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**She’s My Baby**

*A mother searches frantically for her baby*

*while her husband tries to win back her love.*

*An mystery/thriller/romance by Chris Kirby-Ryan*

# Prelude

Grace Draper walked out on her husband two weeks before her baby was due. She was sick of his lay back attitude and lack of support. She was sick of the long hours he put in as a policeman and the few short moments he spent with her. Now here, under her mother’s roof – again – lying in the bed in which she’d spent her impressionable years, she felt a sudden pain in her belly that seemed to radiate to her back and then down her thighs. Was it time?

The labour ward was bright with surgical lights and white walls everywhere. Grace was nearing five hours of labour and just wanted it over. She wished to hell Charlie wasn’t there. She’d left him for heaven’s sake. Here he was being all supportive and urging her on. She just wished that right now she could swap places with him- with anyone! “Aaaaaaggghhhh,” another contraction.

“You’re doing well Gracie, nearly there.”

“Gracie,” thought Grace, “nobody calls me Gracie. Who did this doctor think he was?” She could see Charlie’s amused expression, knowing how livid she would be. “Aaaaaaggghhhh,” she was really over this.

“Here’s the head, here’s the head,” chirped the excited doctor.

“Thank God. Aaaaaaggghhhh.”

“Here she is, a beautiful baby girl,” the doctor exclaimed and as he lifted the tiny infant towards her mother’s arms the baby gave a reassuring wail, signifying her entry in the outside world. Grace couldn’t believe how tiny, how delicate, how special this baby was. Her baby. And Charlie’s. He reminded her of this by being next in line for a nurse.

# Chapter One

She should have known he would be there. Mother. Of course. Tears streamed down his face as he held his newborn daughter. “Come home,” he mouthed softly to Grace, and as she turned her head away from him the tears streamed down her face. How could she? She’d made her stand. He’d still be the same. Nothing had changed. Yet.

Little Ella Louise was 3.10 kilos or 6lb 13oz. Grace was tired from the delivery but so blissfully happy. Only Charlie had put a blot on her euphoria. She knew he had every right to be there for the birth of their child but she just wasn’t ready to see him. The pain was still so raw. She hadn’t left him unthinkingly. They had been married for two years but had been together for five. Charlie managed to spend a lot of time with her in the early days, but as he progressed through the ranks of the police force his time became more and more taxed. She kept telling herself it would change. He kept telling her it would change. Once he’d made Senior Sergeant he would have more time on his hands, but then came his status as a detective and things became worse than ever.

Oh she knew he had to work. She had been a police officer too and she knew Charlie an important job to do. There were plenty of people out there in trouble. But what about her? Didn’t she need him too? Just some of him at least. Then through her pregnancy things began to dawn on her. He wasn’t going to be there to support her. Support them. If he wasn’t there now things would only get worse when the baby came. He’d probably want to be out all the time. What with the baby screaming and all the trouble they were known to cause.

She started to see just how things would be. Grace believed she could make a good life for herself and the baby without Charlie. She was a capable woman. One of her lifetime ambitions was to start up her own women’s help group. With her mother’s assistance she knew she could achieve what she wanted to and carve out a good life for her and the baby. Better that than raising her daughter in an unhappy home, which it certainly was before Grace left.

Looking at her sleeping baby with her tufts of blonde hair and pale baby skin she felt a pang of regret. That beautiful nursery she’d spent months decorating and furnishing. The puffy white clouds on the pale blue ceiling, the sheep in the meadow on the walls. The little pink bassinet and everything in matching baby-like colours. But it was just too bad. She needed to move on, put it all behind her. Her mother had offered to help her, especially during the early months, as time went on she would find a place of her own. Charlie would have to make a decision about the house, selling it would probably be the best thing.

She reflected on when he first carried her over the threshold. The house they’d admired for two years from afar was now finally theirs. How safe she felt in his strong arms. She remembered the look on his face. The all-conquering-grin that spoke volumes of love and admirable intentions. He was definitely her Charlie then. The Charlie she’d fallen in love with, married and became pregnant by. Had things changed that much? Was it the pregnancy? The baby? Was that what had changed Charlie?

Charlie was sure Grace would come home now that the baby was born. Grace had walked out in a flare-up, he put it down to hormones and pre-natal anxiety. She had been on edge for the past three months and the tension was growing between them. Sometimes Charlie would even work later than he had to to avoid going home. He knew it wasn’t right but just lately when he was around her he felt just as tense as she did. So he let her have her head. Time to simmer down. But now here he was, on his way to visit his wife and their new baby. Convince Grace to come home.

The baby would change everything now, he was sure of that. Grace would need him more than ever and he would make sure he was always there for her. For them. She talked about splitting up but he wasn’t going to let that happen. He wanted to look after his family. They had prepared a home for the baby and that’s where she would be raised. He would win his way into her heart again, he had no intention of letting her go without a fight – no matter how long it took.

As he headed the car towards the hospital he though about all of the good times with Grace. They had met at the police academy during some weaponless control tactics and handcuffing drills. Charlie fell for Grace at first glance, wishing he could stay hand-cuffed to her for a very long time. She was far too attractive to be a police officer. He’d always imagined female police to be a bit masculine, a bit rough. But Grace was anything but that. Soft and feminine with a smile that just lit up a room. She really belonged on one of those TV cop shows where all the female police officers were gorgeous and all the men equally as handsome. She had her blonde hair tied up for training, but he imagined it cascading around her shoulders, tousled and tantalising.

It had taken him seven invitations, a bouquet of flowers and two boxes of Belgian chocolates before Grace agreed to go out with him. She was like no other woman he’d ever met, so interesting to be with and they had so much in common. Their first night out was a great success, they talked and laughed over dinner then finished off the night at a small bar come nightclub and managed to ‘move’ to a couple of songs on the overcrowded and tiny dance floor. Their first night out would become one of many, Charlie made sure of that.

When they married Charlie had been fortunate enough to be posted into the region of New South Wales they both adored and Grace was raised in, the Southern Highlands, with its rolling hills, rainforests, dramatic waterfalls and national park wilderness. Grace had opted out of the police force having come to the realisation that it really wasn’t what she wanted after all. She took up some part time work and a bit of volunteering at the local community group and shelter in Nowra, she had always wanted to help those in desperate need, particularly women, and felt as though this was the beginning of her ambition. Charlie was happy for her, her tenacity and willingness to help others underscored her selfless personality. Charlie knew that he had married the woman of his dreams.

And now as he was walking into her hospital room, a charming, sun soaked private room in the little rural hospital. He looked at her honey blonde hair draped across her pillow, her long lashes as she gently slept, the serenity in her beautiful face, so peaceful. Just as peacefully in a cot beside the bed slept the newly arrived Ella Louise. Such a picture of innocence. The world ahead of her. So tiny and delicate. His daughter. As he looked at his two girls he couldn’t imagine feeling more love than this. It was so potent he’d thought he’d burst. Just then Grace awoke. She looked dreamily at Charlie but as reality overcame sleep her mood changed. “Oh Charlie, why do you have to come here? It’s over between us.” Instantly Charlie’s saturation of love subsided. Fixing things wasn’t going to be as easy as simply bringing a baby into the world.

“I wanted to see you naturally. My new baby daughter, my wife.”

“Look Charlie, I can understand you wanting to visit Ella Louise, but I need some space.”

“And what about what I need?” Charlie’s voice was raised and his grousing was suddenly interrupted by an even louder protest. “Wow, she’s got some lungs on her hasn’t she?” he said to Grace as Ella Louise complained bitterly about having her sleep disturbed. He lifted the baby out of her crib. “She’s got your nose.”

“You think so?”

Grace was softened by the sight of the baby in Charlie’s arms. If only it could be – happy families, normal, just liked she’d always dreamed of. Her own home had been broken. Her father was a violent man and had continually beaten her mother. When he turned to do the same thing to her when she was just four years old, her mother had finally packed a few belongings and fled, to somewhere far enough away that he either couldn’t find them or wouldn’t bother with the effort of looking. The Southern Highlands, to the south of Sydney had always been home to Grace and it would be to her daughter as well, but one thing she would be certain of was that their home was always a happy one.

“Look Charlie, you’ve seen her now. Can you just give me these few days in hospital to clear my head, think about things. Call me at my mother’s when I get home.”

“You mean you won’t be bringing the baby home – to our home?”

“I need time Charlie, just give me some time.”

Grace had her time. She met some of the other mothers and enjoyed comparing notes on their babies and their deliveries. Most people were astounded at Grace’s quick birth, especially first time round, and Grace was starting to realise just how lucky she was. One poor mother had been in labour for 36 hours and two of the other mothers Grace had met had had Caesareans. Grace had always hoped for a natural birth and was now glad she had toughed it out. She was just in the middle of breast feeding and was having trouble, the baby just didn’t seem interested., when a stranger entered her room. “Try to relax, a baby can tell if you’re anxious, it makes him anxious too.”

“It’s a her actually,” answered Grace to this stranger, this woman clad in a pink polkadot dressing gown with matching slippers. She was obviously a recent mother, just found her way into Grace’s room probably for lack of something better to do.

“I hope you don’t mind. It gets so boring in here and I just thought I’d go for a wander. I couldn’t resist having a little peek when I saw you feeding her. What’s her name?”

“Ella Louise,” Grace replied, “she’s three days old.”

“Three days, it’s amazing isn’t it?” said the Stranger as she looked in awe at the tiny, suckling baby, little Ella Louise’s hands opening and closing like a sort of automatic response to whatever she was feeling.

“So you’ve just had a baby?” asked Grace.

“Yes, I …” the Stranger started to say something but stopped herself.

“Little girl?”

“A boy, he …” a tear sprang into the Stranger’s eye, Grace started to sense that something was very wrong here.

“What? What is it? Is something wrong with him?”

“He died. Yesterday. They did everything they could.”

“Oh my God I’m so sorry.”

“That’s OK,” she muttered and turned to leave, slowly shuffling out of the room. Grace was lost for words, she looked down at her own little baby, how precious was this little person that she held in her arms. She would protect her with her own life, nothing was ever going to happen to her brand new baby.

The Stranger started to appear more and more often at Grace’s bedside. Grace felt so sorry for her that she never objected. She learnt that her name was Martha O’Riley. Her child had been stillborn after a placenta-previa which brought on a massive haemorrhage. Martha was rushed in for an emergency caesarean. She was 32 weeks along and from all reports the baby was doing well until he developed a lung complication and just didn’t have the strength or the wherewithal to fight it. She was a single woman of 38, and didn’t believe there would be another opportunity to have the baby she had desperately wanted. She nursed little Ella Louise with tenderness and love, and Grace’s heart went out to this poor woman who seemed to have lost all hope of happiness.

“This is all I will ever have of him,” she sighed as she showed Grace a photo of her newborn child. Grace looked at the little soul. He seemed so content, so healthy. His skin was beautiful and he sported a thick crop of black hair. His nose was quite large for a little baby, sort of ended in a little bulb and his thick lips sat above a very noticeable cleft chin. Grace stared at the photo for a long time, imagining this poor little mite, buried before he would have a chance to be. How cruel life can be.

“Was there a funeral?” Graced precariously ventured.

“Well, there was a no-cost burial, I didn’t attend, I couldn’t. But I know where the grave is – for later, you know.” Grace understood and couldn’t imagine what she would do under the same circumstance. Martha left her room, hugging her baby’s photo to her chest, all she would ever know of the child she had longed for for many, many years.

Those few days in hospital passed quickly for Grace. There was baby feeding, baby bathing, baby this, baby that. Martha was always there to help and Grace could have sworn she was cheering up a little. She noticed how the woman’s face had brightened, her previous sallow complexion seemed rosier and her whole face had taken on a more relaxed look. Grace realised that Martha was enjoying helping with the baby, finding it therapeutic in fact. She looked at the way little Ella Louise seemed to be staring at Martha’s somewhat frizzy mouse-brown hair, although she knew the baby couldn’t really see anything at all, not even the large mole above Martha’s upper lip or her funny hazel eyes. Grace thought Martha seemed a kind woman and wondered if she might like to visit once they were both fully recovered.

Grace was dealing with her streams of visitors - friends, relatives and well-wishers. The questions. The inevitable questions. How’s Charlie? Are you back together? What is happening with the house? Grace was tired of it. She was really looking forward to going home and just being at peace with her baby. When the last visitor left on the fourth day she fell into a deep sleep. It was as though she had needed it for days. She dreamt of Charlie. When they first met. How handsome he was in his police cadet uniform. That smile. Those dimples. She couldn’t help but fall for him. She dreamt of the first time they’d made love. They’d hiked to Lodard Falls in the beautiful Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Charlie had found a very deserted and grassy spot just above the falls. From his back-pack he had pulled out a blanket and as the warmth of the summer’s day soaked into their skin the sensation of their lovemaking made its debut.

She dreamed of his masculine and capable hands on her midriff, her thigh, her breasts. The intensity of his eyes, the gentleness of his touch, the depth of his kisses. She felt him penetrate, she cried out and then joined with him in this rhythmic pulsation. From what seemed like faraway she thought she heard Ella Louise cry out, but Grace was too enthralled in her dreams, in her lover’s arms, Charlies arms, to respond to any pleas from the real world.

She awoke in a sheen of perspiration and a hot, painful feeling in her lower abdomen. She moved to get out of bed and that was when she noticed that the lower area of the sheets was soaked in blood. The next thing she noticed was the empty crib. Frantically she rang for a nurse.

“Oh hell,” exclaimed the nurse as she looked at Grace’s bed, “it looks like you’ve gone and got yourself an infection. I will call the doctor immediately.”

“But where’s my baby?” cried out Grace, “my baby’s not here.” The nurse looked at Grace puzzled.

“Probably just down in the nursery. I’ll call the doctor and then I’ll check on the baby in the nursery.”

“Please,” pleaded Grace, “I was asleep, I thought I heard the baby cry out. I couldn’t wake up.”

“Well that’s probably what happened. One of the nurses would have heard the baby, they’d have seen you asleep and so they’ve probably taken the baby to the nursery to let you get some rest.” Grace calmed down at that concept.

“Please just let me know she’s OK.”

“I will luvvy, soon as we can get the doctor here, we have got to stop that haemorrhaging.”

Grace was rushed in for an emergency D&C procedure to stop the bleeding source. Groggily she came out of the anaesthetic to be confronted by worried faces. There was the nurse, the doctor, her mother and Charlie.

“Ella Louise. Can I see her? Where is she?” instinctively she just knew something was wrong.

“Now don’t panic Grace, you need to stay calm, get yourself well.” Trust her mother for not laying it on the line with her. She looked to Charlie, he would be straight with her, always was.

“Charlie?”

“Our fellas are out everywhere, looking for her. We’ll get her back, don’t worry.”

“Looking for her? Get her back? What’s happened?”  
“She went missing, around about the time you started bleeding. We checked all over the hospital, but she’s gone Grace. We believe someone has taken her.”

“Oh my God who? My baby. She’s just a tiny baby. Oh my God.” Grace was becoming hysterical. The doctor stepped in and turned up her I.V. Grace drifted into a drug induced sleep, but whether she would find peace within that was doubtful. Her newborn, her first born, her daughter. Missing. How did this happen?

Charlie spoke to the doctor and his staff just outside of Grace’s room. He was a locum filling for Grace’s regular doctor while he was on holidays. Dr. Waters had every intention of being there for the birth of Grace’s child, but when the birth was early that changed things. This new doctor, Dr. Dillon, was very different to Dr. Waters. He was tall where Waters was short. He was fair where Waters was dark. And he had a sort of leering look about him that Charlie wasn’t quite sure he liked. But still, he was the doctor and obviously he was to be trusted. “Gracie needs plenty of rest now, but all going well she may be able to go home tomorrow afternoon. Is there someone there who can help her.”

“Oh well, GRACE has decided,” Charlie replied really sending the message to the doctor that it was not cool to call his wife Gracie, “to go to her mum’s for a little while, just to help her cope and obviously to make sure she’s all right,with the baby missing – you know.”

“Absolutely, it’s the right thing to do.”

“You haven’t seen anyone unusual hanging around the hospital at all have you Doctor?”

“Well no, not at all, but then I’m probably the wrong person to ask. I mean all the faces are a bit new to me. Why don’t you talk to some of the longer serving nursing staff, see if they saw anything. Well I’m busy, I must keep moving.” Doctor or no doctor, Charlie decided he didn’t like this leering doctor and his pompous attitude, he was a bit annoyed that Dr. Waters wasn’t here to help Grace through all of this.”

# Chapter Two

Charlie went straight to the station, he needed to review the evidence to date and to see if there were any new leads. Ella Louise had been missing now for five hours and Charlie knew that the more hours that ticked by the less chance they had of finding his daughter. Detectives Phil Ryan and Sandra Buckworth were reviewing the hospital security tapes such as they were. There was a lot of confidence and trust that seemed to be part of the bricks and mortar of a rural hospital and the Southern Districts Hospital was no exception.

Five years ago they had succumbed to a security camera at the main entrance and in the emergency waiting area when an attack had occurred on an elderly patient. The culprit was never apprehended and so the board had decided a little bowing to the times may be in order. Charlie had secured the last few days video from both cameras and now his team was now carefully scanning every available second of footage. So far they had come up with nothing suspicious. Patients, visitors and staff coming and going, no-one carrying a newborn at that time.

Charlie was heading up the task force. Every known baby broker and some unknown ones were under investigation. Bounce was an American agency that offered $10,000 to mothers to separate from their babies. He had also been known to specifically target mothers who were considering abortion. Ten years ago he came to Sydney and set up Cloud Nine, a house that would accommodate mothers, all expenses paid, throughout their pregnancy away from prying eyes. The agency would then arrange the adoption and payment for the babies once they were born. These parents would pay upwards of $50,000 for their baby.

Sydney based solicitor, Jason Fairchild, had been broking babies for over 20 years. During this time he had been know to place over 200 babies and his current price per head was rumoured to be $75,000. The police had been chasing Fairchild but to date, because of legal loop holes and a lot of fancy footwork, he had been able to avoid legal consequences.

CradleSong was run by Bronwyn Hunter and Dianne Lee. They had been operating since the 1980’s and had finalised at least 100 adoptions but were suspected of many more illegal adoptions. When their place was raided in 2005 police found no records, Hunter explaining that all her old records had been lost in a fire in 1998 and there were no current records as they were no longer in business. Police had been keeping a watch of Hunter and Lee for the past five years.

“Well where do we start?” Officer Fitzpatrick asked Charlie. She was just a rookie, but keen as mustard and quite a looker. Charlie had sort of taken her under his wing and she was just itching to get the bastard who stole Charlie’s baby, it was all Charlie could do to hold her back. “If we could start by investigating these three agencies, but I don’t want to freak them out. I’m going to send you in undercover to CradleSong, they say they haven’t been operating since 1998, this afternoon you’re going to be a young 17 year old drug addict whose desperate for money and desperate to get rid of her baby.”

“17 year old, bit of a stretch when I’m 23,” she replied, pushing a stray lock of raven black hair under her cap.

“Drug addict remember? You’ll be looking worn out, haggard and desperate. Goth’s good. Goth’ll work,” said Charlie looking at her shoulder length black hair and porcelain skin. “Get that new Sergeant, Melissa Monroe to give you a hand with the disguise, she’s really good at this sort of stuff – and she’s going to need to be because that woman is just about to become my wife.” Officer Kellie Fitzpatrick stared at Charlie in disbelief.

When Mr and Mrs James Schroeder made contact with Kevin Fredericks they were given the third degree, but Kevin was impressed – by their style, by their careers, by their Mercedes Benz and by their Double Bay address. Charlie and Sergeant Melissa Monroe made a convincing couple when they walked into his plush agency. They’d been practically mesmerised by the heavenly blue walls and the fluffy white clouds adorning the ceiling – almost making you feel as though you were on Cloud Nine.

The receptionist guided them into Kevin Fredericks’ office – a grand affair complete with a play corner and white satin quilted crib, just for effect Charlie guessed, although he couldn’t help the pang of pain that reminded him of his own baby. Kevin Fredericks sat in a powder blue high back leather swivel chair, taking advantage of the swivel motion – left to right, right to left - that could definitely become most annoying, Melissa thought.

They told their story. Childless after eight years of trying everything they had finally decided to adopt. They were told that it could be up to five years before a suitable baby became available and they wanted to start their family now, while they were young. If they had to pay for that privilege then they would do so, it was nothing by comparison to the thousands and thousands of dollars they had virtually wasted on IVF, at least this way they would be guaranteed a baby.

Kevin Fredericks could feel his palms starting to itch, he could almost smell the money. He told them that he could get them a baby within 12 months. The Schroeders were pleased but they wanted more. Max Shroeder was a man who was used to getting his way and he was willing to pay for it. Wasn’t there a baby available sooner, the sooner the better? Cloud Nine was reputedly one of the best adoption agencies in Sydney – childless couple’s dreams were constantly being fulfilled, at the right price. Kevin Fredericks licked his slobbering lips, said to leave it with him and he would call them within 24 hours. Charlie knew not to push a good thing over the edge and so Max and Maggie Shroeder left, having laid one stepping stone in the path to little Ella Louise’s recovery.

Officer Kellie Fitzpatrick always approached with caution. She was cautious as a child, ever since being attacked by a German Shepherd at seven years old, after stepping into a neighbour’s yard uninvited. And this house was very uninviting. A large Victorian home well over a hundred years old guessed Kellie, the turrets and sweeping veranda could be charming were they maintained, but the near derelict nature of the house reminded her of something out of a Hitchcock movie – Psycho? She rang the bell trying to shake off her apprehension, but as the door opened, the woman who stood before her did nothing to instil confidence.

Tall and almost skeletal like, the walking corpse spoke, “Yes?” Kellie felt herself shudder at the baritone voice that droned from this black garmented death-like creature, she looked at her hair, long, faded black with white streaks and pulled back severely from her face; Kellie put on her best street voice. “I’m Shantelle Davis, I’m supposed to see a Miss Lee.” The Corpse brightened up a little, Kellie could easily see that her upper teeth, too big for her skull like face, were all denture and her lower teeth, gapped and gruesome, should have been.

“We’ve been expecting you dear, please come in.” Shantelle was led through the large entry hall and into the front parlour,

“Dianne, our guest has arrived.” Short of gasping Kellie didn’t know quite what to do or where to look. There, spreading generously on a large recliner was the Corpse’s direct opposite. Dianne Lee was enormous to say the least, the bright orange floral creation that she wore doing absolutely nothing to help her. Her short, wispish, fly away red hair matched her red complexion perfectly. She looked about as comfortable in this late summer heat as polar bear on the equator. And was that a … oh yes, a cigarette, she was smoking a cigarette. Kellie abhorred smoking. “Well come in then girl, don’t just stand there!”

“So, got yourself in a spot of bother then have you?” Dianne asked in a sort of ‘that’ll teach you’ fashion. Kellie could feel herself being scrutinised. Her chestnut hair was now disguised by a short black wig with bright crimson highlights. Her black tunic style dress matched her black tights and black wedge multi-buckled boots. Normally Kellie was a conservative girl but as Shantelle Davis she was a Goth girl gone bad with heavy eye make-up and black lipstick. “Just what do you expect us to do about it then?”

“I heard that you buy babies,” Shantelle asked, acting nervously.

”Buy?” exclaimed Bronwyn Hunter, the corpse-like one. “We don’t buy, we place unwanted babies in very good homes.” She gave a satisfied huff. If she was trying to unnerve the girl it was working, Kellie was quaking in Shantelle’s boots.

“That’s what I want. I want my baby to have a good home,” she managed.

“And you want to get paid into the bargain, I presume.”

“Well I was told …”

“Never mind what you were told. We pay $8,000 for your baby once it is delivered healthy – and white. If there are any traces of ethnicity the price goes down.” Kellie was just horrified at the words coming out of the Corpse’s thin wizened mouth.

“I was told you pay $10,000.”

“$8,000 girl, take it or leave it.”

“I’ll have to let you know. Would it be possible to meet with some of the adoptive parents – have you placed any babies recently?”

“What business is that of yours?”  
“Well it is my baby. I wanna meet some parents who have got babies – from you, you know – that’d help make up me mind – see what sort of people you deal with.”

“What sort of people?” this from Dianne the billowing smoker. “You impudent young … our clients are quality people, of the very highest standard.”

“Crap,this isn’t gonna work,” said an agitated Shantelle who was actually a very irritated Kellie, these crooks sure had some nerve. Shantelle turned to leave, only to have her path blocked by the Wizened Mouth Corpse.

“Dianne, why don’t we give the girl a cup of tea, show her some of our photo albums. I’m sure we can come to some arrangement.” Suddenly the mood softened, the tables had turned as neither of the women wanted to lose this Goth girl’s profitable baby. Kellie had steered the path she wanted and was now one step closer to finding out whether these very likely suspects had anything to do with the disappearance of little Ella Louise.

Jason Fairchild couldn’t resist a good looking woman. Besides illegal baby broking he was also an up front solicitor dealing in many divorce cases. When Samantha Chichester walked into his office he made a vow that he would bed her before the week was out. Charlie knew that to be successful in these endeavours Samantha had to be convincing. He’d called on the aid of other precincts and quickly set to work to find the perfect Samantha. And he had in Senior Detective Sergeant Rose Everett. Legs that never ended. A body better than perfect. Her blonde hair just shoulder length and in a razor cut that sent sharp shivers straight up and down Jason Fairchild’s snivelling spine.

He looked into her deep oceanic blue eyes as she explained her plight with her third husband. The bastard. Wanted everything and didn’t want her. She’d show him. With Jason’s help of course. Third husband had caught her during a moment of indiscretion with the landscaper. Jason checked himself, sure he was beginning to drool. Samantha explained it had all been a misunderstanding but when third husband kicked her out of house and home she decided it was time to go for the throat, and be quick about it. Jason couldn’t agree more. In fact a romantic dinner seemed the perfect place to discuss the details of how to go about being thrown out and design a plan that would not only hurt third husband’s wallet big time, it would give Samantha immense satisfaction and put her permanently back into the lifestyle to which she had become so very accustomed.

Senior Detective Sergeant Rose Everett was pleased with her initial groundwork. What a slimy excuse for a man was Jason Fairchild. On one hand she dreaded having to spend tomorrow evening with him, on the other, she was looking forward to bringing him monumentally undone – and she was going to do that no matter what. She knew that the scum-bucket was dealing in stolen babies. She’d seen the files but they’d never been able to collar him. Oh yes, Rose thought to herself, this was going to be her finest moment!

So the plans and traps were baited and set. But more needed to be done. Putting a lot of their eggs into the baby broking basket was an excellent tactic, but in the meantime Charlie also had a team working on the comings and goings at the hospital through the hospital security system. So far it had been scrutinised by two of their best detectives, but Charlie decided to put a fresh eye onto the job, see if something more interesting might be found.

# Chapter Three

Officer Craig McIlwain was really getting bored. There seemed nothing remarkable about any of the footage. The usual stream of visitors coming and going. Parents with their newborn. He didn’t really know what he was supposed to be looking for anyway. A suspicious person with a baby? Nobody looked suspicious – and heaps of people had babies – this was a freaking maternity hospital for heck’s sake. It was nearly lunch time, and Thursday was payday and pie and chips from the Takeaway. Now that’d break the boredom for a while. Just then the phone rang.

“McIlwain,” he knew it was Senior Sergeant Draper, he couldn’t stand him but he did feel sorry for him – losing his little baby like that. It’s just the he was so damned bossy.

“Yes Serge?” hardly enthusiastic.

“How’s the review of the footage going?”

“Well I haven’t seen anything unusual yet Serge.”

“I think we need to take a closer look at all of this McIlwain.”

“In what way Sir?”  
“Forensics. Let’s get the tapes down to the computer lab.,” said Charlie, he wanted to look at every baby that left the hospital from the time Ella Louise disappeared. If someone just up and walked out with her then this just may be the way to find out who. “I want you to get them to blow up every image of every baby, you’ve got the photos of Ella Louise, see if you can get a match.”

Grace was finally home, away from the rigours of the hospital and the frustration of not being able to do anything. She was annoyed at the lack of results from Charlie’s task force and knew there was more that could be done. The longer little Ella Louise was missing the less chance they had of ever finding her. She knew that in her heart. The doorbell rang.

“Charlie, what’s happened? Have you found her?” Grace begged as she opened the door to find her husband standing there. Charlie hated having no good news to bring to his wife,

“Look Grace, we have three under-cover investigators as well as myself working leads. We are currently scanning all of the hospital security footage and we are hopeful that we will have some results by the end of tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow, oh my God Charlie. She could be anywhere by then – dead. Who knows?”

“Look darling, if there’s one thing we are confident of it is that whoever took Grace did not do so with the intention of killing her. Baby-napping is a big business – a profitable business.”

“You mean they would sell little Ella-Louise?”

“We think so.”

“No, oh no. Charlie – you have to find her. You have to find her now!!” Grace’s voice had risen and Charlie could see that besides the risk of becoming hysterical she was also on the verge of collapse.

“Look, where is your mother?”

“What – huh? Oh picking up some groceries, she shouldn’t be long.”

“I’ll stay here until she gets back. You have to get some rest Grace.”

“How can I rest when my baby is out there – God knows where?” Charlie gently put his arms around his wife and led her to the couch.

Grace was distraught. She couldn’t believe that her baby had been stolen by baby-nappers and would soon be somebody else’s child. To be raised by them in what sort of fashion she had no idea. Why her baby? Why pick on her? She was too tired to cry and Charlie’s arms felt comforting. His warmth and his familiar smell all worked in unison to lull Graze into a light doze. She dreamed of a little girl with long blonde pigtails and of a mother and father playing with her in a meadow full of daisies. But when the parents’ faces were revealed, they weren’t those of her and Charlie but of foreign people, totally unknown to Grace. They looked welcoming at first, then gradually their features changed to those of predatorial, sharp teethed, black-eyed monsters and Grace jolted awake in a lather of perspiration to find that Charlie had laid her on the couch and covered her in a cosy quilt.

She could still smell his aftershave on the quilt and she could hear his lowered voice in the kitchen, obviously her mother had returned while she was awake. She lay there thinking of Charlie, breathing the comfort of his scent. Why couldn’t things be just as they should be? Grace and Charlie - happy new mum and dad with little Ella Louise. She knew she still loved him, but she also vowed that if – no when – she got Ella Louise back she would be stalwart about leading their lives separately from Charlie. Little Ella Louise, not even two weeks old and she’d already been through more than most people in their entire lives. She owed it to her baby to ensure she had a stable home without any disruptions. The last thing she needed was an on-again off-again father coming and going whenever it suited him. A policeman was a public servant, not a father, but that was all right with Grace, she could be both mother and father – just as her own mother had done.

“Oh look there she is, awake now,” Grace’s mother commented as she and Charlie walked into the living room with a tray of coffee and cake. “Dear, Charlie thinks he may have some good news about the baby.”

“What? You’ve found her?” cried Grace shaking off her sleepy cobwebs and sitting up in anticipation.

“No, but we think we have a pretty good lead,” Charlie explained.

“Where? Please Charlie, can we go there?” Grace was pleading.

“Look, it’s just not that simple. We have a young police woman working undercover,” Charlie started.

“Who, who is it?” Grace was becoming increasingly agitated.

“Don’t worry about who it is. One of our most reliable officers. She has posed as a pregnant unmarried girl looking to sell her baby. She has received a message from persons of interest who are arranging for her to meet the parents of a recently adopted baby.”

“Oh my God,” shrieked Grace, “how recent?”

“Yesterday apparently, a little girl, just one week old. Shantelle Davis – that’s the alias of the undercover officer, said she would not allow them to adopt her baby without talking to some of the parents of past adoptive babies. In fact she insisted on talking to people who had recently been through the whole process so that it would be fresh in their minds and she could get a feeling as to whether she believed she was doing the right thing.”

“Oh Charlie, it’s little Ella Louise I know it is.”

“Now don’t go getting your hopes up sweetheart …”

“My hopes up! What do you know about my hopes? My baby has been kidnapped, probably sold. SOLD. And here you go about nonchalantly saying don’t go getting your hopes up.” Charlie knew he was treading on eggshells but he could now see that Grace was starting to become unravelled in a serious way. “Well I have got my hopes up Charlie! Hope is all I have, Charlie. All I have, but then I guess you wouldn’t know about that.”

The tears at the back of Charlie’s eyes were threatening to break through. “She’s my baby too you know. It is my life that has been torn apart too.”

“Well then do something about it Charlie, bloody do something!” Grace was shouting now, staggering. Margaret looked on not really knowing what to do but about to catch Grace should she fall at any moment. Charlie decided the best he could do was leave, he was getting nowhere here and upsetting Grace all the more for it. Why couldn’t she just understand that he hurt too and he was doing absolutely everything within his power – and then some – to find his precious baby daughter.

“Charlie!” growled Grace as Charlie neared the door, “what’s next, when will we know more?” She seemed to be finding her sense from within, “When will this so-called Shantelle Davis have some news?”

“In about two hours, I will have an officer keep you informed.”

With that Charlie was gone. An officer will keep you informed. So what did that mean? Grace sank onto the couch once more. Her mother handed her a hot cup of calming camomile tea. Charlie said an officer would keep her informed. Well, she’d asked for that really, hadn’t she? Accusing him of not caring, of not being responsible, of not understanding. This was his answer. An officer would inform her. She looked across at the side dresser, a photo of her and Charlie on their wedding day shone out from all of the other pictures. Could she really get through this worst time of her life without Charlie?

She was so confused. One minute she wanted nothing to do with him and the next minute she desperately needed him. She somehow knew that all of the comfort she could ever wish for could be found in his arms, but then on the other hand she wondered if he did care at all – the way he stomped out of the house. So impersonal. Grace often wondered if the announcement of a baby soon to join their family was the undoing of the loving partnership they previously had. Never being around when she needed him, he hadn’t attended any of her pre-natal classes. Oh it was such a big conundrum. All she wanted was her baby daughter, she could get by without Charlie. Couldn’t she?

Charlie had to calm down. No sooner had he reached his car than he had broken down into tears. He was struggling to keep things together and for the sake of his wife and child he knew that he must. He couldn’t see Grace again. Wouldn’t. Not until this was over. He knew she would be safe with her mother. Margaret doted on her for God’s sake. Her only child. Charlie would need all of his strength, all of his nerve and all of his resolve for this investigation and until Ella Louise was found he was going to give it 100%. Besides, Grace would be better off with out him. Just look at how he upset her without even trying. When this was all over he would give her her freedom if that’s what she wanted, but he would still be a good father to Ella Louise, of that he was adamant. First things first however. He must find his daughter.

# Chapter Four

Officer Kellie Fitzpatrick had been joined on her trip to Sydney by a team of police officers, but now, as Shantelle Davis, it was her job to enter the plush Mosman home alone. She was surprised by the woman who opened the door, a well groomed brunette who seemed the career driven type. Although a little taken aback at first by Shantelle’s appearance, she welcomed the girl into her stately home. Shantelle looked all around her. The sweeping staircase, the flowing interior, the period furniture – it all reeked of one thing. Money. Yet the Career Woman seemed approachable enough, “Bronwyn explained your situation to me,” Career Woman offered. “I was sorry to hear about it but I can assure you that your baby will be given a very good home. There was no end of checking done on my husband and I before she would agree to find us a baby.”

“Find?” ventured Shantelle, “whacha mean by find?”

“Well babies have to be matched, you know, as best they can. I guess it’s a bit like that online dating service where they try to match you with the right man.”

“Is that how you met your husband then?” The Kellie inside Shantelle knew that this would never be the case with a woman like this, but it was quite a giggle getting her reaction.

“Oh my heavens above no, I was just trying to explain to you how Bronwyn and Dianne try to match baby with parents and well, we believe we have the most perfect little girl, could easily have been a product of our own engineering.” Shantelle looked baffled and then asked,

“Well could I see her. The baby. Wouldja mind?”

As Shantelle entered the nursery she took in the expensive wallpaper, the exclusive furniture and the absolute best in everything. Giant stuffed toys and an astonishing mobile with spinning dolphins and bucking sea-horses surrounded by a sparkling array of fake corals. Then she saw it. The tiny crib where the baby was sleeping. Slowly she walked towards it. Suddenly her breath was taken away when she saw the long thick lashes, the delicate pink cheeks and the rose bud lips, sucking every now and then as though in search of a teat. She was mesmerised and Career Woman could see it immediately. “Are you sure you want to give your baby up?” Shantelle jumped, suddenly remembering her reason for being there.

“Oh yeah, oh look I have to, you know. I’d be a hopeless mum. What’s her name?”

“Isabel.” And with that one word Isabel awoke, staring wonderingly as though she could see the whole world before her, although at two weeks old, she was most likely differentiating shapes.

“Oh, d’ya mind if I hold her?” Shantelle ventured tentatively.

“No, I don’t mind. Be careful of her head.” Career Woman watched as Shantelle gently lifted Isabel from her crib.

“You’ve done this before?”

“The oldest of five.”

“Goodness me. Your mother must have been busy. What makes you think you couldn’t look after your baby?” Kellie knew she had let the Shantelle image slip and immediately got back into the persona.

“I don’t have a job and I live on the streets. How am I going to bring up a baby?” Shantelle hoisted the baby onto her shoulder and Isabel let go with one of the rudest noises the Career Woman had heard to date.

“Oh dear, that one definitely calls for a nappy change, here, I’ll take her.” Shantelle followed Career Woman to the plush padded changing table, now was her chance to look for the birthmark Charlie had briefed her on.

The thing about babies is they can change so quickly, from blonde hair to black hair in less than a week and when Kellie had first laid eyes on Isabel she didn’t believe this was little Ella Louise, but she knew she needed more proof. Once Career Woman and Kellie had overcome the initial invasion of the olfactory organ, the dirty nappy was quickly removed and Career Woman began to clean baby up. Just to the right of the navel, Charlie had said, a diamond shaped birthmark with a reddish tinge. Well it wasn’t there, whether it could have been mistaken for a rash that had disappeared or anything else for that matter was debatable, but there was nothing there now. “Oh blast, I have run out of lotion. Would you mind terribly watching her while I fetch some more from the bathroom?” Shantelle quickly agreed and once alone with the baby she was able to snap off a couple of shots with her iPhone, all the proof she’d need to take back to Charlie.

Jason Fairchild stared at the gorgeous piece of female flesh sitting across the table from him. How he adored his job and obvious skills as one of Sydney’s best divorce attorneys. It gave him advantages he could only dream about when he was a young boy growing up in Sydney’s sprawling and plebeian western suburbs. He’d fought hard to make it to the top, left his lowbred parents behind him and moved way, way up in the world. Now here he was at one of Sydney’s most talked about restaurants with a woman who had every man within envying distance gaping. If there was one thing he did thank his parents for it was his more than half way decent looks. He knew that he was easy on the eye, naturally slim build, olive skin and thick dark hair. He could see Samantha running her selective eyes over those very features right now. He’d make sure Samantha’s third husband paid and paid handsomely, but right now he had a pressingly more important plan to implement.

“More champagne?” he offered as he lifted the Bollinger. Samantha looked teasingly at him through her blue eyes and long thick lashes,

“Don’t mind if I do. Tell me a little more about yourself Jason, you seem to be leading an amazingly interesting life.”

“Oh there’s not that much to tell really, one divorce after the other, day after day, you know,” Jason came back, flattered but trying to act nonplussed.

“No, I’ve heard about you – a man of many interests – and many women. Tell me about your other interests.” Jason, completely clueless as to who Samantha really was, decided to brag a little.

“Well I do have a couple of other interests, but I’m really what you would call a silent partner.”

“That can’t be very interesting then, I should imagine you’d want to be involved from time to time, know what’s going on with your business, with your money.” Jason was thoroughly turned on by Samantha’s lilting voice and the fact that her naked foot was now running up and down the inside of his trouser leg. Gently she caressed his calf, enticingly she looked into his eyes.

“Well of course I keep in touch. I mean, truth be known I am in charge, nothing really happens without my approval,” beginning to brag now.

“I’ll bet it doesn’t,” said Samantha seductively, still rubbing his calf.

“Look why don’t we get out of here. I have an apartment close by, we could have a night cap.” That was just the way he liked it. His place, him in control.

“Thought you’d never ask.”

She let her wrap slip seductively from her shoulders as she sank into the velvety red sofa. “Did you ever think about settling down, starting a family?” Jason was horrified at the turn of conversation and just wondered exactly what Samantha was leading to, he handed her a snifter of Courvoisier.

“Oh, don’t misunderstand me. Sometimes I do muse. He wanted children you see, desperately. Thing was, he married the wrong person – I can never have children. An early childhood trauma. I sometimes wonder whether I would like a child – if I married again, or not. A child, it might not be such a bad idea; but it’s just not going to happen in my case.”

“There are other options you know.”

“Such as?” Senior Detective Sergeant Rose Everett, was fishing, trying not to show her true colours beneath her Samantha persona.

“Adoption. Surrogacy.” Jason hadn’t picked up on a thing.

“I couldn’t entertain the thought of surrogacy, but adoption? Waiting lists, screening. It’s such a drama.” She was doing nicely, Samantha firmly at the fore.

“Doesn’t have to be.”

“Oh?”

“There are ways of cutting through all the red tape.”

“Tell me more.” She knew she was starting to push.

“Come on, what are we talking about this for?”

“I am interested. Really.” Get onto the story and quickly.

“You’re getting divorced for God sake.” Jason wasn’t buying it.

“Come on now, no harm in a girl doing a little planning. Setting her sights for the future.” Samantha persona slipped right back in, Jason nodded knowingly, understanding that Samantha had probably already picked out her next target for marriage. Probably somebody rich and influential who was looking to start a family.

“There are certain agencies that can match babies to the right parents,” Jason offered as he refilled her cognac.

“And would these right parents be those who could afford to use this type of agency’s services?” Samantha probed, taking the offered cognac and warming it in her hands.

“There are usually fees involved. Needless to say it’s not a charity, but it does also mean that you are guaranteed of finding the right baby within a short period of time.”

“Interesting. And how would I happen to get in touch with one of the agencies?” Samantha was being careful not to lose her seductive edge.

“I just happen to be involved in such an agency.”

“Involved?” Now she was getting to the point.

“You know, as one of my extra-curricula activities,” the answer was smarmier than Jason had intended and he hoped she hadn’t seen through his cool, calm and collected exterior.

“Is this legal?” Jason’s back went up at her question.

“Is that an issue?” he retorted.

“No, not at all. In fact it makes it sound all the more intriguing and I love something a little naughty,” a great rescue on Samantha’s part. She continued glibly, “when can I talk to someone?”

“You want to do that straight away?” Jason thought this was something she had in mind for way, way in the future.

“It is. It is. I have big plans and this could be the way to realise them.” And with that Samantha took a slow sip of cognac and seductively licked the snifter as she looked at Jason mesmerisingly from below her thick lashes. Jason knew he would do whatever she asked of him.

# Chapter Five

It wasn’t something she was looking forward to but as she had been given the task, Officer Kellie Fitzpatrick was rehearsing just how she was going to report the latest developments to a very fragile Mrs. Draper. She weighed up the pro’s and cons of each of their investigative efforts as she knocked on the Draper door, inadvertently hoping Grace might not be home. Grace opened the door.

“Kellie? What’s happened? Have you found her? Oh please let it be good news,” Grace pleaded, totally forgetting to invite the visiting police officer in. Kellie looked at her a little helplessly, certainly not wanting to deliver any information right there on her doorstep. “Oh I’m sorry Kellie, please do come in.”

“The baby I saw wasn’t little Ella Louise,” Officer Fitzpatrick explained as she showed the photos on her iPhone to Grace.

“You’re Shantelle Davis?” Grace was putting two and two together. Kellie nodded as Grace continued to plead, “There must be more you can do, demand to see other babies?”

Kellie looked at the despondent expression on Grace’s face and so wished she had better news. She decided to make the most of what she did have. “One of our other officers is about to meet with another of Sydney’s well known baby brokers and I am – I will go back in and tell this lot that I’m not happy, that I want to see more parents. Then of course there’s Charlie’s lead.”

Grace stared at the photo of the little baby girl, the same age as her own but not hers. Who did this little girl really belong to? Was there another mother grieving just as she? Kellie’s words were out there somewhere, and she was trying to make sense of what the girl was telling her.

“I’m sorry, you said something about Charlie?”

“Yes, he has a baby to look at tonight.” Grace looked bewildered, Kellie then realised that she possibly knew nothing about this. “He didn’t tell you? He is going in undercover, with another officer, pretending to adopt a baby.”

“Oh no, he didn’t tell me,” the information didn’t seem to move Grace one way or the other.

“Charlie told me to keep you informed so that is what I am doing. I’m sure he would want you to know. They are looking at a new baby tonight, him and his undercover wife. We really have quite a few feelers out there and we are very hopeful of finding Ella Louise within the next 24 hours.” Grace smiled up at Officer Fitzpatrick just as Margaret walked into the room, she took one look at her forlorn daughter and knew this was all getting way too much for her.

“Hello Officer, can I get you anything?”

“Oh no thank you Mrs er…” she realised she didn’t actually know Grace’s mother’s name, “I really must be off. Let Grace get some rest.”

Yes, I think she needs it – and it’s Fulham, Margaret Fulham.” Margaret began walking Kellie to the door, “Tell me the truth, are you getting anywhere at all with finding the baby?” Kellie always hated such direct questions, there was never an easy or straight answer.

“We’re confident. As I explained to your daughter Mrs Fulham, we have some very good leads and we are following up every one. I will report back in tomorrow or sooner if I have some more positive news.” As Margaret Fulham closed the door she couldn’t help but feel a sense of helplessness about to envelop. Deep down she believed they were no closer to finding her granddaughter than 26 hours ago when she first went missing.

Grace was numb. The pain she was feeling from her grief had overshadowed all other feelings, but thoughts of Charlie were nagging her. She needed someone to hold her, she needed Charlie, yet she’d driven him away. She knew it. Now he was out there with an undercover wife. What had she done? The grief only became worse and she could do nothing about it. Or could she, she decided to get out of the house. Get some air. Go and see Charlie. It would do her could to sit down and talk sensibly to him about their daughter, about them.

The house was right on the cliff at Point Piper. Jason had arranged for Samantha to meet up with the Brandts. He was convinced that if anyone could impress Samantha the Brandts could, with their newly adopted baby daughter and all of their wealthy style, just like the woman he was lusting after. Jason accompanied Samantha to the door, Samantha was doing her best not to let her true identity, Senior Detective Sergeant Rose Everett, show through. Gaping at the ornateness and sheer wealth that pulsed from the edifice just wasn’t an option, so she took it all in her stride as though she was in and out of Sydney harbourside mansions every minute of the day.

As Samantha’s stilletto’s clattered into the marble entry hall she couldn’t help but be taken aback by the enormous water feature surrounding a five foot high Tuscany goddess atop a grand plinth and displaying her long tresses almost to her knees. “There’s no accounting for the lack of taste amongst the rich,” thought Samantha, just as a rather stocky woman minced towards her. Her flamboyant clothes reeked money but did nothing for her well padded figure. Her expensive cosmetics were overdone. *Way* too much perfume and *way* too much eye make-up. Her hair? Probably not real, thought Samantha, you’d need a hairdresser every morning to have your bob looking that flawless and your blond that perfect.

“Hello I’m Erica, sorry Peter couldn’t be here but he is always just so tied up with his company. I don’t get involved. BORING. So Jason tells me you’re thinking about adopting?” It was such a rush of words all converging together that Samantha took an extra couple of seconds to compute.

“Yes, a girl. Definitely a girl. Who wants to bring more men into the world,”she said in her best highbrow voice.

“Oh quite, quite. Let’s see if we can find my little darling then, she’ll be in the nursery with her nanny.” Jason was grinning unctuously, this was all going along swimmingly.

The nursery of course was yet another grand affair and probably enough, thought Rose, to give any poor new baby nightmares for life. Everything was oversized, the jungle mural on the walls, the rainforest on the ceiling, huge stuffed toys and a life sized rocking Shetland pony. She pitied the poor baby when she was able to focus and properly see her surroundings. The nanny looked up from the baby’s crib, she was just tucking her in when the interrupters arrived.

“Cindy leave us for a few minutes will you?” Her manner was abrupt and degrading.

“I was just settling little Antonia down …” the young nanny was trying to explain.”

“I said just leave us, I’ll fix Antonia, she seems perfectly happy,” snapped the dragon lady Erica as she approached the crib. Nanny left and as she did Dragon Lady hoisted the tiny baby out of her crib. As she did so little Antonia let out the biggest wail of complaint, Rose looked at the baby and at once realized that she was not little Ella Louise, her dark hair and complexion hinted at European blood. The baby continued to wail. Louder and louder.

“Oh the poor little darling,” cooed Samantha, “whatever has upset you?”

“Oh I’m sure it’s THAT girl,” complained Dragon Lady, “every time she leaves and I pick her up she starts wailing. I’ll have to get rid of her, get someone older and more experienced.”

“The right nanny is very important,” agreed Samantha, knowing that it was Dragon Lady upsetting the baby all along. She couldn’t resist asking for a nurse of the baby and as she took her the baby began calming down immediately. Jason looked elated.

“Seems someone’s got the magic touch,” and as he said so he caught the glare of Dragon Lady and realised the error of his words, too late to correct them he just shut-up.

“Oh here give her to me,” said a furious and begrudging Dragon Lady, “it’s 11 o’clock and she should be sleeping.” With that she plonked Antonia back down in her crib, the baby wailing even louder. “Oh where’s that wretched girl? CINDY!” The shrieking did nothing to calm the baby and Cindy rushed in, tending to little Antonia with loving care and maternal instincts. The baby took a few gaspy, distressing sobs before gradually slipping into a peaceful sleep. Senior Detective Sergeant Rose Everett gave Cindy an approving smile. Cindy dared to return a little grin, revealed only slightly from beneath her blond locks.

As they left the Point Piper home Jason guided Samantha to her car by gently cupping her elbow with his hand. “What is your plan Samantha? When were you thinking of applying for a child?” asked Jason inquisitively.

“Give me about six months, maybe less,” she answered mysteriously.

“Look, if you want to do this right, we should start putting plans into place now.”

“Plans, what exactly?”

“Look, it’s 5pm. Happy Hour. Why don’t we have a quick drink and I can explain all.”

North Sydney had more than its fair share of trendy bars Senior Detective Rose Everett ordered a white wine spritzer while Jason Fairchild comforted himself with a boutique beer. “You see it’s all about helping each other. There are plenty of young girls who find themselves pregnant and with a bleak future ahead of them.”

“But surely with the Pill and single mother support – I mean teenagers have plenty of choices these days – not like the dark ages.”

“That’s true, but it still happens. More than you would think. We just help those girls solve their problems while we help prospective parents solve theirs. By planning for your baby now, in six months’ time everything can be ready to go.”

“So, do I get to meet the mother?”

“That’s not always a good idea, and I don’t just mean for the mother. Some of the girls are really desperate and well, they often try to take advantage of the adoptive parents. They know how much they want the baby and they know how vulnerable they are.”

So what? They try to scam them for money, that sort of thing.”

Absolutely, money, a decent place to live, even a car to get around in.”

“Well I don’t want just any baby, and I definitely want my baby to be white. Little Antonia looked a bit – well – Latino. Imagine me … I mean white, fair skinned is definitely the order of the day here.” Jason had to agree with that as her looked at her sexy blonde hair and perfect skin, just slightly tanned but not too dark, smooth and buffed with what he imagined would be some of the most luxurious and expensive cosmetics available.

“What I make sure of is that you get the baby you want. By comparing you with the baby’s parents your child is going to be so very much yours that people will believe exactly that, that the baby is yours.”

“What about the father?” Jason looked at Samantha, this was the first mention of a father.

“Easy, give me the father’s vital statistics - hair colour, eyes etc and adoptive daddy will be convinced the child is actually his.”

“That’s what I want,” said Samantha. “I can give you the father’s details right now, no problem, then what we need to do is fast track my divorce.” Samantha picked up her glass and stared deviously across it, into Jason’s eyes. Jason went watery with desire. She sure as hell was some woman!