

COVER ART

THE PROFILER

Book One of the Munro Family Series

Chris Taylor

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A psychopathic killer is stalking the women of Sydney . . .

Federal Agent Clayton Munro, a criminal profiler with the Australian Federal Police (AFP), has been called upon to assist in hunting down a vicious murderer who is intent upon carving up his victims whilst they're still alive. Guilt-stricken over his wife's suicide, Clayton's forced to set aside his personal issues in order to focus on the case.

Detective Ellie Cooper is also no stranger to heartache. Pregnant and abandoned at the altar by a fiancé intent on pursuing a career with the AFP, her opinion of the elite body of officers is anything but favorable. Angered when her boss orders her to partner with the Fed, she's determined not to cut him any slack.

But women are dying on the streets of western Sydney and the pressure is mounting to find the person responsible.

Will Clayton and Ellie be able to put aside their animosity and work together to catch a killer before it's too late? And what about the special fascination the killer seems to have with Ellie . . .

This book is dedicated to the late Len Wilde who was my most ardent supporter and to my husband Linden, who has never stopped believing in me.

PROLOGUE

Bradley Cole smoothed the doll's silky, blond hair with a hand that wasn't quite steady. He loved the fair ones. They were his favorites. They were the ones he tucked in beside him in bed at night. The ones that kept him safe.

Sometimes.

He leaned over and pressed a kiss to the hard, plastic forehead.

The door to his bedroom flew open and slammed against the wall. He cringed at the look on his mother's face. With surreptitious movements, he pushed the doll further under the bedclothes and prayed she wouldn't notice.

"What have you got there, you disgusting little boy? Don't tell me you have one of those filthy dolls in your bed. How many times have I told you boys don't play with dolls? Bradley Cole, you are a naughty, naughty boy."

She stumbled closer, close enough so that he could see the redness that rimmed her eyes. He almost gagged on the stench of alcohol and stale body odor.

Her cheap cotton nightdress flapped around her large frame. She collapsed onto the side of his bed and the steel frame groaned in protest. She reached out and tore off the bedclothes, exposing him to her sharp-eyed gaze.

"What have we here?" she crooned. Her gaze landed on the collection of dolls beside him. Her eyes went wild with excitement.

Terror liquefied his limbs. His stomach clenched.

"Well, well, well. You *have* been a naughty boy." Her fist caught him plumb on the cheek. He gasped from the pain. Tears burned his eyes.

"And now we have tears from the sissy boy. A ten-year-old who plays with dolls and cries like a girl. What am I going to do with you?"

She tut-tutted and then hauled herself to her feet. When she turned back to face him, her expression was as icy as her voice.

"Down to the basement. Now."

Bradley froze. He thought fleetingly of making a dash for the phone that sat amidst the clutter on the hall table and then remembered the other times – lots of other times – when he'd dialed the police only to be told not to waste their time and if he made a nuisance of himself again, there'd be consequences.

"I *said*, get up."

She loomed over him. Her fetid breath turned his stomach. Her fist poised for another strike and his fear ratcheted up another notch. Moments later, his bladder gave way.

"You stinking little boy. You're going to pay for that. Do you think I have nothing better to do than to wash your stinking sheets?"

With vicious fingers, she dug into his shoulder and hauled him from the bed. He blinked away the pain, knowing it was nothing to what he'd be forced to endure in the basement.

"Now, get down there like I told you and make it quick. Real quick."

CHAPTER ONE

Detective Ellie Cooper climbed out of the unmarked police car and waited for her partner, Luke Baxter, to come around from the passenger side. Drawing her jacket tighter around her slight frame, she tucked an errant strand of chestnut hair behind her ear. The afternoon was cold and dreary, just as it had been the day she'd buried her son. Three years today. It felt like yesterday.

Memories she'd tried hard to hold at bay all day threatened to bring her undone. Familiar pain and anger, combined with deep loss and a yearning for answers surged through her. She compressed her lips against the sudden rush of emotions and made an effort to push the thoughts aside. She was at work. Now wasn't the time to fall apart.

As usual, she took refuge in her job. She flashed her badge at the huddle of fresh-faced, uniformed policemen who stood inside the blue and white, checked crime scene tape that cordoned off part of the scrubby bank of western Sydney's Nepean River. Not far away, photographers and TV crews haggled over positions.

"We're Detectives Cooper and Baxter. Penrith Local Area Command," Ellie said to one of the young officers. "We're here about a head."

The officer nodded and offered his hand. "I'm Constable Jacobs, Richmond Police Station. I took the call from Griffin."

"Griffin?" Ellie asked.

"Yeah, the bloke who found it." His gaze flicked toward the crowd and his voice turned dry. "And presumably the one who called the media."

"Where is he?"

"I put him in the back of the squad car. I thought he'd gotten enough camera exposure for today."

Luke and Ellie looked toward the police cruiser. The profile of a man seated in the back seat could be seen in the late afternoon light.

"What's his story?" Luke asked.

Jacobs consulted his notebook. "He came down after lunch for a spot of fishing. Apparently, the fish were biting, so he didn't notice the bag right away."

"The bag?" Ellie asked.

"Yeah, the head's wrapped in a trash bag." He glanced at his notebook again. "Anyway, he was here about an hour when he had to take a leak. Walked over there a bit."

Jacobs pointed in the direction of a stand of bottlebrush trees nearby. Their scrubby branches provided effective cover from the road twenty metres away. "That's where he says he found it."

Ellie was relieved the area had been included within the taped barrier and nodded toward the young constable. "Good work on securing the scene, Jacobs."

He flushed. "Thanks, Detective."

She looked at Luke. "Let's go and talk to our fisherman."

"I'll get the camera from the car," he responded. "We need to get a few pictures before we lose the light." He glanced back at Jacobs. "Anyone call the morgue?"

"Yes. I got onto them straight after I called it into the station."

"Good thinking, Constable. Shows initiative," Ellie said. "Why don't you join me while I talk to our witness?"

Eagerness lit up the young constable's eyes. "That would be awesome. I can't wait to apply for the detective's course. I know I've only just come out of the Academy, but it's all I've ever wanted to do and —"

"Jacobs," she interrupted gently, "let's just get on with it, okay?" Ellie hid her amusement. She wasn't *that* old that she couldn't remember feeling exactly the same way.

Even in the fading light, Elle saw the mortification that flooded his expression and felt a twinge of guilt, but they were wasting time, and in homicides, every second counted.

Turning abruptly, she made her way through the tall grass toward the squad car that was parked a short distance away. Jacobs stumbled behind her.

Ducking under the police tape, she came up to the vehicle and rapped her knuckles on the glass.

The man she presumed was Bill Griffin unwound the window and stared up at her with wary blue eyes. His wild gray hair was windblown and in desperate need of a shampoo. Grizzled cheeks covered in a rough beard emphasized the belligerent thrust of

his chin. He smelled like fish, river mud and body odor. A damp hessian bag lay on the ground near the car, along with a fishing rod and tackle box.

"Mr Griffin? I'm Detective Cooper." Ellie indicated Jacobs behind her. "I think you've already met Constable Jacobs?"

"Yeah. I already told 'im everythin'."

"Okay, but we've got a head lying in a trash bag over there and so far, you're the only witness."

He shot a furtive glance at the hessian bag and suddenly his reticence made sense.

"I'm not from fisheries," she added. "I couldn't care less whether you have a license, how many fish you have in there or how big they are. That's between you and them. All I'm interested in is how a woman's head came to be lying in a bag under a tree near the river." She gave him a hard look. "You got that?"

Griffin gave a reluctant nod and his gaze slid away. "It's just like I told 'im." He gestured with a dirty finger to where Jacobs stood beside Ellie. "I was doin' a spot of fishin', like I always do. Right 'ere, every Friday. Fish were bitin' good. I'd gone through 'alf me bait already and I'd only been 'ere an hour."

He paused to scratch a scab on his arm. "I 'ad to take a piss, just like I told the constable. I pulled in me line and left it on the bank with me tackle box. Then I wandered over to them trees over there. That's when I found it." He gave a shudder. "Frightened the shit outta me."

"What made you open the bag?" Ellie asked, pulling out her notebook.

Griffin shrugged and looked away. "I dunno. Just thought I'd take a look."

Ellie knew the area was renowned for break and enters and petty thefts. More than likely, he'd hoped to find something he could sell.

She gave him another hard look. "What did you do then?"

"I picked it up. It was bloody 'eavy. Carried it a ways over there, toward me gear."

"Then you opened it."

The man bristled. "Got curious, that's all. Nothin' wrong with that." He shuddered again. "Wish to Christ I 'adn't. That thing's gonna give me nightmares for months."

"Can you show me exactly where you found it?"

Not giving him time to refuse, she opened the door and waited for him to step out. She followed closely behind as he walked over to the stand of bottlebrush trees. The night was closing in. Light would soon become an issue.

Luke jogged up beside them. Ellie turned to face him.

"We need to get forensics out here with some lights," she said. "It's my guess it's just been dumped here, but you never know what you might find. On more than one occasion, a cigarette butt at the scene's been enough to nail a killer."

Luke issued a brief smile. "Yeah, on *CSI*, at least." His expression turned serious. "I'll give the boss a call. See what he's organized."

Luke pulled out his cell phone. Ellie caught up to the fisherman.

"Just 'ere, it was. Right near the trunk of that one." He pointed to an area at the base of one of the bottlebrushes. There was a faint indentation where the grass had been flattened.

Ellie waited for Luke to finish on the phone before calling out to him.

"Bring your camera over here." She indicated the flattened area. "This is where our fisherman says he found it."

Luke closed the short distance between them and came to a standstill beside the witness. He leveled the man with a hard look.

"When did you call the media?"

Griffin's gaze skittered away and he ducked his head. "It wasn't me that called 'em."

Luke snorted. "Right, they just happened to magically appear." He gave the fisherman a hard look. "You want to hope you don't have anything in that fishing bag of

yours that you shouldn't. We might not be from fisheries, but it doesn't mean we don't know where to find them."

The man opened his mouth to protest again and Luke cut him off. "Whether you did or whether you didn't, I don't give a damn. This is our show now. It's a murder investigation and we won't stand for any interference – from you or the media. Got that?"

The man's gaze fell to his feet. He nodded with reluctance.

"Good." Luke handed her the camera and she fired off several shots, taking care to photograph the entire area.

She turned to the fisherman. "We need you to come down to the station so we can take a full statement. Constable Jacobs will bring you in." She turned to the constable who'd come up behind her. "Is that all right with you, Jacobs?"

He nodded emphatically. "Of course, Detective. We'll leave right away."

Ellie nodded her thanks. "We'll be there shortly. Just as soon as forensics arrives and we give them a quick rundown."

Moments later, headlights swept the riverbank. "Looks like them now," she murmured.

* * *

Ellie pushed away from the bench and moved closer to the stainless steel gurney where Dr Samantha Wolfe, the head of Forensic Pathology in the Westmead Morgue, examined the head of the unknown woman. The doctor's glossy black hair was tucked up in its usual position under a blue surgical hat and although Ellie knew the woman wasn't much older than Ellie, the years spent working with the dead were etched into the lines of fatigue on her face, making her appear older than she was. Even so, Ellie was pleased Samantha had caught the case. The doctor was the best forensic pathologist in Sydney.

"So, what do you think?" Ellie asked, trying hard not to breathe in too deeply of the smell that was unique to the morgue. It was well after nine, and Ellie was feeling the effects of the long day. And it wasn't over yet. She'd told Luke to go home. No sense in both of them hanging around. At least one of them ought to get some sleep.

Samantha peered at her from behind clear plastic safety glasses.

"There's no trauma to the head, as such." The doctor sent her a wry look. "If you don't count the fact that it's been severed from its body."

Ellie smiled reluctantly. There was something very weird about trading jokes while a woman's head lay on a gurney between them.

With gloved hands, Samantha examined the girl's face. "She's definitely Caucasian. I'd hazard a guess she's of European or Mediterranean descent. From the broadness of her features and the olive tones of her skin, even taking into account its deterioration, she's not an English rose."

"How long do you think she's been dead?"

She shrugged. "Hard to put an exact time of death. This time of year, tissue breakdown is slowed down by the cold. We've had some fairly severe frosts over the past few weeks. A bit like being kept in a freezer. If I had to guess, I'd say two, maybe three weeks. She's still in pretty good shape, but as I said, the cold weather would have something to do with that."

With a clank, the doctor dropped a small metal object into an empty kidney dish lined up beside several others on a trolley next to the gurney.

Ellie leaned in closer. "What's that?"

"An earring. There's one in the other ear, too." A few seconds later, another object clattered into the dish. Ellie hunted around for a plastic evidence bag.

"Over near the door." Samantha indicated the rack of shelves on the far side of the room beside the door through which Ellie had entered.

“I’ll take these with me,” she said scooping them up with gloved fingers and dropping the jewelry carefully into the evidence bag. “They might help us identify her.”

“No sign of the rest of her?”

Ellie shook her head. “Not yet.” She sighed wearily. “I guess we’ll see what tomorrow brings.”

“Come and look at this.”

The doctor’s tone had sharpened. Ellie’s heart accelerated. “What is it?”

Samantha was working her way through the woman’s honey-blond, matted hair with a pair of tweezers. Bending closer, she extracted a small particle and dropped it into a clean kidney dish.

“I don’t know, but her hair’s full of it.” She continued to part sections of hair, retrieving more and more slivers.

Ellie moved closer and peered into the dish. It was difficult to say what they were. Pinkish-brown in color, the particles were irregular in shape and size, the biggest about half the size of her smallest fingernail.

“I’ll send them to the lab.” Samantha indicated with her chin toward the other dishes lined up beside the gurney. “Along with those. Hair and tissue samples, blood samples, mouth swabs. Until someone comes forward with an identification, it’s the best I can do.”

Ellie suppressed a sigh. Someone out there was missing a daughter, a sister – maybe even a mother. “I appreciate your help, Samantha. Any clues on how it was removed?”

The doctor turned the head until it rested on its side. Ellie tried not to look at the single, milky-brown eye as it stared sightlessly up at her. Pointing with her tweezers, Samantha indicated the area where the woman’s neck should have been.

“Have a look here. See the striations in the vertebrae? It looks to me like it’s been sawn off.”

Ellie swallowed and shook her head. “What sort of a monster does something like that?”

“I’m afraid it gets worse.” Samantha poked at the ragged, exposed flesh. “There’s still blood in this tissue.” She raised her head and stared at Ellie. “Have you ever seen a dead heart pump?”

CHAPTER TWO

“For the love of God, will somebody answer that phone?”

The incessant ringing continued behind Ellie. Her fingers clenched around the phone already pressed against her ear and she gritted her teeth. It wasn't the fault of her colleagues that she'd spent the rest of last night drowning memories of her son, Jamie, with a bottle of merlot. To top that off, she now had the unenviable task of identifying a young woman's head.

Luke sidled in from the tea room and propped his hip against her desk, his usual mug of morning coffee in hand. A shock of red hair fell across his eyes as he took a sip. “How did it go last night?”

She grimaced and covered the mouthpiece. “We've got a real sicko on our hands. Samantha's preliminary examination found the head was severed while the girl was still alive.”

“Shit! You're kidding?”

“Afraid not. To make it worse, we still don't have an ID. We've joined the queue waiting for lab results. There's a backlog, apparently.”

“Of course there is. So, Sam did the autopsy?”

Ellie nodded. “Yeah.”

“Lucky break.”

“Yeah, let's hope it's not the only one. We haven't got much to go on. A pair of earrings and some weird pink-colored particles found in her hair. Sam thinks the girl could have been dead for up to three weeks.”

“Have you sent pictures to the media yet?”

Ellie nodded. “Sam did her best to minimize the shock factor with some strategic drapes, but they were still pretty awful. As much as I want to get her identified, I feel for family members that recognize her. No one should have to see their loved one like that.”

Luke's lips compressed.

Ellie did her best to stop her mind from straying to the last moments she'd spent with her son Jamie. She knew exactly what it felt like to identify a loved one in the morgue.

Determinedly pushing the painful memories aside, she concentrated on listening to the elevator music that played monotonously in her ear.

“Who are you waiting on the line for?” Luke asked.

“The Department of Roads and Maritime Services. Thought it would kill some time while I'm waiting. The boss asked me to take a look at a spate of thefts that have cropped up in the Mt Druitt area. I'm trying to get some registration information on a vehicle spotted by one of the victims about the time of the burglary.”

Luke shook his head. “You mean the general duties boys haven't already done that? What the hell are they teaching them at the Academy these days? Back in our day—”

“Hey, don't go lumping me in with your vintage. You must have at least a decade on me.”

Luke grinned. “Really? And here I just thought you looked good for your age.”

Ellie rolled her eyes. “I'm going to pretend you didn't say that, Baxter.”

“No offence, Cooper.” He sidled closer to her desk. “How old are you, anyway? Or are you one of those girls who can't bear to mention their age?”

Ellie tried for a glare but couldn't quite pull it off. She'd never had an issue with her age. The alternative to no longer having birthdays was pretty grim.

“I'm twenty-seven, if you really want to know.”

Luke whistled. “That old?”

She picked up a file and hit him with it.

“Hey! You spilled my coffee.”

“Not the least of what you deserve.”

“Now, now, Coop. Don’t be like that.”

Before she could cut him down with a suitably disparaging reply, Detective Superintendent Ben Walker appeared in the doorway of his office, his face grim.

“Luke. Ellie. In here now.”

Ellie watched him retreat back into his office. She turned to Luke, her eyebrows raised. Luke shrugged. With a sigh, she replaced the phone in its dock and stood.

“Sounds serious,” she murmured.

“Yeah.”

“Guess we’d better get in there, then.”

“Yeah.”

She crossed the squad room floor, wending her way through the clutter of government-issued gray steel-and-laminate desks, Luke close on her heels.

“Shut the door.” The curt command came from the direction of the window. Ben Walker stood motionless, his back to them, staring through the glass at the gray, dreary day beyond.

“Is there something wrong, sir?”

“Yes, Detective Cooper. There’s something wrong.” He leaned over his crowded desk and picked up a piece of paper. “A few moments ago, I took a call from an Evelyn Ward at Cranebrook. Her daughter’s missing. No one’s seen or heard from the girl since ten last night. The mother called her disappearance in last night and someone downstairs filled in a missing person’s report. It’s been referred to us because there’s still no sign of her.”

Ellie frowned. “How old is she?”

“Nineteen.”

“*Nineteen*? With all due respect, sir, it’s not unusual for nineteen-year-olds to disappear for a day or two. Maybe she’s with friends?”

“I know what you’re saying, Ellie, but not this girl.”

“How can you be so sure? When I was nineteen, there was more than one occasion when I lost track of time and ended up spending the night at a girlfriend’s place. Mom and Dad wouldn’t know where I was until I called in the next day.”

“What a joy you must have been, Cooper.” Luke held his poker face under her narrow-eyed scrutiny.

She punched him in the arm. “Just you wait, Baxter. You, me and the squash courts. Later.”

Luke’s gaze swept over her petite frame. She barely came up to his shoulder. “You’re on,” he grinned.

“Cut it out, you two.”

Their expressions immediately turned solemn and they murmured apologies.

Ben ran a tired hand through his graying hair. “This is the second girl to go missing in the last few weeks. I’ve got a bad feeling about this one. I know it hasn’t even been twenty-four hours, but the thing is, this girl’s never spent a night away from home.”

Ellie’s eyebrows rose. “How old did you say she was?”

He glared at her. “Nineteen. And yes, she’s never been away from home overnight before.” His eyes drilled into hers. “She’s disabled, Detective. She has Down’s syndrome.”

Ellie’s shoulders slumped and the breath left her body in a rush. “Shit. I’m sorry, sir. I really am. Me and my big mouth. I should learn to close it. How many times—?”

“For fuck’s sake, Ellie. Shut up.”

Ellie flushed in surprise at Ben's harsh reprimand. "Yeah. Right. I'll stop talking. Right now." She squeezed her eyes shut for a few seconds. When she opened them, Ben regarded her closely, his expression somber.

"I want you and Luke to talk to Mrs Ward. Go and get a few photos of the girl. Talk to the neighbors. Call the TV stations. You know what to do. We need to find this girl. Before another night falls."

"Yes, sir."

"Job's done, sir." Luke gave him a level look. "We'll find her. Don't you worry."

Ben's gaze narrowed. "Yeah, well, just get on with it, okay? Time's of the essence."

They moved toward the door.

"How are things going with the other investigation? Did we get anything from the autopsy?"

Ellie turned back. "It's not good, sir. Samantha Wolfe thinks believes the woman was decapitated before she stopped breathing."

"Jesus."

Ellie remained silent.

"You don't have an ID?"

She shook her head. "Not yet."

"You've got it out to the media?"

She nodded. "Of course."

Ben blew out his breath on a heavy sigh. "I'll get some of the others to go through the missing persons' files. Do we have a time of death, yet?"

"Two or three weeks. That's Samantha's best guess," Ellie replied.

"Well, it's not the Ward girl. But what about the other one? Sally Batten?"

Ellie pursed her lips. "It's possible. I didn't think of her earlier, but she was reported missing a fortnight ago."

"As soon as you've seen the Wards, go and talk to Sally's parents. Show them the head photos. There's no way of knowing if they read the papers. I'm sure the pictures are gruesome, but we don't have a choice. Besides, if it is Sally Batten, they'll have to formally identify her at the morgue and I'm betting the real life version is a hell of a lot worse than the pictures."

* * *

Ellie negotiated the right hand turn into Evelyn Ward's street and glanced across at Luke. "What number on Edward Street did you say?"

He consulted the crumpled piece of paper in his hand. "Thirty-six. At least, that's what I think it says." He turned the paper in her direction.

She glanced at it and frowned. "The boss could do with some handwriting practice."

"I guess he had other things on his mind."

"Do you think there's more going on here? I mean, I know this is the second girl to go missing, but it's not that uncommon for teenagers to take off for a while. Especially if things aren't good at home."

"I guess you don't know, then."

"Know what?"

"That's right. I forgot you only transferred in a few months ago."

She waited for him to continue. When he didn't, she sighed and pulled up at the curb outside the red brick house with the number thirty-six painted in black on the neat white picket fence running across the front of the property.

She turned to him expectantly. "So?"

The line spanning the bridge of Luke's nose deepened. He stared out through the windshield. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still heavy with full-bellied clouds.

“The boss’ daughter went missing at nineteen, more than ten years ago,” he murmured. “She’s never been found.”

Heat spread across Ellie’s cheeks. She thumped the steering wheel. “Shit. I had no idea.”

“Yeah, well, he doesn’t like to talk about it. She was his only child.” He shifted to look at the nondescript brick-and-tile house opposite. “That’s why this has probably hit him harder than you’d expect.”

Ellie breathed a heavy sigh and shook her head. “Shit.”

He grimaced. “Yeah, anyway, let’s go and talk to the mother. The sooner we get some pictures out to the media, the sooner we’ll find her.” He glanced at his watch. “If we’re lucky, it might even make the six o’clock news.”

Ellie climbed out of the unmarked vehicle and tried to ignore the cold knot of dread in her belly. The girl might have been nineteen, but was likely to have the mentality of a much younger child. Memories of the young son she’d lost stirred at that connection. She tightened her lips and forced them from her mind. Now was not the time. After all, this wasn’t about her.

A white metal mailbox overflowing with junk mail – half of it hanging out, wet and neglected – stood near the front gate. No doubt collecting mail was the last thing on their minds. She took a steadying breath and looked across at Luke. “Ready?”

He nodded. “Let’s do it.”

* * *

Ellie hid her reluctance while she accepted the cup of tea and balanced it awkwardly on her knee. She hated tea. Unfortunately, it was all Evelyn Ward had offered and it seemed rude not to accept. The woman had gone to a lot of trouble gathering tea things, including polished silver teaspoons, store-bought fruit cake and matching china. Even the sugar bowl matched, but Ellie didn’t fail to notice the way the woman’s hands shook as she loaded the items onto the tray.

They were seated on a worn, chintz-covered two-seater sofa in a small but immaculate house. Ellie guessed it was *circa* 1950, but the modern, neutral-colored paintwork was fresh and the place had been decorated with a talented eye.

After pouring the tea, Evelyn Ward took a seat opposite them in the matching armchair. Her cup remained untouched.

“I hope you’re not too hot.” At their enquiring looks, she shrugged apologetically. “I had to stoke the fire. I just haven’t been able to get warm.”

Ellie’s heart swelled with compassion. Leaning forward, she set her cup and saucer on the cherry wood coffee table and cleared her throat.

“Thanks for the tea, Mrs Ward, but we need to ask you some questions about your daughter. We know you’re worried about her. I take it you haven’t heard from her?”

The woman shook her head. She stared back at them, her pale eyes swollen and red-rimmed.

“It’s just not like her, Detective. I know what you must be thinking... She’s nineteen. Of course there’s going to be nights when she doesn’t come home. But not my Josie.” She gave them a hesitant look. “You know she has—?”

“Yes, Detective Superintendent Walker told us.” Luke placed his cup on the table and leaned forward. “We need you to tell us about her day yesterday, right up until the time you last saw her.”

Tears welled up in Evelyn’s eyes. She took a moment to dig around inside the front of her woollen dress and produced a crumpled tissue. Dabbing at the moisture, she then blew her nose. The tissue remained scrunched in her hand.

"I'm sorry, Detective. I just... I'm just so worried about her. I know something dreadful has happened. I just *know* it."

"Mrs Ward." Ellie kept her voice calm. "I know how difficult this is for you, but we need to get as much information as we can if we're going to find her. Now, I think you told Detective Superintendent Walker she was home until about three o'clock when she left for work at the local supermarket. Is that right?"

"Yes, that's right, although she wasn't at home, as such. We went into town together in the morning to get our hair cut."

She touched her head reflexively. "We always go in together. Every six weeks." A thin smile twisted her lips. "She gets hers curled, I get mine straightened."

Ellie returned her smile, hoping to put her at ease. "When you say you went into town, I take it you mean Penrith?"

"Yes. We go to *Hair Affair* in the Westfield Mall."

"How did she seem?" Ellie asked.

Evelyn frowned in concentration. "She seemed just like she always does. Her usual, happy self. She loves going to the hairdresser."

"Did anything happen while you were out?" Luke asked. "Did you run into anyone she knew?"

"No, we didn't run into anyone we knew, but not long after we had lunch, I started feeling unwell. I-I must have eaten something bad. We left soon afterwards and returned home."

"How does Josie normally get to and from work?" Ellie asked.

"I usually drive her."

Ellie consulted her notebook. "I think you told Detective Superintendent Walker your husband Harold dropped Josie off at work yesterday. Is that right?"

"Yes." The woman looked away. Color flushed her cheeks. "I-I had taken quite ill. Since our arrival home, I had spent most of the time in the bathroom. I had a terrible bout of gastric and vomiting. I could barely stand from the cramping. There was no way I was going to be able to drive her there and collect her again. Harold was going to do it, but then he was called to work."

"What does he do?" asked Luke.

"He's a nurse at Westmead Hospital. Someone called in sick. They were already short staffed." She shrugged. "He agreed to go in."

Ellie sat forward in her seat, her notebook open. "Why didn't you call Josie's boss and tell him she couldn't work? I'm sure if you'd explained the situation—"

"I understand what you're saying, Detective and we talked about it. Harold was going to call the store, but Josie begged for us to let her go." Mrs Ward shook her head, tears welling up once again. "She loves that job," she sobbed. "It's her first job. It makes her feel like any other nineteen-year-old."

Ellie gave the woman a few moments to get her emotions back under control. She did her best not to glance at her watch. Time was marching on. They needed to get moving.

"What time did Harold drop Josie at work?" she asked.

"Three o'clock."

"What time did she finish?"

"Ten. That's her usual shift. Three to ten. She mainly packs shelves and does product presentations – things like that."

"Was Harold supposed to collect Josie last night?" Ellie asked.

Evelyn Ward shook her head. "No, his shift wasn't going to finish until eleven. He couldn't possibly be back in time to pick her up. It was one of the other reasons we suggested she stay home last night."

Ellie frowned. "So what arrangements were made to collect Josie from work?"

“Harold had arranged with Josie’s supervisor to send her home in a taxi. There’s a taxi stand right outside the store.”

Ellie scribbled in her notebook. “What’s the name of Josie’s supervisor?”

“Jason Warner. He’s been very good to Josie.”

“So, what happened last night?” Luke asked.

The woman clenched her hands again and gave a shaky sigh. “I was still feeling quite unwell, so I hadn’t been paying too much attention to the time. When I noticed it was ten thirty and she wasn’t home, I started to worry. We only live about seven minutes’ drive from the supermarket. She should have been home.”

“Did you call the store?” Ellie asked.

“Of course I did, but the phone just rang out. They actually close at ten.” Her lips tightened. “I guess there was no one there. I called Harold. He couldn’t get away from work. That’s when I called the police.”

“Have you spoken to anyone at the store today?” Luke asked.

Josie’s mother sighed. “Yes, I spoke to Jason. He said he asked one of the other staff, Drew McNeill, to walk with her to the taxi stand. He didn’t see her after she clocked off.”

“Did he say what time that was?”

“Yes. Right on ten o’clock. It’s recorded on her time card.”

“The store should have security cameras,” Ellie stated. “We might be lucky and catch them leaving the shop. It could give us some idea where she went.”

Josie’s mother stood abruptly. Hope flared in her eyes. “Well, what are you waiting for? You’re wasting time asking me all these questions. My baby’s out there somewhere and she’s in trouble. Soon it’s going to be dark and she’s going to spend another night on her own.”

Ellie and Luke stood and gathered their things. Ellie looked across at the other woman.

“Mrs Ward, where is your husband now?”

“He’s out looking for Josie.” She stared down at her hands where they lay twisted together. Her voice dropped even lower. “He’s been out searching ever since he arrived home last night. It was his idea for her to catch a cab. H-he’s taking it hard.” As if a button had been pressed, the woman’s face suddenly crumpled. “Oh, my God! Maybe that’s it? Maybe there weren’t any cabs? Maybe she started walking? Maybe someone came along and took her...”

The woman’s thin shoulders hunched forward, quiet sobs wracking her body. Ellie’s heart ached. Painful memories of Jamie’s death swirled in her head. She fought off the impregnable wall of panic that had become a familiar companion ever since they’d told her about her son. She knew firsthand how useless well-meaning reassurances from strangers were, but offered them anyway.

“Mrs Ward, we don’t know anything about what happened, yet. Who knows? She could have met up with a friend after work and gone out.”

“No.” The denial was swift and strong. “She wouldn’t have done that. Not my Josie.”

With nothing left to say, Ellie and Luke followed the woman into the entryway. Brightly colored artworks adorned the walls on either side of the foyer. Evelyn caught Ellie looking at them.

“They’re Josie’s.”

“They’re very good,” Ellie murmured and moved in for a closer look.

Pride flickered in the woman’s eyes. “Yes, they are. She’s been taking art classes up at the University. The theory is a bit of a struggle for her, but she blows them away with the practical.”

“That’s the University of Western Sydney, is it?” Luke asked.

“Yes, the Penrith campus. She goes there three times a week.”

Ellie looked back at Evelyn. "Would you have a recent photograph of Josie? We'll get it out to the media, if that's all right with you? The more people who know about her, the better chance we have of finding her. You never know who might have seen her."

"Yes, yes, of course." She hurried through the doorway and disappeared.

Luke looked at Ellie. "What do you think?"

She frowned. "I think she's legit. She seems genuinely distraught and there doesn't seem to be any reason why the girl wouldn't come home, although I'd like to talk to some of the people she works with, in particular this McNeill fellow. After all, it appears he was the last one to see her."

"Yeah, I think you're right. I wouldn't mind meeting the father, just to get a take on him, but I'm not sensing any undertones here. Seems like a classic missing person's case."

Evelyn came back into the room brandishing a photo and handed it to Ellie. "Here it is. I found it with a few others I've just downloaded and printed."

The picture showed Josie standing in what looked like the sitting room. A glimpse of chintz-covered lounge could be seen in the far left-hand corner. Her plain turquoise uniform fit comfortably over an average-size frame. Medium height. Straight, short, dark brown hair. Guileless chocolate-brown eyes. A warm olive complexion and a smile as big as Mount Everest lit up a small, heart-shaped face.

"She's beautiful," Ellie murmured.

Tears crowded Evelyn's eyes. "Yes, she is." She cleared her throat. "Please bring her home, Detectives. We need to have her home."

Ellie clasped the woman's hand and squeezed, but the words of reassurance wouldn't come. "We'll do our best, Mrs Ward; we'll do our best."

That was all she could manage.

CHAPTER THREE

The icy sleet bit into Clayton Munro's cheeks, scorching them with its silent fury. He tugged up the collar of his jacket and tried to ward off the bitter chill. The Woden Cemetery was deserted. Canberra, in July, wasn't the place to be outdoors if you had a choice.

But that was it. He didn't have a choice.

Plenty would disagree with him. After all, she'd been gone nearly three years. More time than some people stayed together. More time than he'd been her husband.

Ancient pine trees stood silent witness, dark and heavy in the winter gloom. He kneeled beside the headstone and stared at the letters carved into the unforgiving stone.

*Lisa Anne Munro.
Beloved wife of Clayton
Mother of Olivia
1st March, 1983 – 2nd September, 2008.
Forever in our hearts.*

With an unsteady hand, he reached out and traced her name. Even through the thick leather of his gloves, he was sure he could feel her warmth.

Which was just plain stupid.

He knew that. With his head, he knew that. It was his heart that refused to believe it.

Tears pricked the back of his eyes. He swiped at the moisture with his hand.

For Christ's sake, she was *dead*. When was he going to let go and get on with his life? Wasn't that what everyone kept telling him to do? Even his brother had weighed in the last time, which just went to show that crap about twins being in tune with one another was total bullshit.

And what about Olivia? How was a four-year-old meant to understand why her mother wasn't there to kiss her goodnight? Christ, *he* still struggled with that.

Now he was expected to carry on without her – had even managed to do so. At least, that's what they thought. He couldn't bring himself to tell them it was all a lie.

He was a lie. He hadn't moved on. He couldn't. His life had ended when she'd swallowed the bottle of sleeping pills.

The sound of his phone ringing against his chest snagged his attention. He stood a little stiffly and tried to ignore it. On the fourth ring, he cursed and dragged it out of his pocket. *Why the hell couldn't they just leave him alone?*

"For fuck's sake, Riley, how many times do I have to tell you? I'm not interested. I couldn't care less if she has legs up to her armpits and tits the size of Pamela Anderson's. The answer's *no*."

"Legs up to her armpits? Pamela Anderson? Are you kidding? Even I'd be interested in seeing that."

His heart skipped a beat. The voice was familiar, even though he hadn't heard it in a long time.

"Ben? Is that you? Christ, uh... I thought you were... Never mind. Why the hell are you calling? I haven't heard from you in years."

Ben Walker chuckled. "Sounds like you were expecting someone else, Clay. Is that twin brother of yours still trying to set you up? I thought a man of your advanced years would have settled down long ago."

Clayton's heart pounded. His throat constricted. *Ben didn't know*. He didn't know about Lisa. He snatched a breath of air and fought to answer. "Twenty-eight's not all that advanced, Ben. Besides, it's not a crime to be single."

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