



SUZANNE
FLEMING

THE ART DEALER

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THE ART DEALER

SYNOPSIS: Mix six priceless works of art, a missing dealer, some serious insurance fraud and then throw in a few smart investigators, and what do you get? A fast paced page turner that forces you to take notice.

Billionaire, Sam Richards, had no trouble outbidding all the other hopefuls when six masterpieces went under the **Z** Block gallery hammer. A few weeks later the paintings were stolen from the Richards mansion. Insurance-fraud is the hot-gossip reverberating throughout the art world.

Detective Alexandra Papadopoulos defies the rulebook when she goes solo to talk to an informer in a part of town where the local currency is gang violence; not precious works of art.

Papadopoulos discovers the paintings are on Sam Richards's yacht and bound for his South Pacific getaway island.

Senior Sergeant, Tony Vascelli and Senior Detective, Mark Newman want to know who set the firebomb in the cargo wharf precinct. And who was the unidentified male seen in the running from the area.

Papadopoulos causes further problems for the team when she reveals the missing Art Dealer was once her long-time lover.

The action driven plot is a race against time to overcome dangerous odds.

FOR YOU DENIS.

Thank you for the tuition hours you so generously gave me and for the gift of friendship you brought to my door.

"The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the true source of art, science, and friendship."

Albert Einstein

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CHAPTER ONE

Walking down a dark alley, in a neighbourhood that specialised in drug deals negotiated by under-age kids, pecking-order turf wars, budget-rentals and low-grade business operations, had never been Alexandra's idea of fun. Doing it alone at midnight made her hypersensitive to sound and movement.

Pushing away thoughts of abandoning the exercise, Alex reminded herself that she'd made a promise. She didn't break promises.

She'd given her word his meet-up terms would be respected. He'd made them clear; "come alone, ditch the hardware, tell no-one where you're going and don't record the meeting in the investigation register."

A fleeting vision of her boss made her shiver. She knew Senior Sergeant Tony Vascelli would not gold-star her back-alley rendezvous.

Vascelli's safety policy was non-negotiable. Risk-taking heroics did not impress him and flying-

solo was off limits. Case-solving strategies were his responsibility and he insisted the team members exercised extreme caution; regardless of the environment they worked in. Alex knew disregarding orders put Vascelli in a very bad mood.

She shivered again and her bone-marrow temperature dived towards sub-zero. She felt badly about blatantly disregarding her boss's orders, but instead of aborting the mission, she tightened the belt of her long woollen coat and strode over to the parked vehicle.

Alexandra gripped the handle, wrenched open the door and slid into the seat beside the driver. "Hello Marcus. It's been a long time." She said softly. "What's so important that it comes with conditions?" She glared at him. "Conditions that could cost me my job."

"No one is holding a gun to your head cupcake. You're a big girl. I'm sure you're capable of making your own decisions about who you'll meet up with." Marcus smiled at her, then turned the ignition key. "Relax Ally, when you tell Vascelli your story, he'll probably promote you."

‘Yeah right. Vascelli doesn’t reward officers who play hero. He busts their balls.’

Marcus laughed, “Good thing you’re female then, hey?” Alexandra didn’t respond, but a smile tugged at her the corners of her mouth.

“So where are we going?”

“To the boat ramp, cupcake.” He stressed the last word because he knew it drove her crazy.

“You know you’re a shit don’t you?” Alexandra spat the words through clenched teeth.

“What’s wrong with cupcake? It’s a helluva lot friendlier than Senior Detective Papadopoulos.” Marcus glanced sideways. He faked the injured look. “Sorry Ally, the title makes me nervous.” He sounded serious. “Your stripes just don’t fit into our family history book.”

Alexandra didn’t respond. Mixed emotions flooded her heart and a memory king-tide pounded her brain. For the past five years, she had been emotionally steady. Her life was predictable. Just the way she liked it.

Sitting beside Marcus messed with her head. And her heart. She was a good cop and the fact she was deliberately throwing out the rulebook confused her. A familiar tingle in her blood scared her.

Twenty minutes later Marcus swung the Jeep, Grand Cherokee, into the car park that overlooked the Sea Spray Marina. A full moon danced on the calm water, creating silhouettes of the upsized-price-tag vessels that swayed gently in their moorings.

“We should walk down.” Marcus said quietly, “Not a good idea to spook the natives. Their boss pays them to play tough and scare off sightseers.”

Alex leaned forward to study the scene below. The marina appeared deserted; but looks can be deceiving, she thought. “Before we go down there, tell me exactly what you expect to find?” she said. “Don’t crap me Marcus. If you know something that might impact on the case I’m working on, tell me now.” Her eyes locked on to his, “This is not a game Marcus. It’s serious shit. People could end up dead.”

“Come on Ally. I’ve already told you I’ve seen the paintings. Spotting the difference between a genuine Van Gogh and a fake is what I do.”

Marcus exhaled heavily. His frustration was showing. “Sam Richards docked here two weeks ago. I saw the paintings in his private stateroom. There are six masterpieces down there on his yacht.” Marcus said, pointing towards the marina. “They’re the ones he bought at the auction.” He continued, “The ones he claims were stolen from his Boston mansion.”

“I understand your story Marcus. What I don’t get, is how the hell you managed to score an invite to tour the yacht. Surely if Richards is trying to scam his insurance company he wouldn’t want people snooping around his staterooms.”

Marcus sucked his lower lip and nodded. “OK, so I took a few liberties when I attended one of Sam’s famous champagne bashes.” His eyes pleaded with her, “Trust me Ally. I saw them and they are the real deal.”

“Come on Marc, I’m not going down there until you tell me everything.” Marcus pushed his frame back in the seat and rested his hands on the steering wheel. Alex studied him hard and waited.

“Two years ago I bought a Day-Sailer. She’s berthed here and I take her out most weekends.”

Marcus glanced at Alex then continued, “I’ve made some yachtie friends Ally. We spend time together.”

“So you know Sam Richards. He’s one of your yachting pals.” Alex said with attitude. Marcus ignored her tone. He was still unpacking the emotional surge he felt when she called him Marc. It took him back to the good days and he realized how much he missed her. It was hard work to suppress the desire to run his fingers along the side of her face. Old habits die hard.

Alexandra lowered her voice, “So what’s the game plan?”

“We’re going to go down to Sam’s yacht and we’re going to take a long hard look at the paintings.”

“Great idea. We just knock on good old Sam’s door and ask him for a viewing hey?” She shook her head and added, “He’ll be thrilled to be dragged out of bed at one a.m. by a couple of strangers.” Alex rolled her eyes, “Oh sorry. I forgot you two are pals. Maybe he’ll pop his best champagne for us.”

“Richards isn’t on the boat. A couple of his security stooges take care of the shop while he’s on shore.”

“Come on Marc, this is a dumb idea. If you’re certain the paintings are on board, then let me do it by the book. I’ll get a search warrant and we’ll check the vessel out properly. Sneaking around like a couple of boy scouts won’t get us anywhere.”

She held his gaze, “Please Marc, let’s do this right. We do it properly and we nab the bastard. If he is pulling an insurance scam it will be easy to stitch him up.”

“Don’t let the media version of Sam Richards blind you Ally. He can be one mean character and he has powerful friends. My guess is that he’s taking the paintings overseas, where they’ll end up on the black-market. Moving them by yacht is a smart way to stay under the custom’s radar.”

“Don’t do it like this Marcus. It will only jeopardise the case.” Alex pleaded. “We don’t have to do it alone.”

“Richards has already logged a departure plan with the local harbour master. He’s moving out at sun-up.”

“All the more reason for us to do it right Marc.” She looked worried. “Once he’s in international waters he’ll be home free.”

“Not if we can get the goods on him before he leaves.” Marc gave her a reassuring smile, “We get on board, take a few date stamped photos of the paintings, then we make it official.” He opened the door quietly, “Come on Ally, we’re wasting valuable time sitting here arguing. Let’s just do it.”

Against her better judgment, Alexandra opened her door and walked to the front of the vehicle. She looked down at the marina and studied the vessel Marcus had pointed out earlier. Because of its ostentatious size it stood out like a skyscraper in a suburban neighbourhood.

Lights were shining through two lower deck portholes, but the rest of the vessel was in darkness. The moon made it easy to see the boat, but Alex knew it would also make an unannounced visit difficult. She inhaled deeply, pushed her shoulders back and said, “OK. Lead the way superman.”

CHAPTER TWO

Senior Sergeant, Tony Vascelli and Senior Detective Mark Newman scanned the stack of files on the desk. They were looking for anything that might help them create a shortlist of burglary suspects.

Art was a special commodity. It was an exclusive market that street thugs didn't muscle in on. Whoever did the heist had to know the product, and their way around the art world. The thieves knew exactly what they were lifting. They probably had a solid reputation for handling quality merchandise with respect and care.

“Our man had to know enough about the stuff to identify the exact paintings to lift.” Newman said with conviction. “And he needed the right equipment to transport them safely to wherever he's hiding them. Paintings have to be handled with care or their value takes a dive. Big time.”

“Which makes me think he, or she, didn't do this thing alone.” Vascelli replied.

“Definitely a he, boss. A she would have had a problem scaling the bloody great walls around the Richards estate.” Vascelli nodded, “Plus it would take a pretty strong woman to carry six paintings in one go.” Vascelli looked at his watch. “What time did you tell Alex our update meeting was?”

“I sent her a text last night to say same time, same place.” Newman frowned. “Come to think of it, she didn’t respond. That’s not like her. Should I punch her number again?”

“No. Let’s wait for a while. She might be caught in traffic.” Vascelli said. He felt uneasy because Papadopoulos was a punctuality freak. In the four years she’d worked for him, she had never been late for a meeting.

Newman made a fresh pot of coffee and handed Vascelli a cup. The room was heavy with the anxiety they were both trying hard to hide.

Alexandra was an hour late. She didn’t do late. And she didn’t forget to call in. This morning she’d blown the schedule with zero contact. After a short silence Newman thumped his mug on the desk. He ignored the coffee streaming towards the files. “I’m

going to find her boss. It just doesn't add up." He said in a thick New Jersey accent.

Vascelli peered over his glasses, "Settle down son, she's entitled to miss a meeting." His deeply creased forehead conflicted with the calming tone of his voice. "Still it might be a good idea to check on her. Perhaps she's ill. Or maybe she's had an accident." He said like a concerned father.

"I'll go" Newman blustered. "You're busy and I've got nothing urgent going on right now."

Vascelli shook his head slowly. "Thanks for the offer, but I'll do it." He said, pushing the soggy files towards Newman. "While I'm gone you can sort this mess out."

"Come on Sarge. You can't do that."

"Sure I can." Vascelli grinned. "I'm still in charge here, remember." He grabbed his coat from the hook and headed towards the door.

"When you've mopped up the coffee, you can finish that report I've been waiting for. You mightn't consider it urgent, but I do." Vascelli said over his shoulder.

Newman gave the finger to Vascelli's back and mumbled, "Yeah. Right" through clenched teeth.

"Bad attitude son." Vascelli said without turning. He didn't see the gesture, but he sensed it.

He smiled as he gently closed the door. He liked the lad. The attitude made Vascelli's life more interesting. Not many officers had the balls to smart-mouth him face-to-face. Sure, some of the younger guys made the occasional crack when they thought he couldn't hear them, but not Newman. If he had something to say, he just spat it out. He thought it. He said it. No sugar coating. Take it or leave it.

Vascelli liked Newman's values. Under all the bluster, Newman was fiercely loyal and Vascelli knew the young detectives had the greatest respect for him.

Vascelli also knew that if any of the young officers tried to put the boss down, Newman was on it in a shot. He had a unique way with words. He made sure there was no misunderstanding about the rules. It was his way, or the highway.

The young officers hero-worshiped Newman. If he said the boss was a damn smart cop, who had earned his stripes, in ways they could only dream about, they didn't argue with him.

Vascelli believed a small amount of slagging-off was ok. It was a national sport and an essential part of the male-bonding process. It gave the young lads a sense of raised status. If only in their own testosterone blasted brains.

Vascelli drove to Alex's apartment building and walked up to level three. He pressed the buzzer of apartment 305 and waited for a response. When none came he rang again. No sounds were coming from inside. No TV. No radio. No noise to indicate Alex was home. Vascelli checked the door. It was shut tight. His brow creased into a heavy frown. Something wasn't right. Alex loved her music. If she was home, Jimmy Hendrix would be bouncing off the walls.

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and called Newman. "I think you'd better come over." Vascelli said. "And it would be useful if you could bring a bunch of picks with you."

“I’m there.” Newman said; his voice suddenly hoarse from tension. “I’ll push the blue lights and honkers to the max.” He was down in the car park before he hit the end-call button.

The trip took fifteen minutes; twelve less than normal. His strobe-light-show cleared the roads as fast as a fox in a chicken shed.

Newman left the car on the grass verge and raced up the internal fire-stairs to Alexandra’s apartment. He gave Vascelli a quick nod and got to work on the lock.

He had the job finished in fifty seconds. “Not bad son. Not bad at all.” Vascelli said with genuine admiration for Newman’s lock picking skill.

Vascelli pushed the door inwards and entered the living room. Newman checked the bedroom while his boss scanned the other rooms. Everything looked normal. The double bed was neatly made. The stainless steel sink gleamed and there wasn’t an unwashed dish in sight. The apartment was as tidy as its owner. “So what do we do now?” Newman asked.

CHAPTER THREE

“Just follow my lead. Don’t question anything Ally. Let me set the scene and the pace.” Marc said. His eyes pleaded with her to trust him.

Alex nodded. Marc put his arm around her waist and began to stumble forward like someone who had had too much to drink. She went along with the charade and supported him. They made their way along the decking. When they reached Sam Richards’s vessel Marc lurched to the right and pretended to lose his balance.

He grabbed a railing to steady himself. “Come on cupcake, just one nightcap.” He yelled, “Don’t be a party pooper.”

Marcus rolled his body over the railing of the yacht’s front deck. “The night’s still young cupcake. Let’s enjoy ourselves while we still can.”

Alex almost laughed. “You told me we were going sailing.” She yelled at him. “Now you’re too bloody drunk to even walk by yourself.” She climbed over the rail and stood in front of him. “I’ve had enough of your stupidity Charlie. Grow up. Act

like a man, instead of an idiot.” She delivered a convincing performance.

She was deciding on how to follow up when the sound of heavy boots echoed through the night air. “Hey, you two. What the hell are you up to?” one of the boot-men yelled. “This is a private vessel. Get outta here, before I throw you both to the sharks.

“Come on pal. There’s no need to be unfriendly,” Marcus called back in a hurt voice. He tried to stand up, but slumped in a heap, the boots were only inches away from his face. “My girl’s having a PMS moment and I’m over it. I’m going to bed.”

He dragged himself to his feet again. “You two can buddy up together. I’m outta here.” Marc headed for the lower deck door and half-walked and half-fell down the stairs.

The boots were after him in a flash. Alex pushed passed them both. “You idiot Charlie. Are you ok?” her voice conveyed her concern. It was real.

She clambered down and knelt beside him. His head was bleeding. It wasn't life threatening, but it was making a mess. 'Oh my God. You're hurt.' She looked around for something to wipe him with, then yelled up at the boot-men, "Well don't just stand here; do something. Get a wet cloth." She was tempted to add 'you goons', but decided it might trigger a nasty response.

The boots looked at each other. Confusion was new to them. They usually called the shots. No one had ever pulled a stunt like this before. This was uncharted territory for them both.

Alex used their uncertainty to her advantage. "Come on guys. He's in trouble." She said in a gentler tone. "He'll die from blood loss if we don't do something." There was no chance of him dying, but she could tell the boots didn't want a stiff on their hands. A dead man on their watch would not impress their boss.

The shorter boot-man jumped over Marcus and raced into the galley. He came back with a towel and threw it at Alex. The tall one just stood glued to the spot. "Thanks." Alex said as she began dabbing at Marc's face. He yelled at her to stop; calling her a

Nazi. He let his head fall back, rolled his eyes upwards and then closed them.

Groaning softly, he kept his lids tightly shut. The fake alcohol-induced coma act was worthy of an Oscar.

Alex tried to wake him, but Marc kept up the performance. “Oh my God, he’s out to it.” She said, looking up at Tweedledum and Tweedledee. “Is there anywhere we can put him until he comes around again?” Alex said. “Please.”

The boot-guys looked at each other and shrugged. “What the hell. Let’s drag him into the lounge and try to sober the idiot up.” the tall one finally said. “Then we can send the two of you on your way.” Shorty nodded and locked his arms under Marc’s shoulders. Tall-boy hooked onto his feet. They dragged Marc along a narrow passage and into a formal living area where they threw him onto a sofa. Alex followed.

“Thank you so much. I don’t know what I would have done without you.” She said. “I’ve never seen him like this before. He’s usually a nice guy, but tonight he’s been downing beers like there’s no tomorrow.”

“We’ll sort him out for you little lady. Then you can take him home and put him to bed.” Shorty said. “He’ll be fine. Well, apart from the big-time sore head he’ll be nursing in the morning.”

Shorty grinned at Alex, “I ain’t never seen anyone die from a few scratches and gut full of grog.” He grinned some more, then added. “You clean him up little lady, and I’ll fix him one of my power tonics. It’ll clear his head at rocket speed.” Shorty chuckled.

Tall and Short left the room, but Alex could hear them arguing about how to handle their uninvited guests. Marc opened his eyes and whispered, “Find the stateroom and take the photos.”

“Are you crazy? I can’t just go wandering around like I own the place.” Alex snapped, “Those guys are paid to keep people like us off this bloody boat. They aren’t going to put up with us for much longer.”

“They don’t have to. Just take the photos then we can scam.” Marc insisted. “Go. If they see you, just say you’re looking for the lavatory.” He tilted his head towards the door, “Go.”

Only half committed to the plan, Alex moved towards the door. She looked back at Marcus but before she could argue he said, ‘Just do it, for Christ’s sake.’

Alex poked her head around the door and checked the passageway. It was clear so she stepped out and headed towards the stateroom. She could hear the boot-men in the galley. They were arguing loudly, so their voices covered her footsteps and gave her the courage to continue. Following Marc’s instructions, she found the stateroom on the right then and slipped inside.

She flicked the light switch and found herself in a large entertaining area. The room reeked of money. It had a Ritz quality. A scaled down version, of a two-grand-a-night prestige suite. The designer would have earned a tidy sum for this fit out, Alex mused. Portholes had been replaced with spectacular leadlight windows, featuring diamond-quality crystal inserts.

Gilt-embossed ceilings matched the ornate fireplace that housed a state-of-the-art ceramic-log gas heater. The room’s atmosphere was warm and

welcoming. Alex stared up at the crystal chandelier; amazed that the roof structure could hold its weight.

A slamming door reminded her that she wasn't there to carry out a décor evaluation. She plucked a Galaxy smartphone from her jacket and slipped into the adjoining bedroom. Marcus said that's where she'd find the paintings. Coming face to face with great works of art took her breath away.

Alex snapped two photos of each painting, shoved the phone back in her pocket and left. The boot-men had stopped yelling at each other and their noise was replaced with an eerie silence.

She returned to the small lounge at the back of the boat and held her breath as she lowered the handle and pushed the door inwards. Alex's eyes locked on Marc, who was sitting opposite the doorway. A fresh bruise had exploded through his tanned skin; making the initial scratches from the fall, pale into insignificance. Alex froze and changed her line of vision to the two men sitting on the sofa at the far end of the room. She waited for one of them to speak. Neither did. They were waiting for her to make the first move.

Tall-boy finally broke the silence. “Enjoy your little tour sweetheart?” His eyes were rock hard. Alex said nothing. “I don’t know what you’re playing at lady,” he yelled, ‘but I sure as hell do know, that your drunken mate has sobered up very quickly.” His glared at Marc, “So what’s the game hey?” he paused for a second, “Make it the truth drunk-boy, or you’ll be taking a swim without a lifejacket.”

Alex pulled herself together “There is no game bigfoot.” She shouted. “Charlie here might have sobered up, but I don’t give a damn. I’ve had it up to here with idiots.” She grabbed her handbag from the couch. “You blokes have fun together. I’m outta here.” She glared at Marc from the doorway. “Delete my number Charlie. You won’t need it anymore.”

“Wait up ladybird. Get back here. We’re not finished yet.”

“Oh, yes we are.” Alex said and ran like the true Olympian sprinter that she was. She made it to the deck before she heard heavy steps on the metal stairs. She would have made it to the dock if the

moon hadn't decided to dump the game of hide-and-seek it was having with the clouds.

Alex groaned when she was grabbed by the shoulders and dragged down. "Fuck off, you idiot." She screamed and kicked the groin below the vice-like hands. Her attacker suddenly refocused. His scream told Alex she'd inflicted pain.

The adrenalin rush propelled her upwards. She sprang onto the boardwalk and ran. When she reached the beach, she hurled herself into a wide hedge and willed her breathing to slow down. She strained to hear anything that could tell her how the boot-men felt about her sudden departure, and what counter measures they had planned.

CHAPTER FOUR

Newman and Vascelli didn't return to the station immediately. They found a quiet coffee shop where they sat in silence. Vascelli's mind was focused on Alex's empty apartment. His frown deepened as he tried to make sense of her disappearance.

"Come on Sarge stop with the thinking. We need to come up with a plan." Newman said. His tone was urgent.

Vascelli looked over the rim of his glasses and said, "Plans come after the thinking son. We can't draw a diagram until we know what we're dealing with." He stirred his coffee slowly and watched the creamy foam turn into a whirlpool. Following the swirling vortex helped his head clear. "What do we know at this point?" Vascelli asked, but didn't wait for Newman to answer. "We have a colleague, who is behaving outside her normal patterns.

Of course, there could be a number of reasons for this. She might have taken ill and now safely tucked up in a hospital bed. On the other hand, she might have a new boyfriend; she hasn't told us

about, and spending all her free time with him. Maybe he doesn't have an alarm clock."

Newman broke in. "Yeah right. And she might have won the lottery and taken off to the Caribbean.

Get a grip boss. There is no new boyfriend. She's in trouble and we're sitting here like a couple of wackos yacking about stuff a five year old kid could target as rubbish."

Vascelli smiled. "You're right. It's not like Alexandra to miss work. Even if she is ill, she'd message in. Something has happened to her, and like you, I think all the news is going to be bad."

"Finally." Newman sighed, "Now we're getting somewhere." He said with relief. "OK, let's timeframe the situation. She finished work around nine pm last night. I know that because Turner, Brady and I dropped her off; after we'd finished working on the art dealer case in the squad room."

"How did she seem?"

"Tired. But then we all were." Newman squinted and did a mental replay of them driving Alex home and saying goodbye outside her apartment block. "I walked her to the front door and waited until she let herself in. She waved to us from

behind the glass and we drove off. She seemed fine.”

“OK, let’s check her phone records to see if she made any calls or if anyone phoned her.” Vascelli said. He felt better now they could plot their action. “I’ll get Turner to check the hospitals and Brady can check the cab companies to see if she left the apartment again.”

It was Newman’s time to frown. “Can we do that boss? She’s a private citizen and she’s not under suspicion for anything. Is it ethical?”

Vascelli chuckled. “When did you start worrying about ethical behaviour son?” He smiled gently, “Of course we can do it. She’s a colleague and we think something bad has happened to her. You know as well as me that the first twenty-four hours are vital. We need to follow the clues now, before the trail leafs-over and buries the track.” Vascelli nodded, more to himself than to Newman. He was committed to the plan and anxious to get it happening. “Come on son. Let’s go back to the station. The fog could close in at any time.”

Twenty minutes later Newman, Brady and Turner gathered in Vascelli’s office for a briefing. The big man did not downplay his concerns and

five-minutes later, they were giving the phones a serious workout. Forty minutes later they regrouped to share their findings. Newman reported Alex had received a call from an unlisted Bay area number. Unlisted were a problem, but Newman expected to have the number within an hour.

A Special Investigations mate was happy to help; he knew the favour would be reciprocated. That's how it works in the force. Forget to do pay-back and your name makes it way onto a blacklist. Repeated pay-back-failures had a negative impact on the offender's investigations. Stonewalling was a highly effective way to manage an overdue pay-back debt.

Turner had checked out all the local hospitals and ambulance stations. Alex's name was not on any of their lists. She hadn't visited her local church to ask the priest to hear her confession. None of the local pharmacists had dispensed a hangover draft or sold Alex any self-medicating products.

Brady struck gold when he found out a yellow cab picked up a young woman from Alexandra's building at eleven-thirty. The driver dropped her off in Baxter Street; the dark end. There was no record of a return trip. Brady double checked all the cab companies and drew a blank.

“Excellent work lads. Excellent work indeed.” Vascelli meant it. “Now we have something concrete to go on.” He smiled at the young officers, “Turner and Brady, you talk to the Baxter Street locals. Take a photo of Alexandra with you and see if anyone saw her last night.” he paused, “Or this morning for that matter.”

“We’re on it boss.” Turner said standing and buttoning his jacket. “Do we flash the photo first, or ask questions first?” he asked.

“Let the situation decide. You’ll know how to handle it.” He glanced across at Newman, “As soon as your buddy gets back to you, we’ll take a ride. Maybe the locals will have something for us too. Who knows, if we listen hard, the streets might start talking.”

Vascelli’s desk phone rang. He answered it and nodded to Newman, “It’s your SI pal. He has the information you requested.” Vascelli said and held out the handset.

CHAPTER FIVE

Alex strained her ears and waited. Sunup was only a few hours away. She knew she had to make a move before Sam Richards arrived. Stress interfered with her brain signals, but a message to trade the bushes for somewhere safe flashed with neon sign intensity. The sound of heavy boots on the boardwalk had her on red-alert again. Tweedledum had sorted his injured manhood and was back in the game. The search party number had expanded. Tweedledee had joined the hunt.

Abuse was yelled at her. The message was clear. She'd be flushed out and punished. The end result would not be a happy sight.

Alex's breath-holding marathon continued until the sound of running-feet receded into the distance. She guessed the two tough guys were on their way to the car park. She was unsure of the immediate land formation, but decided to exit the bushes, take a sharp left, then sprint up the beach; using the cliff-overhang as a shield.

The moon was out again, but heavy cloud-cover cut the glow. It was just possible to see the dark shapes of boulders and other objects that might

trip her up. Although an exercise in supreme-self-discipline, Alex changed her pace to slow. Running was an attention getter; power-walking was the safest way to put distance between herself and the marina.

Looking ahead Alex made out the silhouette of a huge landmass. When she reached it, she discovered a solid wall of granite formed a barrier, making it impossible for her to continue. From this point on, the only way-out was up. Without proper climbing gear, Alex doubted she'd be able to scale the cliff-face.

The overhanging cliff top cut off the light from the moon. Alex groped the rock face, trying to understand the physical nature of the place. Wind erosion, possibly over thousands of years, had gouged shallow grottos into the cliff face. She found a narrow vertical ledge and hoisted herself on to it. Then she found another ledge above that one and quickly pulled herself up again. The horizon was flushed with the first signs of dawn. She knew it wouldn't be long before the sun revealed her position. For the first time since her escape, she felt the tension leave her body. Adrenalin was still pumping through her veins, but her leg muscles finally relaxed, her head cleared and she decided on her next move.

Alex strained to pick up sounds below, but heard none. She was either too far away to hear what was going on back at the marina, or the bootmen had stopped looking for her. Of course, it might also mean, they were above, waiting patiently above for her to show herself again. She had no idea what happen to Marc after her escape but guessed he was still captive on the vessel. Sam Richards intended to sail at sunup. The only way she could help Marc was to get to safety and contact Vascelli and Newman.

The photos on her phone would give them what they needed to get a search warrant and keep Richards in the port. Alex inhaled heavily. Time was running out. If Marc was right that the vessel had already been cleared to exit at six am. She had had no time to loose.

The soft, pre-dawn, light allowed Alex to see the coastline better. It also gave her a chance to understand the local environment. She moved slowly along the ledge and discovered it opened on to a deep cavern that curved all the way around the bluff.

Alex explored the cave and found it ended abruptly. She pulled herself onto a narrow ledge that extended beyond the front of the opening and then

clambered upwards. The unstable shale and sand made the going tough and the razor-sharp rocks sliced into her hands. Bleeding and exhausted she finally pulled herself to the top of the cliff. Tears of relief rolled down her cheeks when she saw a number of large beach houses in front of her.

Alex studied the homes and watched for signs of activity inside. There wasn't any. It was still early, so she guessed the occupants were sleeping. Best not to wake them she told herself. Better to find somewhere safe to hide, then call Vascelli and wait for him to come to the rescue.

She crept forward slowly; conscious of the fact the houses probably had surveillance cameras and alarms. Or even more worrying, dogs.

Accessing the properties was easy. All the homes were built close to the cliff face and none of them had front fences.

Alex studied each house carefully, and then headed for the smaller one, at the far end of the row. She moved silently along a side pathway, saying a prayer of thanks for the extensive combat training she'd done at the academy.

In the rear garden she discovered a play house and decided the children it had been built for had

long lost interest in tree houses and games of daring-do. A sturdy flip-latch held the small front door closed, but there was no lock attached. Alex squeezed through the narrow opening and found herself in a small square space. It wasn't high enough for her to stand full height, but it was dry and an old Persian rug covered the floor.

Alex pressed herself into a far corner and dug into her jacket for her phone. Her fingers moved around the large front pocket. It was empty. Panic made her stand too quickly and she cracked her head on the roof beam. She slumped back on the floor, inhaled deeply and told herself to get a grip. Slowly and systematically she checked all the other pockets but the phone was gone. "Oh shit." she said aloud. "Freaking hell. This can't be happening."

Her shoulders slumped; her head fell forward and tears of frustration splashed onto her knees. After a moment of self-pity, Alex forced herself to focus again. It was useless to search for the smartphone. It could be anywhere. She had to find a payphone as quickly as possible.

Although she had no idea where to find a callbox, she knew that searching for one, was a constructive step forward. Hiding out in a kid's playhouse was a waste of precious time.

After a brisk twenty-minute hike along the headland, Alex came to a small fishing village. There wasn't a callbox anywhere, but a sign in the general store told her there was a payphone inside.

When Arthur Gilbert arrived to open the store thirty-minutes later, he was thrilled to find her sitting on his veranda. It wasn't often he had someone new to talk to. A visit from a pretty young woman was as rare as finding a gold nugget on the beach.

Alex called Vascelli and gave him a cut down version of the past twenty-four hours. She held the phone away from her ear after she explained about the escape. Vascelli used words he kept for times of extreme anger and frustration. He told her to stay where she was and speak to no one. Alex promised, hung up, hoisted herself onto an ancient bar stool and chatted with Arthur over the strong coffee he had prepared.

Arthur was a genuine local. He'd lived in the area all his life. He'd taken over the store from his father, thirty-five years earlier. His father had taken it over, from his father, thirty-five years before that. Alex felt the stress of the past hours melt away.

Arthur was a charming raconteur. His village-life stories were funny and fascinating. His story about a local police officer who accidentally locked himself in a cell made Alex laugh heartily. Seems the poor guy wasn't found for two days. It might have been longer if one of his mates hadn't decided to go to the station to check out why the phones weren't working.

Alex felt a pang of sadness when she said goodbye to Arthur when Vascelli and Newman arrived an hour later. She promised she would return one day soon.

CHAPTER SIX

Marc could hear the two men talking outside the cabin door. When Alex made her break, the tall one had gone after her; leaving Shorty to deal with their houseguest. Shorty duct-taped Marcus to the chair, strapped his ankles together, and then he raced off to give his mate backup. The PVC tape was as strong as concrete and Marc accepted the fact he would not be joining in the outdoor activities. He wasn't going anywhere.

The sudden return of the two tough guys told him that Alex had outsmarted them. "The bitch must be around here somewhere." One of them screamed. "She's not wearing night vision goggles, so how in god's name could she find her way around in the fucking dark. If she headed down the shoreline she'd cut herself to shreds on the rocks."

"She wasn't in the car park; so I'm guessing she's headed downwind of the marina."

“What a fucking nightmare.” Marc guessed the voice was the tall guy. “What the fuck are we gonna tell Richards? He’ll be here soon.” the voice was hitting critical pitch. “And what the hell are we gonna do with the bloke in there?” Marc was pretty certain that meant him and knew things were going to get interesting.

“Just let the bastard go.” Shorty snapped. “He knows squat anyway.” He continued. “The guy gets drunk, ends up on the wrong yacht, we tell him he’s a naughty boy, and send him back to where he came from. End of story.” Shorty inhaled deeply. “We tell Richards nothing.” He said with authority. “He goes; we stay. Problem solved. Too easy.”

Marc was encouraged by what he heard, however the good feeling didn’t last long. The door flew open and the goons filled the gap. Change of plan, Marc told himself. It wasn’t his idea of how ‘just let him go’ played out. He thought ‘just let him go’, would mean open the door, shove him off the boat, throw in a bit of verbal intimidation, and him racing like a hare to his car. The gun definitely gave ‘Just let him go’ a new twist.

“Right you. Stand the hell up and tell us what the fuck you and your girlfriend are doing here.” Tall-boy demanded.

“It’s a little difficult for me to stand right now,” Marc said, adjusting the tone-dial to cool dude. “The tape is pretty tight.”

“Don’t get smart with me shit-head.” The gun holder yelled. He nodded at Shorty, “Kill the plastic.” Marc shivered. The word kill coming from the mouth of a man with a gun, just didn’t sit well with him.

Shorty flicked a knife, squatted down and cut the tape. Marc studied the top of his head. Funny how perspective can completely change the pecking order. When all you can see of a guy is the top of his skull, it makes you feel like you’re in control, Marc thought. “Ok guys, I don’t know what’s going on here, but it seems I’ve done something to upset you. I’m real sorry for that.” He looked straight at tall-man. “Something tells me none of us wants this to explode into a shit-fight.” He paused for a second and then added, “Let’s be grownups here. I’m sure we can work something out.”

“You’re the only thing that’s getting sorted out here, mate.” The tall guy’s stress levels were maxing out. “Now move it shit-head.” He bellowed, waving the gun towards the door. “We’re going for a ride.” Marc caught Shorty’s surprise. It told him tall-boy was problem solving on the fly. Not a good

practice; especially if you know nothing about the opposition.

“Ok, settle down.” Marc fired back, “Do you think you could stop waving that thing in my face. I’m more cooperative when I don’t have a gun stuck up my nostril.” He sounded a lot tougher than he felt, but relaxed when the gun was lowered. It was still there, but at least his head wasn’t the primary focus anymore.

“Gimme your car keys.” The big man ordered, holding out his hand. “And start walking. Slowly.” He jerked the gun toward the door. “I’m right behind you, so don’t get smart.”

Marc fished the keys from his pocket, handed them over and did as he was told. Getting smart was definitely not on his agenda. Not yet, anyway. He needed more information if he was going to build up a workable plan. He walked down the passage, climbed the narrow stairs and waited for Tweedledum and Tweedledee to join him.

When they got to the car, the big guy flicked the lock-release button and shoved Marc into the back seat. Shorty jumped in beside him, while tall-boy slid behind the wheel. Before turning the

ignition key, he flipped his cell phone and punched numbers.

“Hey, Jason, we’re bringing you a problem. We need a quick solution buddy. We’ll be there in twenty.” He threw the phone on the seat beside him, fired the engine and sped away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Vascelli suppressed an impulse to grab Alex and hug her. He knew that making inappropriate body contact with a co-worker was a no-go zone. Plus, something told him that her emotions were pretty raw. She'd need time to process what had happened to her. He held the hug, nodded at Arthur, commented on the weather and then asked Alex if she was ready to go. "There's work to do young lady." he growled at her, but winked at Arthur.

Alex patted Arthur on the shoulder and thanked him for the coffee. They had made a connection and Arthur had soothed her troubled soul. She would never forget that.

Newman was waiting outside. He flashed a brilliant smile when Alex and Vascelli walked over to the car. He held the door open and gently patted Alex on the arm. She nodded slowly then lowered herself inside.

It took an hour to get back to the station, so she had plenty of time to tell her story. When she got to the part about the lost cell phone Newman said they should go back and look for it. “We need those pictures to get the search warrant boss.”

“It’s ok. Judge Wilson will take my word that we have the proof he needs. I’ll send Turner and Brady out to the bay; they can search for the phone. The most important thing at this stage is to stop that vessel from leaving port.” Vascelli pulled into his car space and lead them inside. “Call the young officers and get them in here.”

Vascelli glanced at this watch. It was only five-thirty. “Tell them if they want to keep their jobs it’s non-negotiable.” he said to Newman and headed for his office. “I’ll contact the harbourmaster and get him to delay the boat’s departure. Once we have that under control I’ll call Wilson and get him to issue the warrant.”

Alex followed Vascelli and Newman in silence; lightheaded from exhaustion and hunger. Her feet and hands felt like slabs of raw meat. Her energy levels had plummeted to zero, and her brain had almost shut down. While Newman and Vascelli focused on their phone calls, Alex threw herself on

the lumpy sofa, in the corner of the office, and instantly fell asleep.

Brady and Turner shed the sheets in record time. They were in the station in forty-minutes. Their minds were sharp and their enthusiasm for the job shone in their eyes. Newman felt a twinge of envy. His inner glow of youth had faded over the years and he missed it. Sure, he was physically fit; riding high in the job status area and his brain was still in great shape. But he knew the eye-sparkle had faded. He now hit his face with a daily fix of expensive moisturizer to keep his tired skin awake. What the hell, he thought, what he lacked in youth, he made up for with passion and experience. You've gotta be happy with that, he told himself and smiled.

Newman went over to Alex and tapped her gently on the shoulder. "Hey kiddo, time to get up. The cavalry has arrived." God, he thought, she'd so bloody beautiful when she's asleep. Shame to wake her. Fleeting thought. Fleeting reaction. Time to get to work, he reminded himself.

Vascelli passed around freshly brewed coffee. The machine in his office was his one concession to luxury. He was old school and didn't believe in flashy work environments. He liked the décor to yell 'work is what we do here.'

However, he had high standards when it came to coffee. He expected it to be as good as his work ethic. It had to be excellent quality and it had to get results. He was proud of his fully automatic Delonghi ESAM660. It had set him back \$2,399. Like a gloating parent showing off his kids, he'd Blu-Tacked the promo sheet on the wall; its range of features read like the pitch for a luxury car; with the performance to match. In the coffee machine stakes, it was up there with Mercedes Benz.

After a briefing session, Turner and Brady headed for the Bay to search for Alex's cell phone. Judge Wilson came good with the warrant. He was happy to wait a few hours for the incriminating evidence report.

When the paperwork was sorted, Vascelli phoned the harbourmaster. After a short, but heated, debate he got the assurance he needed. Sam Richards would not be heading to sea until his vessel had undergone a thorough search. "Get your coat Mark we've got a date with an Art Collector." He called to his partner. "You stay here Alexandra. We'll be back in a few hours."

"No way boss." Alex fired back, "I'm going with you."

“Not a good idea, detective. You stay. That’s an order.”

“But ...” Vascelli cut her off,

“No buts. You don’t have a choice here.”

“My friend is still on the yacht. God knows what state he’s in. I have to come with you. Please.” She pleaded.

“Sorry detective you’ve had enough excitement. Take another nap. You look like you need it.” Vascelli was all business. She knew it was useless to argue. Newman shrugged and made a ‘*what can you do*’ gesture. He gave her an apologetic smile and followed their boss through the door.

Vascelli and Newman got to the marina in rapid time. They parked and then raced along the jetty to where the *Lancelot* was berthed. The space was empty and their disposition took a negative dive. They tore down to Harbourmaster Frankston’s office where Vascelli threw back the door with excessive force.

“Where’s the friggin’ Richards yacht?” Newman yelled ferociously, “We told you on the phone that we have a friggin’ warrant to search the

vessel. We made it clear the Lancelot was to be compounded until further notice.” Without waiting for a response he added, “If Richards has done a runner, I’ll rip your friggin’ heart out.”

Vascelli pushed in front of Newman, “Please excuse my colleague, sir. He’s having a really bad day.” He smiled at the mariner and then added, “However, I do need to remind you sir that you are in contempt. If Richards, as my colleague says, has taken to sea, I will take personal responsibility for it and have your license revoked. Permanently.” Only an idiot would misinterpret the fact he was serious.

Colour drained from Frankston’s face. “I tried to stop him from leaving. But he just laughed and went anyway.” He stammered.

“And you did nothing to stop him? Why didn’t you send out a tug to turn him around?” Vascelli asked.

“We don’t use tugs in this port Sergeant. This dock only handles small sized crafts. And they don’t need tugs to take them out to sea.”

The maritime officer slumped into an old wooden chair. “Look Sergeant, I’m sorry he got away, but restraining pleasure craft skippers isn’t something I’m asked to do very often. It’s not what

you'd call an everyday occurrence in my little port.” He swallowed hard, and then added apologetically, “I can tell you where the yacht is headed though.”

Vascelli took a deep breath and managed to put a lid on his anger. “It would be a great help if you can tell us their intended destination. And anything else you can tell us will be extremely helpful.” Vascelli’s tone had softened a little and Frankston started breathing normally again.

“Richards arrived around six. Not long after I got your call. He went straight to his yacht and I saw him talking with the two guys he hires to protect the vessel. There was a heated conversation, but as you can see, I’m too far away up here. I couldn’t hear what they were saying. Richards went on board, stayed there for about thirty minutes, and then he came up here to the office and asked for his copy of the signed departure-manifest. I told him I was under instruction to refuse his departure. I told him he could not leave the port until I had received police clearance.

I told him that you guys were on your way up; with a warrant to search his vessel. I told him that legally I could not allow him to leave.” Frankston swallowed hard. “Richards lost it big time. Told me I was a madman and said he was leaving with, or

without, the paperwork. He stormed off and went back to the yacht. Within five minutes the engines were fired up, the crew cast off, and they headed out to sea.” Frankston paused. “I phoned the number you gave me, but it didn’t answer. I didn’t know what to do, so I just waited for you to get here.”

“Ok. Thanks for trying anyway.” Vascelli said, “Sorry I yelled, but this is a serious situation. It’s imperative that we stop Richards before he gets into International waters. It’s even more important that he doesn’t head for somewhere that we don’t have an extradition agreement with.

“The log entry states he’s heading for the Pacific island of Nauru. No stops in between. The yacht is like a floating hotel. Food and water will not be a problem for a straight through trip.

The fridges and freezers hold six months supply. There’s a high-tech desalination plant on board and a state-of-the-art electricity generation system keeps everything running like clockwork.” Frankston said.

“How long does it take to sail to Nauru?” Newman asked.

“*Lancelot* could make it in about twenty-five days. She’s fast.” Frankston said with authority. “There aren’t too many vessels around that can match her for speed.

Vascelli asked Frankston for a copy of the unsigned departure manifest, then turned to Newman “We can’t do anymore here. Let’s go find Turner and Brady and see if they’ve had more success.” He thanked the Harbourmaster for his assistance, told him not to feel too bad about not being able to stop Richards, and they left.

They followed the shoreline in the direction of the headland. They found Turner and Brady a short distance around the bluff. ‘Any luck?’ Vascelli called out to them.

“Nothing yet boss.” Turner said. “We’re just about to head up to the cliff top. Senior Detective Papadopoulos said she had trouble climbing the track. The phone might have fallen from her pocket when she was scaling up there.” He pointed skywards, then added, “Don’t worry boss, we’ll find it.”

Vascelli nodded. “Do what you can boys. We need those pictures. Without them we’ve got nothing to prove Richards stole his own paintings.”

Brady knuckled Turner on the arm and said, “Come on partner. We’ve got a job to do. There is no time for standing around chewing the fat with the boss.” He chuckled and looked at Vascelli, “Keep the coffee hot. We’ll be back in the office before you can grind fresh beans.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Marc ran his hands over the walls. Heavy-gauge corrugated steel. He cursed. The two feeble light rays that fought their way into the darkness, gave him no cheer; they were too weak to illuminate the space.

He had been blindfolded during the ride from the Bay to wherever he now was, but he guessed they had travelled for around an hour. Marcus remembered the car stopped somewhere quiet, but that's all he could recall. After Shorty smashed the gun butt on his skull, nothing else got added to the memory banks.

He continued his Braille exploration and recognized the construction techniques. The shape of the struts gave him the first clue.

The two side walls were solid and conformed to the one at the far end. The other end was the same size, but it felt different.

Marcus kept running his hands over the wall and decided the end was enclosed with full-length doors. He could feel the edge of the sealing rubber and what he guessed to be hinge brackets.

“I’m in a fucking shipping container.” He shouted. “A fucking shipping container” he repeated. “Bloody marvellous. Next step, I get loaded onto a fucking freighter and end up dead before it arrives in some third-world port.” Marc punched the wall and screamed from a mixture of pain and frustration. “Shit ... Bloody shit.” He yelled again. “It can’t end like this.”

His body slid slowly down the metal wall and he slumped on the oiled-timber floor. Marcus knew metal shipping containers. During college he’d worked for a company that sold de-commissioned containers to people who wanted to turn them into rural sheds, or use them as an alternative housing option. Yes, he knew shipping contains all right.

They were constructed from high-tensile, anti-corrosive, Corten steel plate. They were tough. And they shut tight. Once they were sealed from the outside, it was impossible to get out. The doors could only be opened from the outside.

Unless of course, you just happened to have an industrial strength circular saw in your back pocket. Reality check. He didn't even have a pen knife on him.

But he did have a cigarette lighter. Could he use that to set fire to the timber floor? No. He'd need something that would burn long enough to actually ignite the timber. He thought about peeling off his clothes, but canned the idea because he knew the container would be like an ice box once the sun went down. No, he'd have to come up with something better than that, he told himself.

He yelled profanities into the air and smashed the wall with his feet. He wasn't a quitter, but in his present situation he was ready to give up and just let the worst happen. Why fight when you had no weapons to do battle with?

Marc stretched full length on the floor and let the exhaustion he had been ignoring take over. He had no idea how long he slept, but the cramp that woke him must have been doing its stuff for some time. Both calf muscles felt like volcanoes were burning inside them.

He rubbed the knotted tendons vigorously until the pain subsided. Then he managed to pull himself upright then carefully, and slowly; so the muscles could support

his bodyweight. He told himself to walk. He knew if he didn't exercise his legs they'd end up a wasted mess.

Walking wasn't actually what he managed. It was more like a hobble, but at least he was moving again, and it felt like a small victory to get back into the fight. His will to win returned and his brain cogs started turning. Think you imbecile, he told himself. Think about this bloody structure. Where are the weaknesses? There is always a weak spot. Everything has an Achilles heel. Stop the Blondie-Act and do something to get on top of this.

Marcus closed his eyes. He thought better with his eyes shut. He brain-scanned the inside of a shipping container. His mental image showed how angled-steel braced the walls from the roof to the floor. Steel reinforcement brackets ran the full length of the walls and industrial strength welding fixed them like concrete. Marcus knew those suckers were not going anywhere. They were there to stay.

The air vent, he yelled. That's it. The weak point. Sure, it would take a King-Kong effort, but the vent could be smashed. That would leave a hole in the roof. Problem. He was six-two; the roof was nine feet up. Anyway, so what if he did open the hole. What then? Was he going to do a Genie act and spirit himself through the five inch diameter opening? Let it go Marc

he said, not your smartest idea. He sat down again and started addressing an imaginary audience; just like he'd done so many times at corporate presentation sessions.

'So what you do say guys? Who's in favour of burning the trousers and hoping they create enough heat to set the floorboards on fire'. He waited for his imaginary team members to answer. 'OK. So that's five in favour and three against, hey? Well then, let's do it.' He jumped up, unbuckled his belt and let the pants slide down. As they hit the floor, there was a god almighty thud on the container's roof.

Marc pressed an ear to the side wall. It was muffled, but there was no mistaking the throb of a heavy-duty machine. A large truck maybe. It was close. Another thud followed by clanging chains and the container began to move upwards. It swayed a little, then after some more crashing and bumping, it was still again.

A sudden Adrenalin-shot made Marcus's Adam's apple pump. He was pretty certain he was going on a long journey. First stop, dockside, then on to a freighter with the high seas on its radar. No passport would be needed for this trip; because there was no chance anyone would be checking the contents.

Marcus held his breath and slid onto the floor again. The container swayed some more then after another few more thuds it was attached to a prime mover and the journey began. All escape plans went out the non-existent window.

The ride was surprisingly smooth. Marcus was amazed at just how smooth. He estimated they travelled for around an hour. The transfer from the truck, to what he guessed was the loading dock, was a reverse replay of the initial loading procedure. Just with a few additional steps to break the monotony.

After the container was dumped on the ground, there were ear busting crashes as others were stacked on top and beside it. Marc visualized the outside environment. Banks of shipping containers would be tightly packed side by side and stacked four levels high. Not real good for someone trapped in the middle of the pile.

Marc knew that even if he screamed his lungs out, the chance of anyone hearing was zero. There was also the matter of oxygen. Or lack of it. Not a lot was going to find its way through the small roof vent with a tower of steel stacked over it.

Marcus knew if a window of opportunity, to attract the attention of someone outside, did exist, it was a

bloody small one. And whatever stunt he decided to pull off had to hit the bull's eye with the first arrow.

He did a quick situation-audit. Something heavy was needed to bash the walls if he was going to attract someone's attention. His runners didn't tick the box for him.

He canned the idea of screaming until his voice box gave out, because he knew OH&S policies required cargo-handlers to wear ear plugs at all times. He was running low on ideas, so it was back to the trouser-burning option. If he could get a fire going, it might be enough to attract someone's attention. Problem. Fire feeds on oxygen; he'd better get a move on, he told himself, because the currently supply was running low. The clock was ticking and he knew that he'd only get one chance to pull it off.

Marcus grabbed the trousers and trained the cigarette lighter on the inside lining of one of the pockets. The fabric was lighter and it would flame up faster than the heavier fabric.

He watched with the fascination of a pyromaniac as a small flame flicked in the air. "Burn baby, burn." He yelled, holding the trouser leg still.

A sudden crash above made him drop the trousers and he looked in horror as the flames died. "No." he

screamed. The lighter fuel was spent. His escape plan was shattered.

The noise outside continued and the container moved slowly upwards. Marcus pulled himself together. He knew it was time to move to Plan B.

Marcus ran across the floor, threw his full weight on the side wall, then spun around and raced to the other side to repeat the process. He continued to run from side to side and hope started to return. The container was swaying like an out-of-control capsule on an amusement park ride.

The crane driver yelled down to the Docker on the wharf below. “What the fuck is going on down there.” He didn’t wait for an answer, “The fucking load has shifted.” He smashed the control lever and the unit went down with a thud. “Get one of the boys over here Robbo.” He screamed, “I can’t load the bloody thing until the stuff inside is properly secured.”

Robbo didn’t hang around for the abuse that was coming. He sprinted down the wharf to find someone who could lend a hand.

CHAPTER NINE

“So what have we got people?” Vascelli asked gravely, “We’re running low on time. Have we found anything of value yet?”

Newman walked to the whiteboard and started drawing boxes. “Firstly, Richards has done a runner, but the maritime boys are tracking his vessel. We should have a marker in a few hours. At this stage it looks as though he’s headed to the South Pacific. Best guess is Nauru. Well, that’s if the Harbourmaster’s Intel is solid. As soon as the vessel enters the harbor, it will be taken into custody.

A couple of our boys will drag Richards off to the local lockup and keep him there until we get the extradition order sorted.” He looked at Brady and Turner and said, “The young guys did a great job Boss. After two intense searches they finally found Alex’s Galaxy stuck in a crevice. It’s in good shape, and the photos are as clear as crystal.”

“Well done boys.” Vascelli said, “When you didn’t find the phone on the first scope I was ready to kiss it and the photos goodbye.” He shook his head slowly and smiled; he knew how much determination it took to go over search ground a second time. Hope usually took a dive when first searches failed and replays generally came up negative anyway.

Vascelli was proud of his young officers. He knew he was lucky to have them on his team, and as much as he hated the idea, he guessed it wouldn’t be too long before he’d have to put their names on the promotion recommendation list. They deserved to move up the ladder, but the thought of losing the rookies gave him no joy. “How is Alexandra by the way?”

“She’s good. Went home for a hot shower and a few hours under the duvet. She’ll be back at five.” Newman said. “Papadopoulos is tough. He smiled and added, “She thinks she’s invincible.”

“Any word on her mate Marcus?” Vascelli asked no one in particular. “Does Marcus have another name?”

“Nothing on Marcus yet.” Newman said. “As for the name, we still don’t know the last one.” Vascelli didn’t miss the edge to Newman’s voice. He was obviously having a problem digesting the fact that

Alexandra had a male friend she'd never told them about. Vascelli hoped Newman's nose-twitch wouldn't impede his judgment and end up complicating the investigation.

Suddenly he felt the weight of his fifty-nine years. Maybe early retirement wouldn't be such a bad thing after all.

The rivers and oceans were brimming with cold-blooded aquatic vertebrates and the rods in his shed were collecting dust. Putting up a '*Gone Fishing*' sign was tempting. Maybe it was time to call it a day and make this his last case.

Newman's voice pulled him out of his reverie. He blinked himself back to the present. "Find out the family name Marcus goes by and run a check on him?" Vascelli said, looking at the young detectives. "Maybe you'll be able to dig something that connects him with Richards." He didn't wait for a response, "Don't ask Senior Detective Papadopoulos for a name. See if you can get it from independent sources first."

"There was a black Jeep, Grand Cherokee, in the marina car park. It was heavy with dew, so I'm guessing it was there all night. Senior Detective Papadopoulos and Marcus, whatever his name is, must have driven to

the marina and I'm guessing the Cherokee belongs to him." Brady offered.

"Track the owner through motor vehicle registrations and then dig into our files to see what you come up with." Vascelli said, "Check business records, Facebook and Twitter accounts too. When you get an address, have a chat with the neighbours." Vascelli stopped suddenly. "Sorry boys. You know what to do. I don't need to tell you how to do your jobs." He smiled apologetically. He normally gave his people plenty of space to think for themselves. Micro-managing was not his style. "Call in when you've got something exciting to tell me." He smiled and pointed to the door.

He needed coffee. High-grade hot coffee. Newman knew the signs and began working the machine. "Hang in there old man. Caffeine's on the way."

"Old man?" Vascelli squirmed at the comment. It was a bit too close to the bone, "Show respect boy, or you'll be walking the beat again." He took the coffee mug from Newman and smiled. "Can't wait for me to hand in my badge hey? Just itching to flop your backside in to this seat aren't you." He said without resentment. Maybe it was time.

“Sorry old man. No disrespect intended.” Newman said, “Swallow that coffee quickly. We’ve got some paintings to find.”

“First we’ve got to find Marcus. Something tells me he and Richards have a close connection. He’s probably part of the scam.”

Newman frowned, “The Marcus bloke told Alex he attended a few parties on the Richards yacht. That indicates they’re buddies.” Newman paused. His brow creased. “Let’s wait to see what Brady and Turner come up with before we make any assumptions. The most important thing at this point is to find the guy. And my gut is telling me we need to be quick.”

“You think the tough guys hurt him?” Vascelli asked.

“Not sure. But they’d want him out of the way before their boss found out they’d messed up.” Newman was thinking hard. “If Richards was due to sail at six am, they didn’t have a lot of time to sort out their dilemma. Maybe they called in reinforcements to make their problem go away.”

“Reinforcements like?”

“More tough guys. To take Marcus someplace and smash him around a bit.” he paused, “or even something more permanent.”

Vascelli’s phone rang before he could comment. It was Brady. Vascelli punched the speaker button to accommodate Newman. They both grinned when Brady said that Marcus was one Mr Marcus Murray. Home address: 158 Clyde Road, Newbury, New Jersey. Age: thirty-nine. Unmarried. Current occupation: International Art Dealer. No criminal offences recorded in the United States of America. No recent traffic infringements. Brady added Murray’s financial stuff was complicated. He and Turner were still trawling through a mountain of credit card and business bank statements. He’d get back to them within the hour.

“Great job boys.” Vascelli sang into the phone. “Keep digging. I’ve got a feeling that when you drill down, Mr Murray’s affairs they’ll be extremely interesting.

“Jesus,” Newman whistled through his front teeth. “An International Art Dealer. So that’s the Richards connection. What the hell are they up to? And why drag Alex into the mess?” Newman was angry. He didn’t like his friends to be badly treated. He had Murray in his firing line.

“Settle down Mark. Don’t get yourself twisted over this. We need information before you start gunning for Murray. Being an art dealer isn’t a criminal offence. It certainly doesn’t prove he’s one of the bad guys.” Vascelli tried to lighten the mood by adding, “A man’s got to make a living.” He joked, “People like to buy art.” The tactic didn’t work.

CHAPTER TEN

Six fire trucks roared towards the dockyards. Pandemonium had broken out. Paramedics and backup police vehicles were on standby. Police Officers and ambulance people were trying hard to duck the added confusion the news media vans caused. Photographers and Journalists had descended on the area like commandos that had dropped from the sky.

When Senior Sergeant Vascelli and Senior Detective Mark Newman reached the barriers they flashed their badges and got the nod to go through. “What the hell happened here?” Newman yelled at the officer who was directing operations.

“Too early to say. A crane driver had a problem with one of the containers and when the loading crew checked it out they discovered it was empty. The only thing inside was a pair of scorched trousers and a heavy smell of smoke.

While they were trying to figure out where the cargo had gone, there was a massive flash over near the

fence line. A petroleum tank exploded and the fuel went up like an atomic firebomb. Those buildings over there didn't stand a chance. It's a war zone right now. The explosives team and the hazardous-fuels guys are doing their best to get the fire under control, but I'd say it's going to be a long night. There's a hellava lot of combustible stuff lying around here. It will feed the fire for a bloody long time."

"Anyone hurt?" Vascelli cut in.

"No one we've found. But anyone near the fuel tank, wouldn't have had a chance." The officer said. "Look I've gotta go. You guys are free to poke around if you want, but just try to stay out of everyone's way. We can't spare the manpower to look after you. You'll have to do that yourself."

Vascelli and Newman stayed for an hour then went back to the office. They wouldn't find out the true facts until the preliminary report came out. They could wait.

The next day a courier delivered a copy of the Emergency Services report on the fire. It was only a draft, but it contained most of the primary facts. The details would come later. Vascelli and Newman read the

report with interest, although they already knew most of what had taken place.

A crane driver and two dock-workers discovered a container that was ready for shipment, but it had no cargo inside. They had found a pair of men's trousers on the floor of the container.

When the Dockers first investigated they found the unit doors were properly fastened by vertical locking bars and the heavy duty catches were firmly in place. Both doors were shut tight, but there were no padlocks. "Not smart if you want to stop your stuff from being stolen." Newman said. Vascelli ignored him.

While the men were inside the unit they heard an explosion. The aftershock was so intense it nearly knocked them to the ground.

The Dockers rushed outside to see what had happened. None of them was certain but they thought they left the container doors open. At the time, closing them didn't seem important; there more pressing issues to deal with outside.

The men said they saw a fuel-storage tank ablaze and assumed that was the cause of the explosion. They called 911 and they were told someone had already reported the incident. Emergency units were on the way.

The fire investigation team discovered a melted mass near the wrecked tank stand. It checked out as the remains of a cigarette lighter. The intensity of the fire made it impossible to see if the tank's rubber hoses had been cut. Too late now All of them were destroyed in the blaze.

The senior freight-handler checked the computer system and found no record of the container. No customs forms. No owner. Nothing. No one knew how it got there and no one knew where it was going. Not that it mattered anyway; because now it was headed for the police compound; where it would stay until every inch of it was scanned.

“Did they pick up anything useful from inside the rogue container?” Vascelli asked.

“Turner and I checked it out.” Brady said, “We managed to lift a few fingerprints, but haven't matched them as yet”

“Anything else?”

“The men's trousers are top line expensive. Fine-quality wool. Italian Designer label. We're making a list of stores that stock them.” Turner added. “We also found a fancy leather belt; probably owned by the guy who left his pants behind. The lab is running a few tests to see what else they can tell us. We'll check all the

fancy men's stores in the area, to see if they have anything useful to say."

"Good. Keep chasing the leads and let me know what comes up." Vascelli said. He flicked his head towards the door. It was time for them to get back on the streets.

"Got a minute boss?" Newman asked, swinging his chair to make eye contact. "I've got a theory I want to run by you."

"Make it quick. I've got a date with an insurance company. Seems like they have a strong suspicion that Richards is scamming them. They want Richards. And they don't care if it's on a morgue slab." Vascelli sounded exasperated. "I hate insurance companies. Especially ones that think we've got nothing better to do than chase crooked art dealers." He sighed heavily. "So what's your theory son? Entertain me."

"Suppose the tough guys who were paid to babysit the yacht wanted to get rid of the evidence that they'd messed up." Vascelli groaned; he'd heard Newman's postulate before. Newman ignored him. "And suppose they have contacts on the docks. People who like the water tend to stick together. Go to the same pubs. Share stories and all that stuff."

"Get to the point."

“Getting there boss.” Newman flashed a cheeky-boy smile, ‘Just suppose the tough guys phone up one of their cronies and ask for a bit of help to solve a little problem.”

“And which problem is that exactly?”

“Alex’s mate Murray. They didn’t have much time to get rid of him themselves, so they call in reinforcements.”

“We’ve been here before.” Vascelli growled.

“Yes I know we have, but hear me out. Just suppose the guys they call are Dockers. They come to the yacht, collect Murray, and stick him in a container with the intention of sending him to some far-away place.”

Vascelli’s face softened. “It’s a long shot, but it might have value.”

“If someone did stick Murray in a shipping container, it wouldn’t take him long to guess what was going to happen to him. So what’s the first thing he’d try to do?”

“Get out of it, I guess?”

“Exactly. But not easy unless you’re got the right equipment to smash through a couple of steel doors.

“So how did he do it?”

Newman looked blank. ‘Not sure.

“Did anyone ask the crane driver why they checked the container out? What made them suspect it was empty in the first place?” Vascelli jumped up and grabbed his jacket. ‘Come on we’re going down to the docks.’”

“Why don’t we wait and see what Brady and Turner come up with. I’m guessing when they run the prints they plucked from the container, they will prove Murray was inside and my theory’s got legs.”

Vascelli hooked his jacket over the back of his chair and sat down. “Murray hasn’t made it into the police records. We need to get samples of his prints to match the ones the lads collect from the container. Check the prints from the Cherokee and see if they’re a match.” Vascelli said. “Then to be doubly sure that they are Murray’s we need a set from something we know he’s touched.”

“Any ideas about how we can do that?”

“We know where Murray lives. I’m sure you can dream up a clever reason to take a look inside.” Vascelli smiled, “Dig into your bags of tricks and come up with something that will save us from an unlawful entry charge.”

“How about a report from an unknown source, of an attempted break-in.” Newman said. “We check the place out. I bring my picks, and while we’re searching for an intruder, you slip inside and lift something we can test for prints.” Newman grinned. “Is that clever enough?”

“I’m a little disappointed son. I expected something more interesting from you.” Vascelli shook his head. “What’s happened to you boy? Your imagination taking a vacation?”

“Well we could always tell the Swat Team there’s a suspected terrorist in the apartment and get them to splinter the door with one of their king-sized battering-rams.”

“Better. But let’s save the taxpayers a lot of money and go with the boring option.” Vascelli plucked his coat from the back of his chair, “Well, come on. Let’s get moving. We’ve got some skin-farming to do.”

On the drive to Murray's place Vascelli glanced sideways at Newman and said, "I'm still trying to work out how you came up with your theory."

"They don't call me the master of lateral thinking for nothing." Newman chuckled.

"Something must have set you off; lateral thinker or not. What was it?"

"When we were poking around the wharves, an old derelict chatted me up. Wanted to know what happened. When I gave him the short version of the blast, he mumbled something that didn't make much sense. His accent was as thick as treacle and I missed the punch line. The penny dropped when I ducked out to get fresh beans for your machine. The old boy said, 'so the fast-fella lost his duds in the fire, did 'e? I was thinkin' the Cap'n caught 'im with 'is misses and 'e done a runner 'for 'e got 'is balls sliced.'

Vascelli laughed at Newman's phony Scottish accent. "So some old codger saw someone running away from the fire?" He paused for a second, and then growled, "And when were you planning to tell me about this?"

"Just did."

“Not good enough. You know the rule. There are no heroes. We share information and we discuss strategies. We’re a team son.” Vascelli played the angry boss, but in reality he was actually proud of Newman and admired his ability to think outside the square.

“Sorry boss. I had to let the idea build up a head of steam, before I started yakking about it.” His apology was genuine. He believed in the anti-hero code and supported it. It kept them all safe and it helped to move cases along faster. “Once I translated the derelict’s lingo I got to thinking about the missing Murray. It always struck me as funny that he vanished so quickly. If I was a Richards’s boy, I wouldn’t want him to find out I’d stuffed up. If the yacht-watchers were smart they’d call in a few favours and dump the problem in someone else’s lap.

Wharves and shipping containers share the same territory. It wouldn’t be too difficult to get one of your mates to stick the problem in an empty unit and load it on the first freighter scheduled for the high seas.”

“Messy for whoever opened the unit at the other end.”

“Hard to trace it back to the perpetrator. No manifest. No paper trail. No problem.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Marcus made it to the administration offices and then he headed for a row of warehouses at the far end of the dock. The area was deserted. All the workers were pitching in to help with the fire. He found an open doorway and poked his head inside. When he was sure he was alone, he gave the place the once-over. A narrow passage led him to a lunchroom.

He ripped open a few lockers and struck lucky. On the top shelf of one, he found a neatly folded dark blue boiler-suit. Marcus grabbed it, pushed his legs into the lower section and smiled. A perfect fit. He did a quick search of an adjoining storage room and found a baseball cap and a lumber jacket someone left hanging on a hook. He had to fight hard to suppress a cheer when he discovered the owner had left a fifty-dollar bill in one of the pockets.

Dressed like a local, Marcus checked the outside again, then strode down the main access road. Five-minutes later, he slipped into a pub that catered for waterside workers.

He headed for the toilets, where he splashed water on his face, to get rid of the soot. Returning to the main bar he found a seat in a quiet corner and tuned in to the conversations around him. He knew how important it was to have good Intel. ‘Don’t want to share a drink with Tweedledum and Tweedledee, or any of their mates for that matter,’ he mumbled aloud.

Marcus was on his second beer when a young man approached him. “Mind if I join you?” the guy asked and sat down before Marcus could answer. “I’m Dean. Dean Temple. Haven’t seen you around before. New to the area are you?” Dean ran the questions into each other. “Got a job on the wharves, hey?”

Marcus took a long gulp of beer and studied Dean. “No. I’m just a blow-in. Came down to see what all the commotion was about.” Then for authenticity he added, “I’m staying at a little boarding house up the road. Heard the sirens and got curious.”

He hoped there was a place nearby that rented rooms. There were usually a few houses in wharfing precincts that rented rooms to Dockers at a reasonable rate. Meals thrown in. No women allowed. Washing and ironing extra. Mostly run by

widows who had lost their man at sea, or in a waterside accident.

Dean studied Marcus for a few seconds. “I thought you were a local because you’re wearing a *Big Seas* cap. Not often an outsider gets to own one of those. The darts club boys are pretty choosy about who gets to wear ‘em. Got to be a paid-up member of the club.” Marcus picked up the suspicion in Dean’s voice.

“A mate gave it to me a few nights ago. Told me to take it home and stick it in my trophy cabinet; to remind me that I had a great time while I was here.” Marcus said cheerily.

He hoped he sounded genuine, but wasn’t sure. His confidence had taken a skydive over the last twelve hours. He didn’t trust his ability to judge how authentic he sounded.

He held his breath while he waited for Dean to reply. His response would tell him if it was time to make a speedy exit. Dean grinned broadly. “So you’re one of Robbo’s mates hey? I’d recognize his cap anywhere.” He picked up Murray’s empty glass. “My shout.” Dean said loudly and headed toward the bar.

Marcus looked around the room and wondered if he should leave before Dean returned, or if it would be smarter to stay. Having another drink and leaving on a high note was option number one. Shooting through would only plant a bad memory seed in Dean's head. God knows how long he'd hang on to it.

No, a friendly pat on the shoulder and a cheery goodbye probably wouldn't be remembered. Well, not until the next time Dean and Robbo shared a beer together.

Staying proved to be a good move. Marcus picked up some useful gossip. A big guy, who came to sit at their table, told Dean he heard the cops were running the line that the explosion wasn't an accident. They'd already found a cigarette lighter and some other stuff that would help them find the person who started the blaze. If he was still alive. A lot of red hot timber had been flying around and the intensity of the fire was brutal. The police weren't ruling out the possibility of finding a blackened body when the clean-up was over.

Marcus hung around for another half an hour, then slapped Dean and the big guy on the back, and thanked them for a great time. They were

disappointed he was leaving. They wanted to take him to a strip club in a real seedy part of town.

They gave him their blessing to split when he told them he had a date with a well-endowed teenager. Loud testosterone fed cheers erupted when he added she was still a student at the local junior high.

It took a lot of self-control to suppress the desire to flatten the two guys. Instead he faked a grin and walked away. It wasn't often Marcus felt ashamed of his gender, but that was one of them.

Leaving the docks behind, and making it to the city centre, took fifty-minutes. Marcus knew wandering back into his apartment as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened was not an option. He couldn't be certain, but he was pretty sure Alex managed to get away from the marina. It was a reasonable assumption that if the goons had found her they would have taken her back to the yacht and he and Alex would have ended up a Duo act.

Marcus figured that once she was in the clear, she would have checked in with her work

colleagues, told her story, organized a posse to rescue him and recover a stack of masterpieces.

No, the apartment is out for the moment, he told himself. It was time to pay Stocky a visit.

He did a quick calculation. The cost of the beers brought the fifty down to thirty-nine, which meant a cab was out of the question. He found the nearest bus stop and waited for an MTA vehicle to give him a ride.

As a precaution, he got off the bus a block away from the gallery and then used the service alley to access the building's rear door. It was dark, but he knew exactly where to find the buzzer. He didn't need a light to show him. He kept his index finger on the button for a full minute. Stocky was a heavy sleeper and without a prearranged meeting he rarely opened the door after dark.

Marcus stepped back and craned his neck to see if any lights were burning in the upper level windows. He buzzed again and this time Marcus saw the kitchen light go and a voice growled through the speaker. "Whoever you are go away. We don't see visitors after business hours."

“Get your fat-arse down here Stocky, or you’ll be looking for somewhere else to live.” Marcus yelled into the microphone.

“That you boss?” Barney gurgled through the speakers. “Sorry boss. Coming right down. Just gimme a sec to kill the alarm.”

Stocky’s discombobulated tone told Marcus that he was going to need more than a second to get the alarm sorted.

“Take it easy Stocky. There’s no rush. Just relax and take your time.” Marcus said soothingly, “Fix the alarm, then come down and let me in. Stay cool. I’ve got all the time in the world.” Marcus sniggered at his last comment and sighed heavily. He sat on a trashcan to wait for Stocky to do his stuff. He was shocked when a few minutes later the old guy threw the locks and the door sprang open. Marcus studied the ex-cop and smiled.

They were friends. Had been for thirty years. Stocky, whose real name was Barney Short, had been his father’s on-the-job partner for fifteen of them.

One winter night Stocky and his dad were gunned down by a doped-up gang of high-school drop-outs who resented being told to move on. One

of them had a gun. Four rounds ended up in his father's chest and two smashed a bone in Stocky's leg. His dad didn't make it to the hospital. Barney's leg took months to heal. Barney asked for, and was granted, a special discharge from the force. He never recovered from seeing his best friend die on the job.

The small measure of compassion Barney once felt for young men, from disadvantaged backgrounds, vanished the instant the punk opened fire. It never returned.

When Marcus opened his gallery, he contacted Barney and offered him a caretaker's job. The wage was generous and a one bedroom, upstairs flat, was thrown in, free. The gallery took care of all the utilities, which meant Barney's only overheads were food and personal expenses.

It took a lot of coaxing to convince Barney to accept the offer, but when he finally agreed, the unwritten deal included a bond of friendship neither man had experienced for a very long time.

Stocky held the door back and studied Marcus closely. He stepped aside and then followed his mate's son up the stairs. He didn't comment on the

boilersuit. “You look like you could do with a cuppa. What do you fancy, tea or coffee?”

“Extra strong coffee would be great.” Marcus said, flopping onto a small sofa in the corner, “God, I’m stuffed.” He added.

“You look like hell.” Stocky said concentrating on the coffee making. He knew the lad would tell him the story; in his own way, in his own time. There was no need to rush. Whatever the problem was, they’d map a way through it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“Come on Alexandra. You’ve gotta give me more than, outta the blue an old boyfriend calls and asks you to meet him in a dark alley late at night.”

Newman didn’t try to hide his exasperation. “Not your usual style Detective. You’re normally more cautious than that.” His eyes pleaded with her, “Come on Alex, give it up. What the hell is going on here?”

“I’m sorry Mark. I wish I could tell you more, but that’s what happened. Marcus called and asked me to meet him. He sounded like he was carrying a heavy weight, so I agreed.”

“What about the solo rule? When were you gunna tell Vascelli and me about the meet-up?”

“Come on Mark, don’t do the high and mighty thing. It doesn’t suit you.” Alexandra’s eyes flashed with anger. “You would have done the same thing for a friend.” Her eyes challenged him, “And you

sure as hell wouldn't phone me, if you got a call from an old flame. Would you?"

"So Marcus is an old flame?" Jealousy drove the question; not a professional need to know.

"Fuck you Mark. I've already told you Marcus and I had a thing a few years ago. After the breakup we didn't stay in touch. I hadn't heard from him until last Sunday night." Alexandra's voice pitched higher than usual. Anger and frustration will do that. The bickering would have continued down the road to nowhere but Vascelli saved them, when he made a noisy entry into the squad room.

His eyes bounced around the room; he was doing a mental roll call. He finally focused on Newman and barked, "Get Brandy and Turner up here. I want a complete update on what we know. What we've done. And what we intend to do."

He spread a bundle of files on the desk and gave Alex a nod. "Good to see you lass. You look a lot better now you've had a bit of a kip." His tone was fatherly and genuine.

Alexandra smiled and thanked him for his concern. And for insisting she go home and get some sleep.

He was a good man. Tough when he had to be, but fair. He looked after his people. He cared about them. She knew was fortunate to be on his team.

Five minutes later Vascelli took the floor and did a quick recap of what they knew and what they didn't know. "As you're aware Mark and I went to Murray's apartment and we managed to lift a few good prints. We ran them against the ones we found in the container. They're a match." He paused; waiting for reactions.

Everyone nodded. "From this we can conclude Murray was taken from the marina, stuck in the shipping container and dumped on the dock. Whoever transported the unit must have access to that particular part of the wharf. It's a restricted area. Still I guess it would be a big job to check every person who has a pass. There are probably dozens of them.

We didn't pick up any other fresh prints inside the container, but we did find a few on the doors; especially on the locking bars. Brady has been checking them out." Vascelli gave the young officer the nod.

"So far I've come up with two names. Billy Tooby and Jason Pratley. They're small time hoods.

They both work for a trucking company, on the Lower West Side. The company does a lot of work hauling shipping containers to and from on the docks. The business seems to be legit, but I'm still checking out the owners to see if any dodgy dealings have been recorded against them." Brady said in a soft, but confident, voice. "Tooby and Pratley had a couple of convictions for street brawling and a break-and-enter, when they were teenagers. Nothing recent though. Seems like they saw the light and decided to become model citizens."

"Yeah right." Newman sniggered. "They'll be running for Congress sometime soon." Vascelli glared at him and told Brady to continue.

"That's about it Sarge."

"What about you Turner" What have you got?"

"I ran a check on Tooby's phone records. Tooby received a call at four-thirty am on the same morning Detective Papadopoulos and Mr Murray were at the marina. The call lasted five minutes. He got a return call from the same number at eight am, and then again at two pm.

I traced the number to an address in Queens. Service owned by a retired art dealer named Charles

Andrew Rothfeld. He owns a warehouse there. Converted the building into an art gallery in the eighties. The gallery closed in late two-thousand, but Rothfeld still lives in a top floor apartment. No police records. However, his name was often linked to known Mob men. He's never been convicted of anything, but he spent a lot of time socializing with big-time mobsters." Turner closed his file. He had nothing to add.

"Excellent work boys." Vascelli said. The young constables glowed. Vascelli looked at Alexandra. "Any of this mean anything to you?"

"No. It's all new information for me." She signed heavily, "Do you think Marcus is connected with these people?"

"You know me. I'm the suspicious type." Vascelli said. "When I see smoke, I expect a fire to break out." The connection was obvious. "No pun intended."

Alexandra shrugged and gave an apologetic smile. "Sorry boss. I wish I could give you something, but I've never heard of Tooby, Pratley or Rothfeld. I'm happy to work with Turner and Brady to see what else we can come up with."

“No need. I’d rather you and Newman try to locate Murray. Find him, then we can fill in the blanks.”

Vascelli dismissed Brady and Turner and looked at Newman. “Check out Murray’s gallery. Talk with the staff and see if they know where he is.” He slid a note across the desk. It had the gallery’s address written on it. “One and one, still adds up to two. Murray is an art dealer and Rothfeld used to be one. These two men probably have a connection somewhere. Try to find it.”

Newman and Alexandra were silent during the drive to Queens. When they pulled up outside the modernized warehouse Newman killed the engine and turned to his partner. “Look, I’m sorry if I upset you. I had no right to attack you the way I did.” The sudden sting of tears fighting for freedom shocked Alex. She didn’t trust herself to reply and nodded instead. A few seconds passed and she reached over and patted Newman’s arm.

“It’s fine Mark. I over-reacted.” Alex sighed heavily. “I’m feeling a little vulnerable right now. I guess that accounts for the melodrama.”

Newman pretended he didn't see the tears and placed his hand gently over hers. "It seems there's a great deal I don't know about Marcus." Alex said "He's obviously not the person I once knew." She swallowed hard then added, "I agree with the boss. He's not an innocent bystander in this mess." She said sadly, "And I'm having trouble working out why he tried to drag me into it as well."

"My advice: stop trying to work it out. We're a bit short on good information right now. Whatever's going on will come together soon enough." Newman smiled at Alex. "No sense trying to work it out until someone throws some more jig-saw pieces at us." He reached for the door handle. "So why are we sitting here? Let's do our job Detective."

Rothfeld wasn't home. Away on a business trip his housekeeper told them. He was expected back in a day or two. Nothing definite. Rothfeld kept a flexible diary. He didn't like tightly planned schedules because interesting things had a way of coming up when one least expected them. He liked to be available for every opportunity that came his way. Especially if they were young, beautiful and willing, Gender didn't matter, but intelligence did.

How did they know that? The information came with the compliments of the gardener. His way of rewarding Alex for the nice things she said about the magnificent formal garden in the courtyard.

“Did Brady say how old Rothfeld is?” Alex asked. The frown told Newman she was trying to build a mind picture and something wasn’t working for her.

“I read somewhere that he’s seventy-one next birthday.” Mark grinned like a prep-school kid, “He’s doing’ ok for an old guy. Bet his cupboard’s full of Viagra” He added with a chuckle. Alex ignored him and walked back to the car.

“Should we check out Marcus’s apartment to see if he’s come back?” she asked when Newman caught up with her.

“No need. Turner is watching the place. He’ll call us if anything changes.”

“Then let’s go over to his gallery. My guess is he will go there sooner or later.” Alex said as she slid into the passenger’s seat.

Fifteen minutes later they pulled up outside the Z Block gallery. Alexandra smiled, “I wonder what the Z stands for.”

“Zorro. Maybe.”

“Zombie would be a better fit.”

“Or, it might be Z for Zebra.” Newman said. “Take a look inside. The lounges are all upholstered in zebra skin.” He peered into a wide reception area. “Let’s hope they’re all fake. Might offend the animal rights people if they’re real.”

Alexandra pressed her nose to the large front window. “This is one impressive gallery.” She said. There were success-gizmos everywhere. Nothing Kitsch, but the décor certainly sent the right message to impress; in a well-balanced and slightly understated way.” She said.

The more Alex discovered about Marcus, the more it became obvious that his current life was very different to the one they had once shared. Back then, he had trouble finding his share of the rent. His car repayment was never paid by the due-date; unless of course, she made it for him.

Alex shook her head in amazement. She was no expert, but the paintings hanging on the walls

looked genuine. Extremely expensive. If not priceless.

She didn't believe in the tooth-fairy, but someone must have waved a magic wand over Marcus. How else could he be so nicely setup? Drugs? Dodgy development deals? Rich widow? She ignored Newman's look. He was waiting for her to say something. She didn't.

Stocky saw the car pull into the curb and watched from the upper level window. "Looks like a police vehicle." He said. "Unmarked, but I can smell cops from a mile off." Marcus stood, walked over and glanced down into the street. Although he couldn't see the occupants, he agreed with Stocky. The sedan had the stamp of a nondescript law enforcement vehicle.

"I'll go down when they ring the bell. If they want to speak with you I'll tell them you're away on business and not expected back for a week." Stocky said calmly. "Unless they have a warrant, they'll have no choice but to walk away."

"Thanks pal. I owe you one." Marcus paused, "another one." He added.

“You owe me nothing. Life isn’t about tallying up good deeds. It’s about helping friends in trouble.” Stocky patted Marcus on the shoulder and smiled. “When they’re gone I take you over to the storage unit. You can hide out there until we can come up with a more permanent arrangement.” Marcus nodded but remained silent. “No one will ever think to look for you there. I’ll take a couple of the paintings from the unit and bring them back here. If anyone checks the security footage, all they’ll see is me wheeling a trolley inside and then loading a couple of frames into the wagon to bring back here so they can go on display. I’ll make a couple of trips; the first to take you there, then another one to drop off a box of supplies.”

“And how do you intend to conceal me from the security cameras?”

“Rolled up in one of our magnificent Persian carpets. It’s time we did some spring cleaning and put some of the excess stock into storage.” Stocky winked at Marcus and gave him a cheeky grin. “Whatcha think boss?”

Marcus grinned back. “Sounds like a plan. There’s just one small problem. Once I’m inside the rug, how the hell are you going to carry me?”

“Easy. I drive into the storage complex and park right near our unit. I make sure I stop in a camera blind spot, fetch a trolley and spread the rug on it. Then you jump on board and I roll you up like a Christmas cracker.” Stocky cocked his head and clicked his tongue. “So let’s start celebrating.” He chuckled.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Vascelli waited patiently while Newman and Papadopoulos gave him an update. “The caretaker said he hadn’t see Murray for two days, but promised to contact us if he gets in touch.” Newman reported. “Nice guy, but I didn’t believe him. He’s seen Murray for sure.”

“What makes you so certain?”

“No surprise when he opened the door. He was expecting us. Had his story already worked out and laid on the charm.”

Vascelli glanced across at Alexandra and nodded, “Do you agree?”

“I do. It was a bit too smooth. Definitely rehearsed.” Alexandra responded, “As Mark says, Barney Short is a really nice guy, but I suspect he’s a minder. His job is to care take of the business. I’m guessing that his Key Performance Indicators

closely linked to how efficiently he sorts Murray's funny business."

Vascelli noted she called Marcus by his last name. That meant she was building a line of separation between herself and her former lover. 'Good girl' Vascelli said to himself. 'Keep it strictly professional. Don't let emotion splatter mud on the windscreen.'

"So we keep an eye on Mr Short. Let's see if he leads us to Murray, or to anyone else who might be involved." Vascelli said as he walked to the whiteboard. "We need something here people." His frown deepened. "What's the story? Who's doing what to whom?" Vascelli drew a flow chart on the glossy surface. "We've got an insurance claim for six works of priceless art. All owned by Sam Richards.

We've got Murray contacting Senior Detective Papadopoulos after five years and telling, not asking, her to meet him in a dark alley in a seedy part of Queens.

Then we have a retired art dealer, Rothfeld, living in Queens. He calls home, a nice apartment on top of a warehouse he converted into an art

gallery. Murray's gallery is only fifteen minutes away. Are Rothfeld and Murray mates?

We've got Murray doing his Oscar winning performance at the marina and he and Papadopoulos ending up on a yacht owned by Richards.

Murray claims the missing paintings are on board. Richards employs two ex-cons to guard his multi-million dollar vessel, but they aren't very good at their job.

The Senior Detective does a little exploring. Finds, and photographs, the paintings and then she does a runner. The goons follow, but Papadopoulos is smarter than they are and she gets away.

We download what turned out to be good photos of the missing paintings from Alexandra's smartphone, and we have what we need to get a warrant to search Richards's yacht. The bad news is he flies the coop before we make it to the bay.

Richards has two goons on his payroll; supposedly employed to care take the yacht. Their names are Billy Tooby and Jason Pratley, and they just happen to work for a trucking company, on the Lower West Side. This company specializes in hauling shipping containers to and from the docks.

After the goons rough Murray up a bit he ends up like the paintings; missing. Then, just hours after we pick up Papadopoulos, there's a fire at the docks.

Someone torched a fuel tank. We find a pair of charred men's trousers on the floor of a shipping container. The local police find a melted cigarette lighter. An expensive brand before it was fried. The trousers were also top-shelf merchandise. An old homeless guy reports he saw a man fleeing the area while the emergency crews were busy doing their job; the runner wasn't wearing trousers."

Vascelli paused for a moment, and then added, "Murray hasn't been back to his apartment, so we visited his gallery and find out that he's conveniently away on business."

Vascelli took a swig on his now cold coffee. "It's a fragmented jig-saw, but I think Murray has the missing pieces in his back pocket." The others nodded their agreement. "Well then don't just sit there. Get out there and find him." Vascelli snapped.

The team started packing up their files, and were preparing to leave. Vascelli stood and walked to the door.

He smiled broadly and said, "One more thing people. I'm cancelling all leave until we wrap this

case up.” He anticipated the surprised looks. “I saw travel brochures lying around on desks. This would not be a good time to confirm any bookings.”

He glanced at each of them in turn, and then added apologetically, “I’d hate to see you lose your deposit.’ It was impossible to tell if the concern was real; they didn’t believe it was. They said nothing. There was no need. Their faces said it all.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suzanne lives in inner city Sydney. She has five adult children and believes the family and long-term friends are life's true riches.

For many years, Suzanne was a management consultant, and worked on special assignments in London and Vietnam. She was also a part-time college and university teacher for two decades; specializing in business management, information technology and human resources management. Suzanne is a qualified eLearning facilitator and delivers online creative writing courses.

The things she enjoys most are: her family, her work, writing, reading, gardening, preparing small dinner parties for special friends, and spending time with interesting people. Her favorite quote: *Strive to live the ordinary life in an extraordinary way.*

Suzanne was mentored by Denis Butler, the highly respected Australian journalist. She says she was fortunate to have the guidance of such a gifted writer, and adds his support and encouragement helped her develop her skills. Denis also gave her the confidence to trust her writing ability.

Suzanne is a self-confessed Woody Allen tragic. She believes Allen is a modern day genius, and all fiction writers can learn a great deal from him.

Her message to other writers: *'Never give up. Keep writing. It is the path to self-knowledge and a great way to learn about other people. Take rejection well and be your own harshest critic. Examine every piece you write and know you can always do better. There is no such thing as perfection, but there is always room for improvement.'*

OTHER WORK BY THE AUTHOR

NOVELS

The University

Shark Bait

Global Warming

Corporate Giant

Conveniently Blind

The Rack

Nicholas Merewether

Don't Ask for Forgiveness

SHORT STORIES

The Best of the Best

Dead Grandpa Came to Dinner

CHILDREN'S STORIES

The Little Hill

Don't Pick the Flowers



CORPORATE TRAINING PROGRAMS

Staff Recruitment and Selection Survival Guide

Change Management for Large Corporations.

A Trainee Accountant's Survival Guide.

Standard Operating Procedures Made Easy.

Get With The Program: *a self-help text for new managers.*

SAINAP: Skills Audits Industry Needs Analysis Program:

A resource for Employment Consultants and people who are serious about career planning.

That's The Way To Do It: for companies serious about Efficiency Audits and Organisational Restructure.

We're In for It Now: a system to help companies build a team-based workforce.

Get out of My Way, I'm The Boss Now: a quick reference for new managers.

