actually bought them for Tess, but you're welcome, Senior Sergeant," he said, slightly acidic.

I liked the way he wasn't afraid to speak up for himself, even though he was the new guy and didn't yet have a firm grasp on the local personalities and politics. It was as if he didn't care about either, which was always refreshing in any working environment. He was a quietly self-confident man and I admired that.

"Sorry Tess. You've lost your Tim Tams for good now, but we can still find another treat for you around here," he commiserated, sliding his arm around my shoulder.

"What?" I asked, looking up at him in surprise, for once not minding his touch. I guess that meant that I was getting used to him.

"Graham Mundy being interviewed," he smiled down at me.

Chapter 30

We stood watching in the viewing room as Xavier questioned Graham. It was clear the interview had been going for some time, but also equally clear that Graham hadn't been cooperating one little bit. Judging by his strained features, Xavier had really had enough of Graham's relentless shouting and so had his duty lawyer, a very young man fresh out of university, who was clenching his eyes shut and rubbing his forehead as if he had a brain-splitting migraine. They were currently taking a small break from the interview while they all enjoyed a cup of tea, the recording equipment switched off. But Graham was letting his tea grow cold on the table while he continued ranting.

"Will I go in?" I asked the Sarge. "Graham doesn't like me and that might help."

"Only if you feel like it, Tess. You've already been through a lot today."

"Sarge, my Tim Tams were stolen from me. *By a cop!* Oh, you better believe that I feel like taking it out on someone. Why not my good friend Graham? He deserves it more than most."

I left him to burst into the interview room without any warning, startling everyone.

"Shut the hell up, Graham!" I shouted, even louder than him. He shut the hell up straight away, brown eyes huge in his pale face. The two other men cast me grateful glances for the tiny slice of silence, no matter how temporary.

"Not her. Anyone but her," Graham whined immediately to his lawyer. "I can't stand the sight of her."

"I can't stand the sight of you either, you little creep," I said stridently, thinking of my sore knees. I was the one with the grievance in this relationship, not him. "Why aren't you cooperating in this interview?"

He faltered, before continuing in a small voice, "I don't want to go to jail. I didn't hurt anyone."

"You spill your guts right now, Graham," I said banging my fist on the table, making him jump. "You've already told Sergeant Maguire and me a lot of damning things."

"You can't make me," he replied defiantly and started up the racket again. "It's a violation of my human rights to interrogate me like this! I want a lawyer . . ."

He paused, embarrassed, casting his eyes over to his lawyer who showed his annoyance at being so unappreciated by slamming his tea mug down hard on the table, flinging himself back in his seat and crossing his arms.

Time for a change in tack. I regarded Graham thoughtfully as I sat down at the table, before turning to Xavier. "Do you know what, Detective Sergeant Guylen? I think we're wrong. We're barking up the wrong tree completely."

"What do you mean, Senior Constable?" he asked with artful surprise.

"Look at him," I said, casting a scornful eye over Graham. "He's nothing but sound and wind. It's definitely not him who masterminded this swindle, after all. I mean, think about it." I leaned back in my chair. "Don't you think that Graham here is a bit . . . unevolved? I just don't see how it's possible for someone like him to be able to even *think* up a plan like this, let alone carry it out."

"True," said Xavier in a considered tone. "His mother, his uncle and his former neighbour have all told us that he's weak and rather stupid. That he would never amount to much. And they'd know better than anyone. I'd ask his girlfriend her

opinion . . .” Significant pause. “. . . but he doesn’t have one.”

“I’m not stupid, no matter what they say,” Graham denied sullenly, resenting the girlfriend crack.

“You know what I think?” I asked Xavier. “I reckon that it was Uncle Stanley responsible for the whole swindle and that Graham here was just his gofer. We know that Uncle Stanley is a very smart man. He’s a lawyer, after all. And what’s Graham? He’s only a paralegal. And probably not even properly qualified to do that.”

Graham grew defensive. “There’s nothing wrong with being a paralegal. There’re lots of smart people who are paralegals.” He glared at us. “And I’m going to do the course one day. I am. I really am.”

“Sure you are, Graham,” I said, in my most pitying tone. “One day. Maybe. But that would be a bit too much like hard work though, wouldn’t it? And that’s not really your kind of thing, is it?”

Xavier slammed his notebook closed. “You’re right, Senior Constable. We’re interviewing the wrong person. I’ve been wasting my time. Graham is just Stanley’s patsy. We need to talk to the brains of the operation, not the legs.” He shook his head in wonder. “You really have to admire Stanley’s intelligence for coming up with such a tight plan. It was almost genius.”

“He sure is a smart man,” I agreed. “You almost feel compelled to respect him for his clarity of thinking and planning.”

“*I’m* the brains, not Stanley,” shouted Graham, leaning forward on the desk, froths of saliva at the corner of his mouth. “*I’m* the one who found the other pieces of land, not Stanley. Uncle Stanley had no fucking idea about them, even though he’s been administering that fund for years! It was *me*, not him!”

Xavier turned his attention to Graham again, a disbelieving, almost kind expression on his face. “Don’t try to big-note yourself, Graham. It’s over. We’ve realised you’re not smart enough to be the main man.”

“But I *am* responsible,” he insisted, his eyes shifting between us compulsively. His lawyer laid a wary hand on his arm that Graham immediately shook free.

Xavier looked over at me. “What do you think, Senior Constable?”

I shook my head derisively. “Nah. He’s not smart enough. He can’t even tell the difference between an accelerator and a brake. Let’s go interview Stanley.”

We both stood up as if to leave.

Graham began to talk, trying to convince us that he was the criminal mastermind behind the swindle. His lawyer warned him to remain quiet, but he no longer wanted to and rudely told the man to shut up. It was as if a lifetime of being derided as hopeless and stupid swelled up uncontrollably inside him, no longer able to be contained, his strong need to prove himself overcoming his natural caution.

The interview started again formally and I sat back not asking any questions because of my conflict of interest, leaving it all to Xavier. When Xavier asked beforehand, Graham’s lawyer waved his hand to indicate that he had no objections to me remaining in the room during the interview even though I’d eventually be a witness for the prosecution in his client’s trial. Being smart though, Xavier made him say it in the recording. I smiled at him in appreciation. I liked a careful partner. He smiled back with appealing charm. I smiled again. I liked a cute partner even more.

Everything spilled out of Graham in a tumble. He’d taken advantage of his Uncle Stanley’s illness to defraud Miss G, even admitting that he’d been considering it for years. After long, boring searches at the Titles Office for another

client, he'd discovered that there were huge tracts of land owned by the Greville family around Little Town that were unknown to anyone, because when they were originally purchased, they'd been registered under the name Gravel, not Greville.

As someone who'd dabbled in family history research, I knew that transcription errors were common in the early days of the country because of varying levels of literacy and different accents in those providing the information and those recording it. What was surprising though was that throughout the generations nobody except Graham had cottoned onto these errors. Everyone had assumed that the empty paddocks in town, that in reality belonged to the Grevilles, were already government land, including the later Grevilles themselves. I suspected that Miss G's father, drunken old Mr Greville, had been more than careless with family documents and probably the proof of their ownership had been buried in other paperwork over the years, if not destroyed. *Someone really should go through all those boxes of documents in Miss G's library*, I thought, but I sure wasn't going to volunteer.

Graham admitted to desperately peeking on Miss G in the hopes of getting his hands on the title to that block of land on Mountain Road. He'd negotiated up to selling point with the Department of Defence on behalf of Traumleben Pty Ltd, but without the legal means to make the sale an actuality. He repeated his story about having a massive temper tantrum when he couldn't find the title, trashing Miss G's lounge room in the process, but his voice held no shame at all this time. In fact he giggled stupidly, proud of himself, while he told us. I stiffened in anger, about to say something cutting, only to feel Xavier's fingers tapping my hand under the table. I gave him an imperceptible nod, appreciating the warning not to speak.

Graham continued his stream of confessions. He admitted to wanting to get his hands on Miss G's diaries, having heard her discuss them with Uncle Stanley on a number of occasions. He then admitted peeking on Mrs Villiers as a red herring and to leaving the footprints under her window to be obvious about it, bragging this time that it was his idea, not Uncle Stanley's as he'd previously told the Sarge and me. He also confessed to finding the suitcase of money in Miss G's garden shed where he'd hidden on the first Friday night I'd turned up to search her yard. He could hardly believe his good luck, he smirked. I shook my head in disgust at his greed. Finding a cool hundred grand would have been enough for most people. Not Graham though. He'd stashed the suitcase himself in the rickety shelter where it had later been found by Valmae Kilroy on the vacant 'government' land that, he admitted, was in fact even more unknown Greville land.

He further owned up to the safe-cracking in our office, after watching in frustration as Valmae removed his stash, showing his first streak of real emotion in the whole interview by expressing the deep aggravation he'd felt when he discovered that the safe was empty. He admitted to spying on me, hoping that I had either the money or the diaries at my home. Finally, he admitted to setting up Traumleben Pty Ltd using his incapacitated father as a front. He boasted the whole time he confessed, particularly about fooling the Sarge and me with his naive nephew act. I squirmed with discomfort as Xavier gallantly tried to gloss over that failure in the recorded interview.

When Graham had finished talking, exhausted, and had been taken back to the holding cell, Xavier and I congratulated ourselves on the successful interview.

"I'd be happy to partner with you any day, Tess," he said. "You should think about ditching the uniform for the glamorous life of being a Watling Bay detective. I'm sure the Inspector would take you in a flash."

I knew she would because she'd offered before, but at that moment I noticed the Sarge waiting for me, sitting patiently among the hustle and noise of the watch house, checking his text messages. He glanced up expectantly, shoving his phone into his pocket as we came out and jumped to his feet. I gave him two thumbs up and he gave me a lovely, sincerely pleased smile in response. I looked up at Xavier and not without a lot of regret, I'll be honest.

"Thanks anyway, Mr X, but I think I'll stay with my little town for a bit longer. I have a new partner to break in and he's going to keep me busy for a while."

"Shame," he said, smiling. "I think we could have a lot of fun together, Tess." His expression as he said that made me think he wasn't only talking about work. I appreciated the compliment, considering how awful I looked at the moment. In return, I smiled back at him and without another word, abandoned him for the Sarge.

"Let's turn off our phones and get the hell out of this place," he suggested.

It sounded like a great idea to me, but the Inspector arrived in a storm of anger just as we were leaving, everyone nearby dodging and ducking to avoid her attention. She honed in on the Sarge and me straight away. When I dared to ask her if they'd had any luck recapturing Red, she shook her head in frustration and assured me it would only be a matter of time before he was tracked down. But she said it in such a tone that I felt sorry for everyone involved in the pursuit who hadn't delivered a hogtied Red to her office that afternoon. And on a personal note, I wouldn't be able to rest easy until he was behind bars again. There was general consensus that he was the one Bycraft we'd all prefer to be safely locked away. He was crafty, enterprising, dangerous and recklessly bold. Just like his ancestor, Mountain Ted.

Fiona wanted me to stay to be interviewed over the court incident, but I'd really had enough for one day and wanted nothing more than to go home. Promising her that I'd return tomorrow to be interviewed, the Sarge and I escaped back to Little Town.

In the car, I glanced at him with heartfelt gratitude and admiration. He'd risen in my estimation by immeasurable amounts today. "That was great thinking to ring me on my phone, Sarge. It gave me the distraction I needed to escape. Impressive teamwork." I was a little teary as I said that, thinking of what might have been. Blinking furiously, I shifted my eyes to the window, barely taking in the bland view of endless paddocks.

He reached over to pat my hand, not missing the emotion in my voice. "You're the smart one though, for pretending the call was from Jake. And to hand the phone to Red Bycraft. That was even better thinking, Tess. It made him relax his guard. And I agree with what you said. Impressive teamwork today."

I pulled a self-deprecating face. "Not so impressive though when you think about how easily Graham Mundy fooled us."

"True," he admitted. "But he's an interesting mix of big criminal thinking and frightened, awkward personality. I'm still struggling to imagine him as a criminal mastermind. Look how easy it was for you and X to manipulate him into confessing. That's not a mature mind."

When we returned to the station, I followed the Sarge, wearily limping up the stairs, my only thought to take as many painkillers as the doctor allowed. But when I reached the door of the back room, I stopped in absolute shock. Sitting proudly on top of each of our desks was a brand new, shiny, latest model computer, the ancient printer replaced with a new combined printer/photocopier/scanner. I turned to him,

my eyes wide with amazement, mouth even wider, to find him gazing at me, arms crossed, with a self-satisfied smile on his lips.

“Sarge! Where did these come from? How did you manage to get them? Where did you find the money?” I asked breathlessly, sitting down in front of mine and running my hands over it lovingly before turning it on. It loaded up instantaneously.

“A word in the right ear can make all the difference,” he replied enigmatically.

I spent a happy half-hour playing with my new computer, and then, even though I was exhausted, did some real work, knocking off a few reports, shortening my ‘to do’ list. I watched in awe as the paper glided obediently and silently from the new printer. It was becoming dark when I decided I’d done enough for the day, pushing back my chair and stretching painfully.

“I suppose I’ll be back in court next week for the committal hearings for the new charges against the three Bycrafts and for Graham as well,” I complained. “I barely get to spend any time in Little Town anymore. They should have a mobile courtroom that comes here every week, just for me.”

He smiled at that. “Never mind. Perhaps we’ll head into a quiet patch in town for a while.”

I snorted in disbelief. “There’s a whole town full of Bycrafts out there just looking for mischief, Sarge.”

“Tess . . .” he began, uncharacteristically hesitant. “Things have been very stressful since I arrived and I don’t feel as though we got off to a good start together.”

I gazed at him questioningly. I didn’t think we had either. Especially when our relationship had begun with me trying to arrest him.

“It’s Friday night and you’ve had a hell of a week and a real shit of a day. I’d like to cook you dinner. It’s not much of a consolation but . . .” He petered out, fidgeting uncomfortably, regarding me with something I thought was akin to hope. I think he was as nervous as he would be asking a woman out for the first time on a date, waiting for her answer.

But I was so surprised, I didn’t know what to say. My brain wasn’t giving any useful instructions to my mouth. I stared at him, silent.

He took that as rejection and turned away. “You’re probably busy anyway. Maybe another time?”

My brain finally kicked into gear. Jake was working, Dad had his girlfriend visiting tonight, Gretel was busy, Fiona was busy, Abe was busy and I had no other plans. I would only sit at home lounging in front of the TV or even worse, dutifully practicing the guitar. I remembered how much he’d helped me when I was being dragged by the car and that tormented expression on his face at the courthouse when we both thought I was going to die.

And then I considered that maybe he was a little lonely, stuck in this tiny town with no friends and nothing much to do. Perhaps he didn’t want to spend Friday night alone and I was the only person in town he knew well enough to invite over, even if our relationship was somewhat strained. Maybe this was his way of offering an olive branch? His way of cracking that thick ice sheet some more? And maybe he’d prefer to have a good working relationship with his partner every bit as much as I would?

I was suddenly ashamed that I hadn’t been more friendly and welcoming to him. Or even more understanding of his stiff, frosty manner. It couldn’t be easy moving to a small town, far from your fiancée, family and friends, only to find yourself partnered with someone with all the personal difficulties I had. Not to

mention a town full of Bycrafts.

"I'm not busy," I replied, finding my tongue at last, determined to be less judgemental about him and more patient in the future. "And that would be really nice, Sarge. Thanks so much."

He seemed remarkably pleased with my acceptance of his invitation, unable to control the smile that spread across his face and lit up his eyes, and I knew I'd done the right thing. But all he said was a cool, "Great."

"Provided that you can cook, of course?" I added teasingly.

"I'll let you be the judge of that," he smiled again. *He really had a nice smile when he chose to show it*, I thought yet again. It completely transformed his face.

"I'm going home to shower and change. I'll see you up at your place later. And there better be some very nice wine involved," I threw to him over my shoulder, heading for the door. I was excited at the prospect of a dinner that I didn't have to cook myself.

He was busy flicking through his paperwork, his tone casual. "There will be a glass of a talented red for you, I promise. Any time is good for me. See you then."

Dad's girlfriend, Adele, was staying over at our place that night and I think they were both relieved when I told them that I was going out, looking forward to spending more time alone together. I sat with them for a while, sharing the day's events. Both of them fussed gratifyingly over my new injuries, before I left them to take a shower and dress for dinner.

I tried to shower without getting my knee bandages wet, which is quite difficult, let me tell you that for free. Knees stubbornly want to get in the way.

I wasn't sure what to wear for dinner so I compromised, teaming black dress shorts (not wanting to wear jeans because of my knees) with a beautiful floaty flowery top and some nice, moderately-heeled sandals. The shorts showcased my leg bruises from the Bycraft kicking with spectacular effect, but I was struggling to find a part of my body that wasn't bruised.

I applied some light makeup, pulling a face in the mirror at my injuries, brushed my hair out until it fell softly around my shoulders and added a quick spray of my favourite perfume before I deemed I was ready. I examined myself critically in the mirror, not happy with my reflection. There was no doubt about it – I was an absolute fright-fest. I shouldn't be going out in public. I should instead be hiding in my wardrobe for a couple of weeks so I didn't frighten the local kiddies. I hoped it didn't put the Sarge off his dinner staring at me across the table from him while he ate.

It seemed wrong, but I carefully strapped my knife to my thigh as I always did. I had usually found it a mood-killer when I'd been dating, which I guess was why I'd only had three boyfriends in my life, including Abe and Jake. Not that this was a date or anything, I reminded myself with a self-conscious laugh. God, what a thought! Dating my own sergeant! That would just be so . . . wrong.

Shouting out goodbye and promising not to be too late as if I was still sixteen, I drove to the Sarge's house, singing to myself all the way. It felt good to be alive, regardless of the pain that mere breathing, let alone singing, brought on.

He was on the phone when I knocked on his front door. He ushered me into the lounge room, his warm hand on my back as he continued to speak into the receiver. He left the room, the phone clamped to his ear, listening. While he was busy, I took the chance to re-examine his photographs. Now that I knew that the silver-haired man with his mother in the engagement photo was his stepfather, I would bet that the other photo of him and an older man was of his father because they looked so

alike. *Detective Fuller, here you come*, I teased myself before browsing the city newspaper that he'd left lying on the coffee table, flipping disinterestedly through news and gossip about the rich and famous.

I didn't mean to listen in on his phone conversation, but he wasn't exactly the most softly spoken man I'd ever met and his voice was raised as well. Plus, I've already admitted that I am a very nosy person, so I was kind of craning an ear, I'll admit.

"I'm not trying to stop you having fun and I'm not trying to ruin your life, Melissa," he snapped impatiently through clenched teeth as if they'd had this argument a hundred times before. "I just want to know when you're coming home. It's a simple question. Why can't you give me a simple answer? I want to fix a date and start planning the wedding. Surely that's not too much to ask of you?"

He listened for a while. "Oh, for God's sake! I never said that. This place isn't that bad. You're putting words in my mouth again . . . Stop being so bloody melodramatic all the time." He listened again. "I don't want to go over all that again . . . Okay, have it your own way. You usually do. I'll talk to you later."

Wow! No "I love you" or "I miss you" from either of them it seemed. A relationship in trouble? That might explain his decision to move to Little Town and maybe even his moodiness since he'd arrived.

He returned to the lounge room, valiantly rearranging his features from annoyance to hospitality. "Sorry about leaving you alone, Tess."

"Don't worry about it," I dismissed easily, slightly guilty at my eavesdropping. "Now, can I help you do anything for dinner?"

"You can come into the kitchen and keep me company while I cook," he insisted, so I did. We chatted casually while he oiled and seasoned the steaks he was going to grill and checked on the baked potatoes in the oven. I chipped in by slicing up the salad vegetables for him, grabbing whatever I fancied from his fridge.

My phone rang, vibrating in the pocket of my shorts and I put my knife down to answer.

"What are you doing at Maguire's place?" Jake wanted to know, a distinct edge to his voice.

"How do you know that I'm here?" If he wasn't going to bother saying hello, then I wasn't going to either.

"Not because you told me," he replied tartly.

I countered coolly, "I wasn't aware I had to tell you everything that I did."

"You do when it involves another man."

"The Sarge offered to make me dinner after a bloody horrible day. I accepted. End of story."

"I told you that I don't want you getting too friendly with him."

"Jake, don't you start on that again," I warned in a low hiss. I would not be dictated to by a man. Especially a Bycraft man.

"I shouldn't have to rely on my brother to tell me what my girlfriend is up to when I'm not around."

"I'm not 'up to' anything," I said crossly. "I'm just having dinner. And if you haven't got anything more important to discuss and don't even care enough to ask me just how craptacular my day was, I'm hanging up now."

He hung up first. I stormed over to the window and poked my head outside.

"*Piss off, Denny Bycraft!*" I shouted and was rewarded with the sound of him crashing through the shrubbery, his pounding footsteps retreating into the distance.

"Who the hell was that?" asked the Sarge, startled, running to the window and

peering out, tongs still in hand.

“My stalker. Denny Bycraft. Jake’s younger brother. He’s been obsessed with me since primary school. We were in the same grade together. He’s been my unwanted second shadow almost my whole life.”

He digested that information silently, shaking his head as he did. “I’ve never met a person like you before.”

“Is that good or bad, Sarge?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t decided yet. And please stop calling me Sarge when we’re not at work.”

“Sorry. Finn.” It still felt so strange calling him that. It was too intimate or something. I decided that I simply wouldn’t call him anything while we weren’t at work.

We prepped in silence for a while. Self-consciously, I noticed his eyes kept flicking down to my knife. If he’d been any other kind of man, I would have automatically assumed that he was checking out my legs, bruises and all.

“Do you really take that knife with you everywhere?” he finally asked, his curiosity overwhelming him.

“Yes. I told you before that I always carry it, except when I’m in uniform and have my gun instead.” I continued to chop passionately but carelessly. Every finger was in danger. His knives were Japanese-crafted, exquisite and exceptionally sharp. Not to mention hideously expensive, well beyond my budget, but not my dreams.

“Even here at my house, when you’re with another cop? Relaxing?”

“I have to drive here and back by myself, and there’s the walking to and from my house and your house to my Land Rover as well.” Chop, chop, chop, my hands sliced in agitation. I hated explaining my complicated life.

“Things are that unsafe for you in this place?”

I glanced up at him with a small laugh. “Do you really need to ask, after what’s happened this week?”

He absorbed that. “How long have you been carrying it for?”

I sighed at his inquisitiveness and put my knife down to face him. “Since I was competent enough to use it properly and not injure myself.”

“Have you ever needed to use it?”

“God, yes! How do you think Red Bycraft got that scar on his neck?” I wasn’t going to answer any more questions. Throwing him a huge hint to drop the subject, I asked with blinding cheeriness, “So, what’s your favourite salad dressing recipe? I’ll make it for you.”

He regarded me thoughtfully for a moment and then mercifully changed the topic. “I should be asking you that. You’re the guest.”

“Okay, I’ll make my favourite,” I said, flashing him a brilliantly fake smile. I busied myself with lemon juice, olive oil, Dijon mustard, cracked pepper, salt and fresh thyme while he grilled the steaks. He had a well-stocked pantry for a man living by himself. I was impressed. If Jake had been in the same situation, I would have found a lifetime’s supply of two-minute noodles in the pantry, a freezer full of Lean Cuisine meals and a fridge full of beer.

“Sounds as though it’s an evening for difficult partners?” he smiled wryly over his shoulder as he closed the grill. He must have known that I could overhear his conversation with Melissa, just as he was privy to mine with Jake.

“Jake’s being ridiculously possessive, which is not like him,” I confessed unwillingly.

“Melissa doesn’t want to come home,” he admitted.

I looked over at him and sympathised. “Oh, that’s tough for you.”

“Yep.” Said curtly and unemotionally. “She was supposed to return at Christmas so we could move here together. But here we are – two months later and no sign of her coming home.”

“She doesn’t want to move here?” I guessed.

He shook his head. “That’s a definite no. She’s a city person.” He shot me a fleeting look. “She didn’t want me to apply for a transfer in the first place. We had a few arguments about it. I’m trying to convince her that it’s not forever.”

“She’ll probably come around to the idea eventually,” I consoled, not having any idea if that was likely or not. I couldn’t imagine not being one hundred per cent supportive of my fiancé’s career, if I ever found myself in the happy situation of having one.

We chatted over dinner, enjoying a very tasty glass of red wine as promised. I asked him what drew him to the police force and once again he answered readily. He told me that he’d completed a law degree and had articulated for a big city practice on graduation, hating every second of it. The minute he was admitted as a legal practitioner, he decided to chuck it all in and apply to the police academy instead, wanting a career more oriented to public service than moneymaking. He admitted that his mother had been less than thrilled at his decision to become a cop, thinking that he would be wasting his degree and worried for his safety, so he never discussed the ugly side of his job with her. He’d considered becoming a police prosecutor to use his legal training, but enjoyed being a general duties cop much more than he’d ever expected and was happy to continue as one for the time being.

Casually he ground more pepper over his potato and asked, “You ever think about going to university, Tess? It could really enhance your career.”

I froze, a forkful of salad halfway to my mouth and smiled at him with unmistakable coolness.

“Oh shit,” he said regretfully, thumping the pepper grinder down carelessly on the table. “I’ve done it again, haven’t I?”

I nodded slowly, munching on the salad with deliberateness, holding his eyes the whole time.

“Okay, don’t hold back. Give it to me,” he prompted, palms flat on the table, elbows out, as if bracing himself. “You’re a Rhodes’ Scholar with six PhDs who’s written eighteen acclaimed textbooks on modern policing, right?”

“Right,” I giggled, forking up some more salad. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

“I promise I won’t, Dr Professor Fuller.”

“That’s Dr Professor Senior Constable Fuller to you.”

He smiled, with a nice touch of humbleness. “What did you study?”

I told him that I had a degree in justice studies and a master’s degree in criminology that I’d completed part-time in my first few years working in Benara. He pulled a comically hangdog face and palm-smacked his forehead, which made me giggle again. He asked me which university I’d attended. Judging by the surprise on his face when I told him we’d gone to the same university (although I’d calculated that he would have already graduated by the time I started), I gathered he’d automatically taken for granted that I’d gone to one of the state’s regional universities and not the more academically prestigious sandstone university situated in the city. I let it go though. He was learning not to presume things about me and that was the main thing.

We cleared up the dishes and afterwards settled down on his expensive leather lounge to chat generally for a while, Norah Jones’ lovely voice wafting softly from

his stereo. I discovered that we had very divergent tastes in music. He seemed to prefer smooth female soul singers, where I tended more towards alternative and punk-type bands, the louder the better, as did Jake. But this evening I leaned against the back of his soft lounge, closed my eyes and enjoyed the mature sophisticated calmness of his music.

We did have similar tastes in movies though, both preferring comedies and exciting action and thriller films, sharing an allergy to rom coms and slasher movies, and that made it easier to talk to him. I began to unwind and I was glad that I'd agreed to eat with him, finding him much more likeable when he relaxed. Maybe we could even become friends one day?

While he changed the CD, I disappeared to the Land Rover and came back, carrying a large leather-bound book. He raised his eyebrows in curiosity. I placed it on the coffee table nervously. I'd only ever shown a few people this book before and this was always a big step for me. I took a deep breath.

"When I thought that the Bycrafts were going to kill me today, I saw on your face that you genuinely cared about what was going to happen to me," I began.

He was surprised and offended by that statement in equal measures. "Of course I did! Tess! Why would you even say such a thing?"

I was instantly defensive, shrinking back. "I didn't know that. You've kind of left me feeling that you don't like me much and –"

"I'm sorry if I gave you that impression, because I do like you," he said, butting in quietly. "I'm looking forward to working with you. I think we'll make a great team." He smiled. "When we sort out a few teething problems, like your allergy to paperwork. And your inability to not have something calamitous happening to you every five minutes."

I smiled faintly in response. It *had* been a hell of a first week for us. But his comment that we'd be a good team was the right thing to say, and gave me more confidence to continue. I inhaled another huge breath of fresh air. "In that carpark today, I regretted that I hadn't got to know you better and that I'd been so reluctant to share information about myself with you," I told him, so honest that it was verging on the point of physical pain for me. "So, in the interests of advancing our partnership, I'm going to share something with you that's very personal and very private. I haven't shown many people before. Just Dad, Nana Fuller, Fiona and her husband, my best friend Marianne, Abe and . . . and someone else."

"Not Jake?"

I paused for a moment, before deciding to be completely honest. "No, not Jake. He's not good with negative things. This would really freak him out. And he's a Bycraft, so I never would show him anyway." I pushed it closer to him. "I'm hoping that perhaps it might help you understand me and Little Town better. At the least you'll appreciate why I always carry my knife with me."

He didn't take it, so I picked up the book and handed it to him, a desperately vulnerable sensation in my stomach as I did. I wanted to throw up, my usual response to every stressful situation in my life. Although he had no way of knowing, once before I'd let a man get close enough to me to view this book. He had ultimately proven himself unworthy of my trust and I was so afraid of repeating that experience that I almost snatched the book away from the Sarge before he even had the chance to touch it.

"Tess? What is it?" he asked, taking it from me carefully, eyes glued to mine.

"It's my scrapbook. It's a whole history of the Fuller-Bycraft situation right back to beginnings of Little Town. It's mostly newspaper clippings, but there are

crime scene photos, police and autopsy reports and court transcripts in there as well. Any information I could gather, really. There's a lot of material about my mother." And my mind flashed to that awful photo of her huddled against the back door in a pool of her own blood, a broken knife sticking out of her back, the image that haunted me in my sleep. "And Nana Fuller. And Abe's wife, Marcelle. But lots of other stuff as well. Some of it's about me."

He placed it gently on the coffee table and opened it up. I jabbed my finger on the first clipping, a printout of a scanned version of the *Wattling Bay Messenger* from 1888.

"I think this is where it all started – with the murder of my ancestor Elizabeth Fuller by Ned Bycraft. If you read it, Ned's brother is threatening a 'reckoning' on the Fuller family. Now, I've thought about this a lot and I think that the Bycrafts are still carrying out that reckoning, all these years later. Except they don't know anymore why they hate the Fullers. It's just something that's ingrained in them from generation to generation. I tested Jakey one day and he knew nothing about any of his ancestors except for Mountain Ted, the bushranger, and he wasn't interested in knowing about them either. The Bycrafts are simply not the type of people to be interested in the past, but it has a strong hold on them anyway."

He kept his eyes on me the whole time I spoke, but I thought I could see a hint of uneasiness in them.

I shut up and let him casually flip through my scrapbook for five minutes, as the voice of another female singer who I didn't recognise, filled the room with beautiful melodies and her rich sultry voice. He read a few items as he turned the pages, glancing at some of the stomach-churning photos, his face growing increasingly grim.

"Tess," he said finally, stunned and appalled, closing the book with a decisive snap. He glanced up at me with an expression that was indescribable – a mix of pity, revulsion, distress and . . . even more pity? "Are you sure that this is a . . . er . . . um . . . *healthy* thing for you to do?"

I stared at my shoes in misery, trying to swallow the knot that had formed in my throat, not able to meet his eyes. I'd made a huge mistake giving it to him. Now he thought I was some kind of whacko. Well, even more of a whacko than he'd originally thought I was. And he was probably right. "I don't know. Maybe not. I haven't ever really thought about it, but it's never felt . . . crazy . . . to me to be doing it."

I gave a humourless laugh, giving him the full blast of my eyes. "I feel compelled to compile this morbid family history, I guess. I've discovered that all I want in life is the truth. I don't want lies or platitudes, just the cold unvarnished truth, no matter how unpalatable, and that's what this is. It's very confronting and overwhelming to see it all assembled, isn't it? Maybe it will be useful to someone one day. Maybe someone will write a book about it, or do a research study on the Bycrafts. Especially if something happens to me, because I'm the last of the Fullers. And I want someone to study them, because they're nowhere near to being a normal family. I need someone to figure them out."

I stalked around his lounge room, agitated, biting the nail on my right thumb. I'd already chewed all my other nails down to nothing waiting at the courthouse this afternoon. "I want other people to know that they're not normal. It's not *me*, it's *them*! I don't deserve what happens to me. None of the Fuller women have ever deserved what's happened to us."

"Tess, stop!" he demanded in a parade-ground voice. "You're sounding

completely . . .” He petered off tactfully, but I knew what his next word was going to be. *Crazy*. I hated that word because it cut too close to the truth.

But I halted instinctively at the sound of his voice and threw my eyes to him, remorseful again. I’d probably just scared him away from Little Town. The second I left his house tonight he’d be packing his belongings and fleeing in his cute little car all the way back to the city without even a restroom stopover, begging to be relieved of his nightmare country position and his creepy, ill-fated partner. I couldn’t blame him. What normal, sane person wouldn’t do the same?

“I’ll leave,” I decided, upset and angry with myself, on the verge of tears. I’d ruined the evening. As usual. I was hopeless at this sort of social stuff. I leaned down to pick up my scrapbook.

“No!” he insisted with heart-warming quickness, logging my suspiciously shiny eyes. He slammed his left hand down on the cover of the scrapbook to stop me taking it. “Come and sit down again.” He patted the lounge near him. I sat down. He stood up, took my scrapbook away to his office, quietly shut the door, poured me another glass of wine and turned up the soothing music. He sat next to me on the beautiful leather lounge and with one knee crossed over the other and his arm stretched out towards me on the backrest, head to one side, said, “So, we were talking movie characters. Who do you prefer – James Bond or Jason Bourne? And you know, I never realised before that they had the same initials. Do you think that’s deliberate?”

I stared at him in gratitude. I could have hugged him at that moment, but of course I refrained. It didn’t mean that he wouldn’t decamp during the night, but right now he was treating me like an ordinary person and not many people ever did that. I would never forget that little act of kindness from him no matter what happened between us.

In the middle of my long-winded explanation of why I far preferred Jason Bourne, my phone rang. I answered, listened and spoke briefly before hanging up.

“Sorry to break the mood, Sarge.”

“Tess, I told you not to call me Sarge when we’re not working,” he reminded me with more than a hint of irritation in his voice.

“Sorry Sarge, but we are now working again. I’ve just been informed of a head-on crash on the highway to the south of town. It’s a nasty one – a semi-trailer and two cars with probable fatalities. We better get going. They’ll need all the help they can get. It will take ages for the paramedics and Fire and Rescue from Big Town to get here.”

He stood up and sighed, pocketing his mobile and starting to close the windows. “We better rock and roll then, partner.”

“Sure thing, partner,” I smiled up at him as we headed to the patrol car together. As I buckled up and glanced over at his strong, reassuring profile, I sighed quietly to myself with relief. He wouldn’t be leaving Little Town tonight at least.

Epilogue

Miss G was reunited with her suitcase of money. She told me candidly that her mother had not only been a hoarder but a stingy miser as well, desperate to keep money away from her philandering husband. So hearing about the stash of money wasn’t the great surprise we’d expected it to be for her. She promptly and generously halved the fortune with Valmae and Gerry Kilroy, appreciating their honesty in handing it over and claiming with wry humour that she didn’t need that

much money at her time of life. Later, as I examined my bank balance with glum despair, I'd fleetingly wished she'd sent some of it my way too.

Stanley Murchison was currently wrangling with the government on her behalf for some compensation for her losses, arguing that the government bought her fraudulently sold land without undertaking proper due diligence. It promised to be a long, drawn-out legal battle though. And who knew if either of them would even live long enough to see it through to the end?

Unsurprisingly, the sale of the land on Mountain Road to the Defence Department fell through. But the government instead expressed immediate interest in buying the land next to the Kilroys (the land where the suitcase of money was found) for some kind of highly classified laboratory. I sincerely hope that it's not going to be for genetic experiments though. I don't want Little Town to turn into a place overrun by super-mutant Bycrafts, like the X-Men.

I couldn't understand why the Sarge laughed for ages when I shared that thought with him. I was serious.

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Graham Mundy was found guilty of three counts of stealing with intent, one count of breaking and entering and one count of serious assault of a police officer (Pinky didn't bother pursuing the coffee scalding incident). He was sentenced to sixteen years imprisonment all up.

During the trial Graham wept copiously, looking about as dangerous as a soft fluffy toy in the defendant's seat, or so said Fiona. That made me almost feel sorry for him, but I quickly changed my mind when she went on to tell me how he had stubbornly refused to confess how much of the ill-gotten cash from the sales remained and where he'd stashed it, accusing the judge loudly of violating his human rights. I think that tirade earned him an extra year in prison from the livid, stone-faced judge, who was well known for her high profile and very vocal support of Amnesty International. When the trial was finished, Mr Murchison took Miss G, the Sarge and me out to lunch at one of Big Town's nicest restaurants where the four of us complained through four courses of gourmet bliss about the lightness of Graham's sentence. Well, they did. I was too busy stuffing my face with the expensive, delicious food to speak much at all. Heaven!

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Dorrie Lebutt was given a one year sentence for reckless driving occasioning bodily harm. It was wholly converted into a two year good behaviour bond because of her small children and the fact that she was pregnant again with Rick Bycraft's baby (or maybe it was Mark's?). Her attitude towards me hasn't changed one little bit when we cross paths in town. I hadn't expected it to.

~~~~~

Karl, Al and Grae Bycraft were each found guilty of serious assault of a police officer and escape from lawful custody and sentenced to two seven-year terms of imprisonment, to be served concurrently. I was glad to see the back of them even if it was just for seven years. Three Bycrafts, including Lola, were arrested for public disorder at their sentencing hearing. On my day off, I drove all the way to Big Town

to the watch house where Lola was sitting in a holding cell going crazy without cigarettes. Just to annoy her, I walked back and forth in front of her cell, asking her if she wanted a smoko. She called me names that I'd never even heard before and then tried repeatedly to spit on me. That behaviour drew the full, frightening wrath of Daisy down on her. It was a great afternoon. I wished I'd brought a camera.



My whole team managed to complete the fun run, although disappointingly but understandably, I did a time that was far from my personal best. It was wonderful to have Jake cheering me on as I staggered, stiff-legged still, the last few hundred metres over the finishing line, straight into his arms. He picked me up and swung me around and around in celebration, making me squeal with laughter even though I was limp with exhaustion and dripping with sweat. I was the envy of every woman in a fifty metre radius.

We all had a great weekend in the city. That Saturday lunchtime, after the fun run, when I'd showered and changed, Jake and I had lunch with my best friend, Marianne, and her lovely husband and three cute kids. That always had the potential to be a little awkward because as a teenager, Marianne had slept with Jake a number of times. But if I had refused to remain friends with any of my schoolmates who had slept with Jake, I would have been very lonely indeed.

That Saturday night, all of us (except Dad and Adele who volunteered to stay behind at the hotel to entertain Romi, Toni and Marianne's kids), hit a nearby nightclub where we really let our hair down. Abe hooked up with Jenny from my running team and they are now dating even though she lives and works in Big Town. Jake and I drank too much, danced too much (even if I did it badly!) and stayed up way too late, but God we had a good time, especially back in the hotel room afterwards where we made good use of the spa bath and the king-sized bed . . . Luckily for us, Adele drove us home on the Sunday, because we spent the entire seven hour drive back to Little Town asleep in the back seat, leaning against each other, trying to conquer our hangovers.



Surprisingly, the Sarge didn't escape from Little Town the first chance that presented, but instead returned my scrapbook to me a week after I left it at his place. As he handed it over, he fixed me with those magnificent eyes, but all he said was that he was glad he had come to Little Town. It was so completely the opposite of what I had expected him to say that I'm still puzzling over what he meant with those words.

We are steadily progressing our relationship, growing closer each week, much to Jake's displeasure. We spend a lot of time together, even off-duty, and I'm discovering many things about him that I really like the better I get to know him. And then there are other things I'll probably never get used to. He continues to surprise me with little improvements to the station – having the stubborn windows fixed, finding some money to hire a cleaner once a week, repairing the leaking roof. He's talking a lot lately of having a whole new station built, complete with a proper watch house and getting a couple more cops on the team. I'm not sure if he's just dreaming or has some solid plans. I still don't know how he manages to achieve these things, but I'm determined to find out one day soon.

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Melissa remains overseas, no date of return decided yet.

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My chickens are thriving in their new home. I'm even thinking of buying a few more – maybe even a rooster. The Sarge laughed so much when I told him that, I leaned over in the patrol car and thumped him hard on his arm. He deserved it.

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I'm slowly making my way through the Tim Tams, but every time I finish a packet, another one appears in its place. It's a little spooky.

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Denny Bycraft still shadows me everywhere I go. I continue to ignore him.

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Red Bycraft hasn't been recaptured yet. He remains free, waiting out there for me somewhere. He's been sighted right here in Little Town on a number of occasions and I know beyond any doubt that his family are sheltering him. The Sarge and I have tried to force Sharnee to tell us whether she's seen him or not, but she refuses to speak to us, obviously terrified of the consequences if she does. The thought of him never quite leaves the back of my mind. I dream about him all the time and I don't know what will happen when I meet him again. I can only hope that I'm well prepared and armed when I do.

But I guess that's another story altogether.

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#### **About the author:**

JD Nixon lives in Queensland, Australia writing and editing for a living during the day, but by night she lets a wild imagination run free.

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