

# **THE FAMILY OF THE DEAD**

**JENNY PAUSACKER**

Thanks to Nance, who gave me the title, Kiara, who checked the texting,  
and Hugo, who lent me his work experience and acted as a consultant (again).

## CHAPTER ONE

My pocket beeped. I hate it when that happens while I'm on a bus packed with people. When I reached for my mobile, I accidentally elbowed a guy in a business suit, who rolled his eyes and sighed. I shrugged, bumping him again, and checked to see who'd been texting me.

It was my mate Seb, of course. Seb can't leave his mobile alone for more than two minutes. His message said:

'harris U freek r U at wrk? c any ded bods yet?'

I scowled. Ever since I told him I was doing my work experience at the forensics unit in the city, Seb had been carrying on like I was Hannibal Lector. That showed how much he knew. I mean, forensic pathologists are the good guys, right?

I thought about insulting him right back. I mean, *his* work experience was going to be at the Water and Sewage Services, so I could've called him a drip. (Or worse.) But the bus was too crowded even for one-finger typing. I eased the mobile back into my pocket. As I looked up, I spotted a sign I recognised from studying Mum's street directory the night before.

Oops. Time to get out, Harris.

I wriggled round Business Suit Guy, fell off the bus and instantly got lost in a big empty plaza. It was surrounded by office buildings and dotted with grey weird metal sculptures and little concrete boxes. At first I thought they must be planning to put more sculptures on top of the concrete boxes but then I worked out that the boxes were really uncomfortable seats.

An icy wind swept in from the sea and stung my eyes. I went hurrying across to a man on an iron bench, to ask where the unit was, and realised, just in time, that he was one of the statues. Luckily, there was nobody around to notice my mistake.

I blotted my eyes with the clean hanky Mum made me bring and kept pushing on into the wind. There was another street sign on the corner. I squinted up at it and sighed with relief. I was in the right place, after all. The forensics unit ought to be just down the road.

A few minutes later I was walking into a foyer that looked exactly like the main entrance to our school - acres of shiny lino, a curving flight of stairs and a couple of glass display cases. It was kind of disappointing. Oh sure, I knew the unit wouldn't be like TV shows or the movies but I didn't think it would be like *school*.

'Hey, you!' someone called out. 'You can't go poking around on your own, y'know. You have to sign in and get a pass. What are you doing here anyway?'

A pass? That sounded more interesting. I skidded over to the desk near the door and explained that I was doing work experience there next week, so I'd come in to talk to my supervisor. The woman on the desk, who looked exactly like our school principal's secretary, made me write my name in a big appointment book and asked for the name of my supervisor. My mind went blank, even though I'd read the piece of paper a dozen times on the bus, till I was convinced I'd memorised every word.

'The supervisor's name is ... um,' I said, like an idiot.

The woman laughed. 'We've got an Ahmed and an Ng working here but we don't have any Ums,' she said. 'Try again.'

The piece of paper wasn't in my pocket. I had to undo every zip on my backpack before I found it. By the time I straightened up, my face was bright red - from bending over, not from being embarrassed, okay?

'Agnelli,' I said. 'My supervisor's Ms Agnelli.'

The woman nodded. 'Oh, Gia,' she said, handing me a plastic square with a number on it. 'I'll buzz her and tell her you've arrived. Clip your pass on and wait for her here.'

So the pass was just a bit of plastic. That wasn't as interesting as I'd hoped. I attached it to the neck of my windcheater and wandered over to the nearest glass case. There was another metal sculpture inside the case, even weirder than the ones on the plaza - lots of cylinders and rods and battery caps, like a car engine.

'Boring,' I said to the sculpture.

Then I read the label and changed my mind. The thing in the case *was* an engine. It had come from a small plane that crashed and killed five people. The label said that, at the inquest, the coroner had made a ruling that totally changed the way light aircraft were designed.

Not so boring, after all.

'Okay, now you've had your first lesson,' a voice said behind me. 'In this job, you have to know all about everything, from light aircraft to the way people's minds work.'

I turned round and looked into the best pair of eyes I'd seen since my brother Ricky's spaniel died. They were darker than dark but with a shine on them, like stones that had been polished for hours.

'Ms Agnelli?' I said and she said, 'Call me Gia.'

Gia Agnelli could've been eighteen or eighty, for all I knew, because I hadn't been able to get past her eyes. Our eyes were on the same level, so I could tell she was the same height as me. But it took a real effort to check out her hair (black and curly) and her clothes (huge green cardigan) and decide she was probably in her thirties.

'You don't say much, do you, Harris?' she observed. 'You'll fit in well here. They're mostly the silent type, except for my mob in the Grief Counselling Unit, of course.'

'Huh?' I said. 'You do counselling? I thought it was just -'

'Dead bodies?' Gia said cheerfully. 'They all have friends and relatives, you know. When the forensic unit's checking out an accident or a suicide, the family's usually pretty upset. That's where my lot steps in - and talking about stepping, let's do a quickstep down to my office, so you can ditch your backpack before I show you around.'

She sped off down the left hand corridor, which looked exactly like all the corridors in my school. As we passed a closed door, my nose twitched, although I wasn't sure why. It hadn't been a bad smell, just a change in the air or something.

'What's in there?' I asked.

'Oh, that's the morgue,' Gia said. 'You know, where they keep the -'

'Dead bodies,' I said. 'Yeah, I know.'

Next time my foot hit the floor, I felt as if it might send me rocketing up to the ceiling, powered by excitement. Suddenly, the unit didn't seem like school any longer. There was a morgue in the middle of it and what's more, I'd sniffed it out. Seb would've probably thought that was gross but I thought it proved I belonged.

I went on simmering with excitement while Gia took me on a quick tour. She started with her section, which was basically just rooms, because that's all you need for counselling. Then we went through the Pathology lab (awesome), a lecture theatre (the same as any other lecture theatre, except smaller), the viewing room where the relatives went to identify bodies (empty but spooky), some waiting rooms (depressing) and the human resources area (basically just more rooms).

After that we detoured across to look at the Coroner's Court in the next building, where they held the inquests on any deaths that need to be checked out.

'It's kind of cosy,' I said in surprise. 'All those pink and blue colours, and plus the witness box isn't separated off, like in the legal shows on the telly.'

Gia shrugged. 'Well, this isn't a criminal court. They don't have barristers and defence lawyers arguing with each other and trying to trip up the witnesses. The coroner's just supposed to find out the facts and people talk more freely if they feel comfortable.'

Comfortable. It was a funny word to use about a place like that but I knew what she meant. Everyone seemed to be trying to look after the people who came here - like, they'd given the relatives a special viewing room, instead of shunting them right into the morgue, and they'd set up a whole Grief Counselling Unit, so people could talk about stuff.

They really *cared*. I couldn't wait to tell Seb that.

I was planning the best way to get one up on Seb when Gia braked in front of a door in the foyer where we'd started out. 'Sorry, I forgot about the library,' she said. 'This is where we keep all the reference books and the records of the cases we've dealt with. Come in and have a look around.'

The library wasn't exactly the high spot of the tour. When you've seen one library, you've basically seen them all. The most interesting thing was an album of newspaper clippings, lying open on a table between the rows of steel shelves. Gia hared off to talk to someone at the far end of the room, so I parked myself at the table and read one of the stories.

It was about a road accident ten years ago, on the Thomasville Highway, opposite the Selleck Range. A big truck had veered into the middle of the road, just when a tour bus was going past in the other direction. The truck had ripped the side off the bus, killing the truck driver and eight of the tourists.

There were three freaky things about the story. Firstly, the accident happened at two in the morning, so the tourists were all asleep when it happened. Secondly, the coroner said the truck driver's blood contained a lethal amount of ephedrin that he'd taken to keep himself awake, so he'd probably

swerved to avoid something he was just imagining, which meant the accident was totally pointless and incredibly sad.

And thirdly, even though I'd read about worse cases in my true crime books and on websites, I knew the bodies had been brought to *this* morgue, which made it seem way more real.

I couldn't stop staring at the row of nine photos across the top of the headline, showing the nine people who'd died. It started with a little kid in a bath, waving a rubber duck. That seemed like a weird photo to choose, till I realised his parents had been in the crash, which meant the bath-photo was probably the only one his grandparents had.

In the middle of the row, I saw two women who could've been twins but they had different names and ages, so I figured they just looked alike. And at the end of the row there was a photo of the truck driver. He was grinning at the camera, because he didn't know he was going to kill himself and eight other people later on.

The truck driver's photo made me feel strange, so I dragged my eyes away from the page and looked round for Gia. She was chatting to a guy who was so ordinary that I wouldn't have noticed him, if he'd been on his own. He was like one of those black holes where a star has collapsed in on itself and won't let anything out - except that sounds too definite, because he was actually more like a *grey* hole.

'Hey, Harris,' Gia called out. 'Come over and say hi to Jim.'

She sounded like she thought I knew the grey hole guy ... and, as a matter of fact I did, even though I'd never met him. He had to be Jim Dimitropoulos, the chief pathologist, who was married to my uncle Melvin's ex-wife Rina. In which case, he was the person who'd got me the job at the unit.

It had all started when my mum saw a photo of a dead body in a true crime book on my desk, while she was cleaning my room. Seb wasn't the only one who thought it was weird to be interested in that sort of stuff. Mum was still freaking about the photo when Uncle Melvin came round for dinner.

Unlike some divorced people, my uncle and Rina get on fine, so he'd phoned her on the spot and asked Jim Dimitropoulos to sign me up for work experience, to show Mum I was serious about forensics, and not just some sort of pervert.

'Thanks for your help, Mr Dimitropoulos,' I said, meaning it.

'Not a problem,' he said in an empty, echoing voice. 'Nice to meet you, Harris.'

He held his hand out for me to shake and I found myself whisking my own hand behind my back. I couldn't help thinking about what Jim Dimitropoulos might've been touching, only a few minutes ago.

That was exactly what my mum was hoping for. I knew she'd only agreed to Uncle Melvin's plan because she was sure I'd get over my interest in forensics, if I knew what it was really like. But I didn't want Mum to win, so I gritted my teeth and took hold of Jim's hand. It felt exactly like anyone else's hand.

'I was just reading this story,' I said, to cover the way I'd backed off. 'How did you tell the difference between the two women who look like twins? By their dental records, I guess.'

Jim's eyes went out of focus. 'Ah, yes, well,' he said, like I'd asked a trick question, instead of something incredibly easy. 'In this case -'

'Later,' Gia said, cutting across him. 'You'll be assigned to Jim's section later. I'll start you off in my section, where I can keep an eye on you.'

She dropped an arm round my shoulders and practically hauled me out of the library. I glanced back as we went through the door and saw Jim gazing down the album. His shoulders were slumped and his eyes looked like two grey holes.

'He's kind of sad, isn't he?' I said.

I was basically just thinking out loud but Gia picked up on it. 'All the time,' she agreed. 'It makes sense, when you know the story.'

'Huh?' I said. 'What story?'

Gia frowned. 'I thought you would've heard. Jim's daughter Tansy disappeared two weeks ago, after a party to open the new community centre where she'd just started her first job. That'd be hard for any parent but it's even worse for Jim, because his job keeps reminding him of all the things that might've happened to her.'

## CHAPTER TWO

I swallowed hard and made a note to hassle Uncle Melvin, next time I saw him. He should've warned me about Jim's daughter, to make sure I didn't say anything tactless. Then again, maybe he thought I knew. I generally tune out when he and Mum are talking about adult business.

While I was figuring that out, Gia targeted me with her dark eyes, like she could look straight into my head. 'So you hadn't met Jim before?' she said. 'For some reason I thought he was the one who got you keen on forensics. *Why are you so interested, Harris?*'

'Dunno,' I said with a shrug. 'I just am.'

'I hope you're not expecting the unit to be full of weird murders and unsolved mysteries, like on TV,' she said, narrowing her eyes. 'It's all pretty ordinary here. Just business as usual.'

'I know that,' I said indignantly. 'Why does everyone get on my case? If I wanted to be a vet, they'd just go, "Aw, he likes little kittens and puppies," even though vets have to do gross stuff too.'

Gia grinned. 'Sorry, Harris,' she said. 'I cop a lot of flak from my friends for working at the unit and I can't explain to them, either. But you're right - no one ever asks people why they want to be vets or doctors or whatever, do they?'



I grinned back. It was so cool, talking to someone who knew what I was on about. I'd only met Gia an hour ago but I could already say things to her that I never could've said to Mum or Seb.

'I've read everything I can get hold of but it's not the same as seeing it for myself,' I said, while she pushed at the door to the grief counselling unit. 'Like that bus accident I was talking about in the library - it makes a difference, knowing the relatives actually came here.'

'Well, as a matter of fact, there wasn't any grief counselling ten years ago,' Gia said, holding the door open for me. 'That came later but I get your point, all the same. Now, what do you want to -?'

Then she broke off, as a girl with really extreme glasses - red frames and black sparkles at the corners - came racing over.

'Gia!' she yelled. 'Thank heavens you're back! Mrs Clovelly rang ten minutes ago and she won't talk to anyone else and she sounded really, really depressed and I didn't know where you were.'

Gia stared at the opposite wall, like she was consulting an invisible file. 'Mrs Clovelly? Oh yeah, the SIDS case. I'll ring her straight away.' She remembered I was there and added quickly, 'That is, if you've seen enough, Harris.'

I shrugged. 'It was a good introduction. But - well, I'm here now. I could do a bit of work, if you like.'

'You're keen,' Gia commented. 'And we're overworked, so thanks for the offer.' She nodded at the girl and said, 'This is Belinda Ng. She can take you down to the computer room and show you how to enter the latest batch of data.'

Gia disappeared into the nearest office, faster than Superwoman, and Belinda took over. 'What's SIDS?' I asked, as she steered me off down the corridor.

Belinda peered at me over the top of her red frames. 'Sudden Infant Death Syndrome,' she said. 'No one knows why it happens but that doesn't stop some parents from blaming themselves.'

She parked me in front of a computer and gave me a list of the last two week's cases. I knew the program, so I got to work straight away. While I typed, I thought about everything I'd come across so far.

The smell of the morgue and the warm colours of the coroner's court. Jim Dimitropoulos, the human grey hole, and his missing daughter. The photos in the newspaper clipping, who'd turned into real people when I looked closer. The words on the list in front of me - suicide and SIDS and workplace accidents. Gia, who listened to me like I was really important, not some drop-in work experience

student, then turned round and concentrated just as hard on listening to a woman whose baby had died.

Fair enough, it might be business as usual. But I wouldn't call it ordinary, all the same. I felt so impressed that I pulled out my mobile and sent a message to Seb:

'frnsics rules, ok? drippy wtr dept sux'.

Two minutes later he texted me back, saying:

'vmpires suk. i bet U r in it 4 the blud.'

Typical. That proved what Gia and I had just been saying. Outsiders really didn't get it.

\*\*\*

The only down side of working at the unit was the bus trip in and out of the city. The bus was full when I got on, so I squeezed in between two business suits and hung onto a pole, swaying to and fro and thinking about my day.

It felt kind of odd to be surrounded by live people, after I'd spent the afternoon typing up lists that included stuff like "condition of death" and "condition of the body at death". I kept looking at everyone's faces and trying to describe the condition of being alive.

The trip home took ages. When I walked into the lounge room, my little brother Ricky was parked in front of an action movie on the telly, where a bullet had just slammed some guy against a wall. Ricky wrapped his arms round his knees and watched the guy heave himself up, clap a hand to his shoulder and go staggering off down the street.

'Actually, it couldn't happen like that,' I said, leaning over the back of his chair. 'When someone's shot through the shoulder, the bullet pierces their pneumal cavity.'

Ricky unwrapped his left arm and punched backwards, without taking his eyes off the TV. 'Go away, Harris,' he said. 'I'm not listening.'

'No, seriously,' I said. 'Once you puncture the pneumal cavity, the lung collapses. Trust me, no one gets up after their lung's collapsed.'

'Shut *up*,' Ricky said. 'I've told you before, stay away from me when I'm watching DVDs. You spoil everything.'

I sighed. Ricky's just a kid and I guess he needs to believe in fairy tales. He got mad at me when I explained about Santa Claus too. But it's the truth. Mum puts the presents under the Christmas tree, not some fat bloke in a fur-trimmed red tracksuit who climbs down the chimney that we don't have.

And people can't run around with punctured lungs, either. Am I supposed to lie to my little brother or what?

I checked the TV screen and saw the guy crouching on a fire escape, waiting to drop on the man with the gun. His bullet wound had stopped bleeding already. Wrong again. He should've been haemorrhaging by now.

'Ricky,' I said, 'there's something else I need to tell you.'

'No,' he said. 'No, no, NO.'

He kicked me this time, instead of punching me, but before we could get into a full-on fight, Mum called us for dinner. It wasn't much of an improvement, though. Uncle Melvin was sitting at the kitchen table. (He often drops in around dinner time.) When he raised an eyebrow at me, I just knew he was going to ask about the unit and get Mum stirred up again.

'So, Harris,' he said, before I could stop him, 'what did you learn about forensics today?'

'Not while we're eating,' Mum said, banging his plate down in front of him. 'It's bad enough, having to look at those books on Harris's desk. You can't imagine how I felt when I saw that dreadful photo of that poor girl who'd been murdered.'

As a matter of fact, I *could* imagine it, because Mum had told me at least twenty times. I glared at my uncle and he raised his other eyebrow. Uncle Melvin has the most active eyebrows I've ever seen. They look like the furry caterpillars that the pathologist found on the bodies in the Doberman murders.

'A lot of kids find crime fascinating,' he told Mum. 'Ricky was watching a thriller when I came in. I don't think he or Harris are going to turn into psychopathic killers, just because they read a few books or see a few movies.'

'I know, I know,' Mum said quickly. 'It's not Harris's fault that I got upset. It's just that - well, I couldn't help thinking about how that poor girl's mother would've felt when she had to identify the body.' She banged my plate onto the table and added, 'And I *don't* appreciate finding internet printouts in Harris's room, telling me what pathologists do to a corpse in an autopsy.'

It wasn't fair. Mum thinks faster than I do. She was throwing so much stuff at me that I couldn't handle all of it at once. I mean, I *do* think about what it'd be like for the families of people who get killed. I just don't think autopsies are an automatic gross-out, the way Mum does.

'Well, you don't have to read the printouts, do you?' I muttered.

'I wouldn't, if you didn't leave them lying on the floor,' Mum said, scoring again. 'It's hard to vacuum around them.' She forked up some beans, then stopped with the fork halfway to her mouth and said, 'I don't want to nag you,

Harris. I'm just not sure it's healthy to keep thinking about all those horrible, depressing things.'

'So what do you want me to think about?' I asked. 'Football, like Ricky? Actually, I reckon it's depressing to think about guys who spend their entire lives kicking a ball round a field.'

Mum sighed. 'It's your life, Harris,' she said. 'I'm glad you've got a hobby and it's good that you're learning to find information on the net. I just wish you could explain what you see in this whole forensics business.'

I glanced at Uncle Melvin, hoping he'd bail me out. He just wiggled his eyebrows like dancing caterpillars, which meant I was on my own. I sighed twice as hard as Mum. I would've *liked* to explain, to get her off my back. If I'd been talking to Gia Agnelli, I might've been able to try.

But right then, in the middle of my family, I didn't even know where to start.

## CHAPTER THREE

The weekend seemed to go on forever. I couldn't wait to be back at the forensics unit. As I headed through the front door on Monday morning, I paused and switched off the ring tone on my mobile. Seb would be mad but that was just tough. I didn't want my pocket to keep beeping while I was working at the unit.

When I reported to Gia, she said she might have something better than data entry lined up for me.

'Jim Dimitropoulos is giving a lecture to some medical students this afternoon and he needs someone to write up the powerpoint notes,' she explained. 'His handwriting's so terrible that no one but him can understand it. Here, take a look.'

She gave me a piece of paper that looked as though a spider with inky feet had been dancing across it. I held the paper at an angle and squinted sideways at the heading.

'So, okay, the lecture's about disasters involving multiple deaths,' I said.

Gia gasped. 'Harris! You're a genius! That's exactly what Jim told me, although I could never have worked it out from those squiggles. The job's yours. I'll settle you at a desk in the Pathology lab, so you can ask Jim about any words you really don't get.'

That was cool, because it meant I was a proper part of the unit, now just a tourist. But it was kind of scary too, because I wasn't sure how to talk to Jim

Dimitropoulos, the human grey hole. Luckily, I went on being brilliant at decoding Jim's spider-scrawls. I didn't need to interrupt him, and after a while I really got into the lecture.

Jim started by talking about this big fire in an office block, where the forensics unit had to sort out eighteen charred bodies. I took a break and texted Seb, saying:

'did U knO dat bods burnt in fire shrink & thR h&s go up llk boxer, fists clenched?'

Then I squinted at Jim's notes again and squeaked in surprise. The next heading was 'The Thomasville Highway Disaster', which had to be the crash I'd read about in the library yesterday.

The lab was so quiet that my squeak echoed right round it. Two of the pathologists looked up and blinked at me. When I mumbled, 'Sorry,' they went back to their test tubes and I went back to Jim's notes. I was keen to find out more about the bus crash but the notes just said, "one of my failures", underlined three times.

That sounded like Jim, for sure. I could totally believe that he was still stressing about something he'd done wrong ten years ago. I just wished he'd written more in the notes about why the Thomasville Highway Disaster was one of his failures. While I keyed in the rest of the powerpoint notes, my brain kept trying to work out what Jim might've missed, while he was working on the bodies from the crash.

First off, I wondered whether the accident was actually an unsolved murder. Like, suppose somebody had wanted to get rid of one of the passengers on the tour bus and didn't care how many other people they killed at the same time, so they swapped some road signs around and ...

I laughed - under my breath, so I wouldn't disturb the pathologists - and shook my head. Nah, that theory was over the top. No way would anyone go to that much trouble to commit a murder, when they could just drown the person in the bath (if it was someone they lived with) or stage a hit-and-run accident (if it was someone from their work). And besides, it was the police's job to check out scene-of-the-crime stuff like road signs or whatever, so it wouldn't count as one of Jim's failures, anyway.

Okay, forget about unsolved murders. What else could have happened? I remembered the case notes I'd been typing up yesterday and thought "suicide" and "manslaughter". The suicide theory was possible. One of my forensics books talked about a case where this guy drove off a perfectly straight road into a tree and everyone assumed he'd been trying to top himself - until the forensic

pathologist found sleep grit in the guy's eyes and worked out that he'd fallen asleep at the wheel.

Then again, the truck driver in the Thomasville Highway Disaster had been tossing down amphetamines, to make himself stay awake. I couldn't see him dozing off after that. And plus, he'd taken a big risk in order to keep his job, which made him sound like a guy who wanted to live. So I junked the suicide theory and thought about manslaughter instead.

Manslaughter. That sounds like a guy laughing but it's actually any situation where somebody causes a death, without meaning it. I was still thinking about the definition of the word when I suddenly saw it all, as clear as a scene in a TV show.

The truck driver sitting in a roadside cafe. One of his mates slipping some amphetamines into his cup of coffee, just for a laugh. The truck driver getting totally wacked and driving straight into a tour bus. Jim doing the autopsy afterwards and missing a clue that showed the driver hadn't ever used amphetamines before ...

Yep, that fitted all the facts. I felt so proud of myself that I pushed Jim's notes away and reached for my mobile. There was a message from Seb, saying:

'did U knO dat drowned bods swll to 2 2ice thR size?'

I texted him back, saying:

'U file clerk. me genius llk Shlock Holmes. jst solved 1st case.'

I stretched my legs out full length, clasped my hands behind my head and looked round the lab. The pathologists were all hunched over their microscopes or peering at photographs. I felt sorry for them. They all seemed kind of sluggish, plodding on from one job to the next, instead of having genius ideas like me.

I spent a bit more time dreaming about the future, when I'd be the most brilliant pathologist of all time. Then I read through the notes, stacked the plastic sheets together and bounced over to Jim.

'Here's the powerpoint notes for your lecture,' I said. 'It was really interesting.'

'Very nice,' Jim said flatly, shuffling through the sheets. 'Thanks, Harris.'

He looked up as he said my name. I'd been planning to tell him my genius theory but I got sucked into the grey holes of his eyes. My mind went blank and I started to back off. I was just about to turn away when I realised Jim's mouth was moving.

'Huh?' I said, sounding like an idiot.

'I was saying that you could come to the lecture, if you like,' Jim repeated. 'As long as Gia doesn't have anything else lin mind.'

‘Oh,’ I said. ‘Yeah, sure. I’ll check with her at lunchtime. Have you got any other stuff you want me to do now?’

Jim stared off into the distance. ‘As a matter of fact, there’s a box of faxes that need shredding,’ he said, just when I was deciding he’d forgotten that I was there. ‘Some of them contain sensitive information, so we’re not supposed to leave them lying about. But there’s so much to do around here that we tend to let them pile up. It’d be a great help if you could deal with them, Harris. Get Rob to teach you how to use the shredder.’

He waved his hand vaguely at one of the pathologists and I went hurrying over to him. Rob was younger than the others and he actually said ten whole sentences to me, while he was explaining how the shredder worked.

That wasn’t exactly typical. The pathology staff hardly ever said anything to each other, even when they came into the room where the shredder was kept, to make themselves cups of coffee. I got the impression that none of them had much of a life outside of the lab.

Still, I didn’t mind the silence, because it gave me a chance to think about my genius idea. I was glad I hadn’t boasted to Jim. It would be way more cool to sit in the lecture theatre and listen to him tell the students something I’d already worked out for myself.

I drifted off into some more dreams, where I was the one giving lectures and impressing students with the flashes of brilliance I’d used to solve incredibly difficult cases. The minute I’d fed the last fax into the shredder, I raced off to find Gia and get permission to attend Jim’s lecture.

‘Excellent,’ she said. ‘I need to move you round all the different areas during the week, so you get a feel for the way the unit works. Pathology’s a great place to start. I’m glad Jim made that suggestion. Now, do you want to have lunch with us, before you go to his lecture?’

I hesitated, wondering whether I was supposed to stay with the pathologists for the whole day, and Belinda, the girl with the extreme glasses, butted in.

‘Of course he does,’ she said. ‘Grief counselling has the best lunches, Harris. Human resources just have sandwiches in the canteen, the library staff bring their own lunches and the pathology lot forget to eat half the time. But we hear a zillion sad stories every morning, so we need to get out and live it up in our lunch break. Stick with us and we’ll show you a good time.’

\*\*\*



The grief counselling staff swept me off to a cafe on the far side of the plaza, where Gia insisted on buying me a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel. I would've like to tell her about my genius idea but the grief counselling group was as noisy as the pathology group was silent. They kept making bad jokes about dead babies and shrieking like a flock of parrots. I almost choked on my bagel, the first time they did that, but then I noticed the jokes never went *too* far, so I figured they were a way of letting off steam.

I left early, to make sure I'd be on time for the lecture. While the rows of seats filled up with students, chatting and calling out to each other, I started to worry about Jim. The guy was so ... so *nothing*. I couldn't see how he was going to make the students shut up, let alone keep them listening for an entire hour.

But I needn't have worried. Jim walked in as the second hand of the wall clock hit two o'clock, slid the first plastic sheet into the projector and said one word.

'Fire.'

And after that, he was away, telling us stories about fires. There was one where a half a dozen people had been having a party in a squat, with candles all over the joint. Surprise, surprise, the place caught fire and burnt down to the ground.

'Then a woman came running up, screaming, "My baby's in there",' Jim said. 'The SOCO - that's the scene-of-the-crime officer - went white and said they probably wouldn't even find its body, because the place was in ashes. But when the ruins cooled down, they sent a police dog in, anyway.'

His eyes went out of focus, as if he was picturing the scene, and he grinned unexpectedly. 'I watched the handler buckle little leather shoes on the dog, to protect its feet from the hot coals,' he said. 'It headed straight for the back laundry and barked twice, which is unusual - cadaver dogs only bark once for a corpse. So the fireman put on his protective gear, followed the dog ... and came out holding a pink, naked and thoroughly alive baby. It had wet its nappy and its father must've dumped it in the old concrete wash trough, then gone back to the party. We worked out that the concrete had protected the baby from the flames and a dripping tap had cooled the air and allowed it to breathe -... but it still seemed like a miracle.'

The students were still cooing over the baby story when Jim launched into another case. In this one, a woman had been found dead in the middle of a blazing house, without a mark on her.

'Her hair wasn't even singed,' Jim told us. 'That's the first thing that usually catches fire. We couldn't help wondering whether she'd been killed by someone who'd set the house on fire to disguise the murder. But the autopsy showed that

her lungs were full of blood and fluid. We examined the scene of the crime report and found that the body had been lying by a chair covered with artificial fabric. So we did some more tests and figured out that the woman had died because she'd inhaled cyanic fumes from the burning chair.'

You could tell he really loved his work and wanted everyone to know what great things pathologists could do. The students sat there as quietly as little kids at a story-telling session and I felt proud that my powerpoint notes were part of the performance.

Then Jim tapped the second heading, making a shadow finger appear on the screen. 'The Thomasville Highway Disaster,' he said in a different sort of voice, slower and deeper. 'I always tell students about this one, because it shows how crucial it is to check every stage of every procedure. One small mistake by a pathologist can have an enormous effect on people's lives.'

I whispered, 'Yes!', shifted forward till I was balanced on the edge of my seat and waited for Jim to start talking about amphetamines. Instead, he launched into a long explanation of how the scene-of-the-crime officer always puts each corpse's belongings into a plastic wallet and labels it with the same number as the body bag.

'When the wallets and body bags from the Thomasville Highway Disaster arrived here at the unit, I read a 6 as an 8,' Jim said. 'Unfortunately, Body 6 and Body 8 were women of similar age, size and build. They'd both been sitting near the front of the bus, so they were too disfigured by the accident to be recognisable. And to make it even worse, the autopsy on the real Body 8 detected signs of Huntingdon's Disease, which, as you'll know from medical school, is an inherited genetic disorder, with no known cure, involving progressive mental deterioration. If one of your parents has Huntingdon's Disease, you have a fifty per cent likelihood of developing it yourself.'

My brain split into three. One part was still going, 'Hang on, why isn't Jim agreeing with my manslaughter theory?' Another part was going, 'Huntingdon's Disease? What's that got to do with anything?' But the third and speediest part of my brain was remembering the two women in the photos above the newspaper story - the ones who'd looked like twins.

Oh-oh. It sounded as if I might've got it all wrong.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Jim looked round at the students, who were nodding away, like they knew all about Huntingdon's Disease.

'Luckily, the husband of the woman who'd been identified as Body 8 asked for a second opinion,' he said. 'The unit called in both women's dental records, checked their teeth against the charts and corrected my mistake. Body 8 had no children but Body 6 had a young daughter. Even now, ten years later, I sometimes catch myself feeling relieved, because that young girl hasn't spent her life believing she has a fifty-fifty chance of developing Huntingdon's.'

That answered one of my questions. I could see why Jim's mistake had been such a big deal. Okay, Body 6 was dead, so it didn't matter whether she'd been diagnosed as having an illness that would've sent her bonkers. It would've made a huge difference to her daughter, though.

But right then, I couldn't really relate to the daughter's story. I was too busy feeling embarrassed. I'd thought I was so smart, because I knew enough about forensics to invent a theory about the Thomasville Highway Disaster. I'd practically convinced myself that I was like one of the detectives in the movies that Ricky watched, solving crimes where everyone else had failed.

Stupid Harris. I should've listened to myself, when I was telling Ricky that real life was more complicated than the movies. I was just glad I hadn't gone round skiting to Gia or Jim about my genius idea. That way, I would've been feeling even stupider now.

By the time Jim finished his lecture, I'd almost managed to stop blushing. I told him how great he'd been and followed him back to the lab. The pathologists usually worked on the autopsies till lunchtime, then spent the afternoon entering the results into their computers, but Jim was running behind, because of the lecture.

'Gia tells me you're familiar with our data base, Harris, and you're definitely a world expert on my handwriting,' he said. 'Would you mind helping me get this morning's data on file?'

'Yeah, sure,' I said, 'I'd like that.'

Jim's mouth twitched. 'I think I did the unit a favour, when I did a favour for your uncle Melvin,' he commented. 'You're very keen, aren't you, Harris?'

The mouth twitch was obviously the Jim Dimitropoulos version of a smile. Coming from him, that was like three gold stars from anyone else. I took his bundle of spider-scravls, trying to look super-keen, and found a spare computer . Then I started to key in his autopsy results, paying special attention to the numbers, so I didn't type 6 instead of 8 or whatever.

After Jim ran out of work for me, I was sent from one person to the next, doing their paperwork and filing. The pathologists were just as quiet as they'd been in the morning but I felt different about them this time. They weren't slow and stupid, the way I'd thought. They were just being careful and taking a realistic approach to forensics, the way I wanted to do.

I was so busy that I forgot to check my mobile for ages. When I did, there were six text messages from Seb. The last one said:

'Gday Shlock hwz tngz?'

I sighed and tapped out a message:

'not Shlock. jst idiot.'

\*\*\*

While I was filing some printouts for Rob, I heard a buzz of voices at the far end of the lab. That was unusual, because the lab was always so silent. But I didn't want to make any mistakes, so I just concentrated on my filing. A few minutes later, Rob came wandering over .

'You've done a big day's work, Harris,' he said. 'Why don't you knock off early? If you leave now, you'll miss the rush hour.'

I could tell he was hustling me out and I figured it had something to do with the voices. Maybe there was a surprise birthday party for one of the pathologists or maybe Jim had to tick somebody off and he didn't want to do it in front of the work experience student. Either way, it was fine by me. I liked the idea of

travelling home on an uncrowded bus, so I grabbed my backpack and scooted out.

On my way down the corridor, I noticed a half-open door. As I was going past, a flash of white light came from inside. That intrigued me, so I moved closer, to see what was going on. When I peered through the door, the first thing I saw was a wall with a long window in it. On the far side of the window, some people in lab coats were pointing cameras at a metal table, covered with a white cloth. The white cloth was kind of lumpy. There was something underneath it.

And there was a pale hand dangling down at the side of the metal table.

It felt like I stood there for at least five minutes, gazing into the room, but as a matter of fact, it must've only been a few seconds. My brain was working overtime, transmitting the information from my eyes and trying to translate it into words. In the end I worked out that the people in the lab coats were preparing a body for an autopsy. The flash of light had come from the photos they were taking, to record any damage to the body before they started work.

Once I'd got that clear, I heard Gia's voice in my head, saying, 'You won't even see any dead bodies during your work experience.' I realised I wasn't supposed to be seeing this, so I made a big effort and activated my leg muscles and started moving towards the front door. When I stepped out into the street, the sunlight seemed brighter than usual, nearly as bright as a camera flash, but apart from that everything was the same as before.

Except me. Inside my head, everything had changed. Before I started at the unit, my greatest ambition had been to work with the dead. That had just come true. I'd seen what was happening in the autopsy room and I'd understood it straight away. What's more, I hadn't been freaked.

'Actually, I feel thrilled,' I said out loud.

I glanced round, to make sure nobody had caught me talking to myself, but the only person in sight was the sculpture on the iron bench in the plaza. I waved to it, strolled down to the bus stop and scored an empty seat at the back of the next bus. While it trundled through the city, I propped my elbow on the window sill, staring out at the streets but seeing the lump under the white cloth and the hand dangling down from the metal table.

I went through the memory half a dozen times and each time it made me feel more relaxed and comfortable. In the end I had to ask myself why I wasn't spooked, the way Gia had expected me to be.

The answer was simple. I liked it. I liked how I'd felt, looking into that room. I wanted to be there with the pathology team, helping the dead. That was my career and my future. I felt totally sure of it now.

I couldn't wait to tell everyone but when I walked into the kitchen at home, Ricky was jiggling about, giving Mum an action replay of his first game with the under-ten footy team.

'I thought they had us in the third quarter,' he said. 'But those two quick goals by Angelo put a rocket up us. We all played brilliantly from then on.'

'That's nice,' Mum said vaguely. 'Hi, Harris. How was your day?'

'Fine,' I said. 'A bit tiring, though. Think I'll have a rest before dinner.'

I could tell that my face was as blank and expressionless as when I'd looked into the autopsy room. I was thrilled on the inside but for some reason I couldn't show it, even though the thrill was still there. Mum must've guessed something was going on, because she narrowed her eyes at me.

'You're not getting stressed by that place, are you?' she asked suspiciously.

'Nah,' I said. 'Not stressed. Just tired. I told you I was fine, okay?'

I collected an apple from the bowl on the bench and escaped to my room, where I lay on my bed, wondering why I'd changed my mind about talking to Mum and Ricky. I didn't want to text Seb, either. None of them would understand. The feelings I had right then were totally personal. They couldn't be shared and they weren't going to be.

When Ricky yelled, 'Phone for you, Harris,' I just yelled back, 'Tell Seb I'll call him later.'

My brother leaned on the door, till it swung open. 'It's not Seb,' he said. 'It's your girlfriend, Gina.'

'Gina,' I said. 'And she's not a girl. She's nearly as old as Mum.'

'Whatever,' Ricky said. 'She wants to talk to you, anyhow. Will I tell her the same thing as if she was Seb?'

'No way,' I said, shocked. 'Gina's my work experience supervisor. I *have* to talk to her.'

The phone was out in the kitchen, which was kind of public. I was planning to move into the lounge, except that Gia started talking straight away.

'One of the pathologists mentioned seeing a kid at the door of the autopsy room this afternoon. I figured it had to be you. Was it?'

'Um, yes,' I said. 'So?'

'So I want to find out whether you're okay,' Gia said. 'Are you, Harris?'

'Yeah,' I said. 'Fine. More than fine.'

'You know, I believe you,' Gia said, sounding surprised. 'All the same, I'd like to check on that. Can you come in half an hour early, so we can have a chat before you start work?'

I grinned. I'd got off work half an hour early today but it looked as though I'd have to pay it back.

'Sure,' I said. 'See you then.'

Mum had obviously been listening in, because she pounced on me as soon as I hung up. 'Why's your supervisor ringing you at home?' she demanded.

That gave me a second chance to talk about what had happened but I didn't take it.

'Ah, she just wants me to come in earlier tomorrow,' I said, which was the truth and a lie at the same time.

As I headed back to my room, I started thinking about the body under the white sheet again, so I got out my forensics text books and went through them, reading everything I could find about autopsies. I was looking at a photo of a girl who'd been found dead in a cave, where the cold air and the mineral salts had dried out her body and sort of mummified it, when something went click inside my head.

The hand dangling down from the table had been a girl's hand, I was sure of that. It made the body seem even more real, and plus it made me want to help her even more. It also made me understand why I couldn't talk to my family, even though I felt fine about the idea of talking to Gia.

The fact was, Gia Agnelli and Jim Dimitropoulos and the other people at the unit were like me. We were all part of the family of the dead.

## CHAPTER FIVE

On my way down from the bus stop next morning I spotted half a dozen extra figures in the plaza out of the corner of my eye. At first I thought the council must've installed some more sculptures on the concrete boxes. But then the figures surged across to the footpath, watching me like hungry seagulls, and I realised they were just people.

I was still laughing about that as I walked into the Grief Counselling Unit. Gia was perched on the reception desk, chatting with Belinda, but they stopped the minute I appeared.

'Come into my office, Harris,' Gia said. 'Belinda's going to field any phone calls, so we won't be interrupted. Do you want to grab a coffee first?'

I shook my head and followed her into the office. It felt strange to sit down in one of the chairs where so many grieving relatives had sat. I was wondering whether the relatives of the dead girl would be sitting there soon, when I realised Gia had asked me a question.

'Sorry,' I mumbled. 'Could you say that again?'

'Not a problem,' she said, smiling. 'I just want to know how you felt about seeing the body in the autopsy room yesterday. It must've come as a shock.'

I shrugged. 'Not really. I mean, that's what I'm here for - to learn about that sort of stuff.'

'Fair enough,' Gia agreed. 'But I bet it made an impression, all the same. I went round in a trance for days, after I saw my first body.'

'Sure it made an impression,' I said. 'A good impression, but.'



Gia fixed her spaniel-eyes on me, like she could look into my head and read my thoughts. 'So it hasn't put you off working in forensics?' she asked.

'No way known,' I said. 'The opposite, if anything. I can't wait to work with - y'know, the quiet kind. I want to find out for myself what it's like to be in the back room with those feelings rushing through me, same as when I saw the body. I've never felt anything like that before. It was, like, peaceful and exciting, all at the one time.'

Gia blinked. 'Harris Johnson, you're a very unusual boy,' she said. '“The quiet kind”. Are they your own words?' When I nodded, she blinked harder and said, 'That's a great way to look at it. If you stay interested in forensics, you'll have the right approach, for sure. Just one more question. Are you sure you're not going to find yourself brooding about what you saw?'

'No,' I told her. 'I mean, yes, I'm sure. I've seen my first body and I've thought about it now. I guess I'll have some more thoughts at uni or wherever, when I start training, but that's it for the moment.'

Gia let out a long sigh and slid down in her chair, like she was a balloon with the air escaping. 'I'm glad you're so sensible,' she said. 'That makes it easier to move on to the next part. I've got something difficult to tell you. The body you saw - it wasn't a stranger. It was Tansy Dimitropoulos, Jim's daughter. Does that change the way you feel?'

I put my hand on my stomach, because most of my feelings start there. 'I feel sad for Jim,' I told Gia. 'And really sad for Tansy. But nah, it doesn't make me upset or whatever.'

'Good - but remember you can always come and talk to me, if you *do* start feeling upset,' Gia said. 'By the way, you didn't get cornered by any journalists on your way here, did you?'

'Oh, so that's who they were,' I said, remembering the extra statues in the plaza. 'Why are they hanging around?'

Gia rubbed her forehead. 'Unfortunately, Tansy's death makes a good story,' she said. 'One of those “man bites dog” things.'

'Duh?' I said and Gia gave me a sad sort of smile.

'You haven't heard that one before? It's an old newspaper saying. The journos reckon that “dog bites man” happens too often to be news but “man bites dog” is their idea of a great headline. In this case, the unit does ten to fifteen autopsies a day and the journos aren't interested in most of them. But when a body turns out to be related to one of the people who do the autopsies - well, you can see why that's news, in their terms.'

'I suppose so,' I said. 'It's kind of rough on Jim, though.'

'That's for sure,' Gia sighed. 'But you can help, by refusing to say anything to the reporters.'

'I don't actually know anything,' I pointed out. 'I don't even know how Tansy died.'

'Neither do I,' Gia said. 'They rushed the autopsy through last night but the results haven't been released yet. I can only tell you that the body was found under a pile of rocks in the Selleck Range.' She drummed on the desk with her biro and added, 'The unit's going to be extra busy for a while. I might keep you here in the Grief Counselling Unit today, because this whole business won't affect us as much as the other areas. Is that okay with you, Harris?'

'Yeah, fine,' I said. 'I'd like to know more about what you do.'

\*\*\*

When you hear a really extreme bit of news, you always want to pass it on. While I was waiting for Belinda to give me a job, I got out my mobile and texted Seb. It was hard to pack the entire Tansy Dimitropoulos story into a text message. Seb kept firing off more and more questions for the next ten minutes. In the end I had to promise to have lunch with him, in order to shut him up.

The receptionist had taken the morning off for a major dentist appointment, so Belinda taught me how to work the switchboard. I had to concentrate pretty hard for the first hour and even then I lost two calls. But after that I got the hang of it, so I had time to look around.

There were five people in the waiting room - a mum with two little kids and a couple of oldies. The kids were wriggling and complaining, which made the old guy get crosser and crosser, until the old lady found some lollies in her bag and gave them to the kids. I sat back and studied the kids, trying to put myself in their place.

It'd be freaky for them, I decided. The grief counselling team were great but the waiting room was just a little white box, with a view of office buildings through the window and no pictures on the walls. The kids would be fine, once they got to see Gia or whoever, but I could understand why they were restless now.

For the rest of the morning I went on checking out all the people who came in to see the counsellors. Some of them had shadows under their eyes, like they hadn't slept for a week. Some of them clutched packets of tissues and wiped tears away every now and then. Some of them stared out the window, as if they wanted to be somewhere else. And some of them chatted to me about the weather, like they were trying to pretend everything was totally normal.

By the time I headed out to meet Seb in the plaza, I had a fair idea of how Jim and his wife must be feeling. Then, as I walked down the corridor and across the foyer, I realised they weren't the only ones who'd been hit by the news about Tansy. People were huddled together in small groups, according to where they worked - the pathology group, the human resources group and so on. They all looked pale or teary or stressed or blank, just like the people in the Grief Counselling Unit's waiting room.

For a moment, I wished I didn't have to meet Seb. I would've liked to stick around with my new family, while things were so tough for them. On the other hand, I was looking forward to impressing Seb, so I just nodded to Rob and headed out the door.

Seb came racing over the minute he saw me, waving like mad, as if he thought I might miss him. 'This is so cool, Harris,' he gasped. 'Look, there's a TV camera crew on the corner. I guess they're hoping to catch the girl's dad, when he comes out at lunchtime.'

'Some hope,' I said. 'Jim never goes out for lunch, even when things are normal. He's not likely to change his routine with a camera crew hanging around.'

Seb sighed happily. 'That's right, you've met the guy. How's he taking it?'

'Don't know,' I said. 'Haven't seen him today. But I can guess. Remember how cut up your mum was, when your grandad died at the age of eighty? Well, Tansy was only eighteen. If you want to work out how Jim feels, I reckon you'd have to multiply what your mum felt by ten.'

'Okay, okay,' Seb said, backing off. 'I was just asking, Harris. There's no need to yell at me.'

'I'm *not* yelling,' I yelled. '... Oh. All right, maybe I am. The thing is, I know Jim, so it's kind of personal.'

'Makes sense,' Seb agreed. 'But it needn't stop you telling me about the case, right? How about I shout you lunch, in return for the story?'

I steered him over to the cafe where the Grief Counselling Unit had gone yesterday and made him buy me a smoked salmon and cream cheese bagel. Seb grumbled, because it was the priciest thing on the board, but he paid up. After we sat down at a table by the window, he started asking questions again.

'So was this girl murdered or what? It has to be something serious, to get the TV people here.'

'No one's said it was murder yet,' I told him. 'But Gia reckoned Tansy's body was found under some rocks in the Selleck Range, which doesn't sound good.'

'Why? It just means the Tansy chick went climbing and got killed in a rock fall,' Seb said, looking disappointed.

‘Wrong. Tansy vanished two weeks ago. The last time anyone saw her was at the opening of this centre where she was working. She wouldn’t have gone racing off to climb a cliff in the middle of the evening.’

Seb bounced in his chair. ‘Ace. In that case, it looks like someone topped her and then tried to hide the body. I guess they picked the Selleck Range because it’s out in the middle of nowhere.’

‘Maybe,’ I said, frowning. ‘But I heard something else about the Selleck Range recently ... Got it! I went to a lecture that Tansy’s dad was giving and one of the cases he discussed was a crash on the Thomasville Highway, opposite the Selleck Range. That’s a weird sort of coincidence.’

‘Not that weird,’ Seb objected. ‘There’s accidents on the Thomasville Highway all the time, because it’s so straight and boring that drivers keep falling asleep. I can’t see how that could have anything to do with the murder. Tell me something else, Harris.’

I bit a piece out of my bagel, while I tried to remember some more facts. I was still chewing when a girl came and hovered beside our table. She was older than us but not that much, like a really cool big sister with spiky black hair and two piercings.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘This place is full up. Mind if I sit with you?’

‘Go ahead,’ Seb said, without even asking me.

Seb thinks he’s a babe magnet but I thought the girl might’ve had another reason for wanting to join us. Sure enough, after Seb had introduced us and she’d said her name was Lara Page, she gave us this hundred watt smile.

‘I couldn’t help overhearing before,’ she said. ‘You were talking about the girl who was murdered, right?’

‘Yeah, Harris knows all about it,’ Seb boasted. ‘He works at the forensics unit.’

If he was trying to make himself interesting, he totally failed, Lara turned her smile away from him and onto me.

‘Really?’ she said, like it was the best thing she’d heard all year. ‘You look kind of young to have such a responsible job.’

‘Seb’s exaggerating,’ I said. ‘I’m just a work experience student ... and you’re a journalist, aren’t you?’

Lara laughed. ‘Damn, you’ve got me sussed. That *is* why I picked you to sit with. You’re a good detective, Harris. How about we pool our information and see if we can crack this case together?’

Seb instantly started raving on about how I’d solved one case already, since I arrived at the unit. I’d told him to forget all of that but he never listens. I tried to kick him on the ankle, to shut him up, but I just knocked his backpack

over. When he dived under the table, to collect the stuff that had spilled out, Lara leaned forward till we were practically rubbing noses.

‘Give me a break, Harris,’ she said. ‘This could be my big chance. I want to be a hotshot journo but I had to start off with one of the freebie local papers. Mostly, I only get to interview people who have clever cats - or report on garbage strikes - or copy out the leaflets from the community centre or whatever. But today I happened to be in the city, tracking down an exhibition by a local artist, when I heard about Tansy Dimitropoulos. If I can come up with a new lead, I’ll be able to sell the story to the major newspapers, which could change my life. You *will* help me, won’t you?’

Seb sat up, all red in the face - maybe because he’d been hanging upside down, while he fixed his pack, or maybe because he’d developed a kingsize crush on Lara.

‘Go for it, Harris.’ he urged. ‘It’ll be fun. We might even find the murderer and get our pictures in the paper.’

He gazed at me hopefully but I stared him down. ‘Sorry, Lara,’ I said. ‘I’m not into crime-busting. You’ll have to go it alone. See you round.’

I tugged a paper serviette out of the dispenser, wrapped up the rest of my bagel and went marching out of the cafe. I thought Seb would stay on and flirt with Lara but he trailed me all the way across to the unit, telling me how cool Lara was and practically begging me to go along with her plans.

‘You’re missing out on a great opportunity,’ he yelled, as I ducked into the foyer.

The door swung shut, muffling the sound of his voice, and I sighed with relief. Actually, Seb had a point. Two days ago, I would’ve been really tempted by the idea of helping a cute girl reporter to investigate a murder. But, after Jim’s lecture, I’d realised the routine and attention to detail was way more important than guesswork.

And besides, I couldn’t let my new family down by talking to a journo, even if she *was* gorgeous.

## CHAPTER SIX

When I got back to the Grief Counselling Unit, the waiting room was empty, apart from Belinda and Kellie, the receptionist.

'That's sssso terrible,' Kellie was saying, hissing on the 's' because her mouth was still numb from the dentist's injection. 'I met Tansy once, while she was going out with Travis Walker from the Coroner's Court. She was really, really nice. I can't imagine anyone wanting to kill her in that horrible way.'

'What way?' I asked and the two of them spun round guiltily.

'Oops,' Belinda said. 'Gia told us we shouldn't spend all our time gossiping about Tansy. But - oh well, now you've caught me telling Kellie, I may as well fill you in too. Gia talked to Rob from Pathology at lunchtime. He says their tests indicate that Tansy was hit on the head, then run over by a car.'

Kellie shuddered. 'Are they sure?' she asked. 'Couldn't the head injuries be part of a car accident?' She pulled a face and added, 'I mean, I know Tansy'd still be dead but I'd rather think of her dying in an accident than being run over on purpose.'

'I only know what Rob told Gia,' Belinda said with a shrug. 'He seemed to think the blow to the head came first, because of - um, some sort of forensic evidence. I guess that at least means Tansy would've been unconscious when ...'

Her voice trailed away, as if she couldn't bear to say the words, and Kellie looked nauseous. I figured it'd be a good idea to distract them.

'In my forensics books, they say scalp wounds bleed a real lot,' I told them. 'Maybe that's how the pathologists knew. I mean, you don't bleed after

death, so if there was blood from the head wound, that'd prove it happened before the injuries from the car.'

Kellie's eyes opened wide and Belinda grinned. 'You haven't got to know Harris yet, have you?' she said. 'He's totally into forensics. Jim Dimitropoulos'll have to watch out, if he wants to hold onto his job.'

Next second, she heard what she'd said and slapped herself on the wrist. 'Damn, damn, damn,' she wailed. 'What am I doing, making jokes about Jim's job, when he probably couldn't care less about it right now? I just forgot about Tansy for a moment. That's so weird. My clients keep telling me about turning round to say something to their husband or kid or whatever, then remembering they're dead. But nothing like that ever happened to me before.'

She looked so upset that Kellie and I both rushed in to say something. I said, 'Hey, maybe that'll make you a better counsellor in future.'

And Kellie said, 'Actually, someone *was* after Jim's job - Christina Patterson, that woman with all the hair who's been in Pathology since the days of the dinosaurs. She appealed when Jim got the top job and took it right through to arbitration, because she thought the job should've gone to her. Wonder if she'll take over now.'

I thought my comment was more helpful but Kellie's comment worked better. 'Jim won't be away for long,' Belinda said, calming down. 'He'd taken today off but Gia says he'll be back tomorrow. He can't be involved with the autopsy on his daughter, of course, but I guess he wants to keep an eye on things.'

'So it iss murder?' Kellie asked, forgetting to be careful with her "s" words.

Belinda rolled her eyes. 'Duh. You might hit someone on the head by accident or run over them by accident. But even the biggest klutz in the world couldn't do *both* those things, one after the other. Besides, the person who did it carted the body all the way to the Selleck Range and piled rocks on top of it. That says guilty to me.'

The door swung open and a voice said, 'You've decided who's guilty already? Shouldn't you leave that to the coroner?'

Belinda and Kellie jumped. 'Sorry, Gia,' Kellie said in a rush. 'Belinda was just explaining that - ow!'

She'd spoken too quickly and bitten her tongue. (That's happened to me too, after a visit to the dentist.) While she raced off to get some ice from the fridge, to stop her tongue swelling, Belinda sidled off into her office, leaving me alone with Gia.

'Looks like you've caught up with the latest news,' she said. 'The cops are here already, to start their investigation. I have a feeling your work experience is going to be more exciting than you expected.'

I shrugged. 'Actually, I'm not that interested in cop stuff. The unit's exciting enough for me. What do you want me to do this afternoon?'

Gia looked pleased. 'Well, if you're not planning to nick out every five minutes, to see what the cops are doing, you could go on entering our case notes into the computer. It's the same sort of work as you were doing on Monday but you might feel more involved, now you've met some of the clients.'

She led me down to the computer room and gave me a batch of the morning's case notes. Half way to the door, she snapped her fingers and swung back.

'Hmm, I suppose I'd better remind you that this stuff's confidential,' she said. 'You shouldn't talk about it to anyone outside the unit.'

'Yeah, sure,' I said, thinking about Lara. 'I know that. Don't worry, Gia, I won't go spreading the unit's business all round the place.'

\*\*\*

I spent the afternoon entering data into the computer and learning about the stories of the people I'd watched while I was working on the switchboard. The husband of the woman with kids had been killed when he fell off a crane at a building site. The old couple's son had hanged himself two weeks ago. And there were heaps more stories, explaining the tears and anger and blankness that I'd witnessed in the waiting room, showing me the different ways that different people used for coping with grief.

I kept on thinking about all of that while I travelled home on the bus. It made me wonder how Jim Dimitropoulos was coping. At first, I wasn't sure whether it was such a smart idea for him to come back to work straight away. But after I'd run through everything I knew about him, I decided he loved his job so much that it'd probably help.

I was still trying to work out what I'd do in Jim's place when I walked into the house and found Uncle Melvin sitting at our kitchen table. His eyes were bloodshot, his eyebrows were wilting and he was pulling pages off Mum's shopping pad and tearing them into confetti. That threw me, for a second. I'd been so busy working out how Tansy's death affected the people at the unit that I'd forgotten that the Dimitropouloses were part of my home life as well.



'It's okay, Harris, you don't have to break the news to me,' Uncle Melvin sighed. 'I know what happened. Rina rang me this morning and told me about ... about Tansy. You never met her, did you?'

As I started to shake my head, Mum came over and put one arm round Uncle Melvin and the other arm round me.

'Yes, you did, Harris,' she said. 'Remember when you were five and we went to stay with another family at the beach, not long after your father died. That was the Dimitropouloses' beach house and the girl you played with was Tansy. You thought she was wonderful and you kept asking me when we were going to stay with her family again. But, um, Jim wasn't getting on too well with Rina at that stage, so we never had another group holiday.'

When I checked my memory, I found a blurry picture of dark curls and a cheeky smile and the best hide and seek games in the sand dunes. Part of the reason that the picture was blurred was that my eyes seemed to be watering. Luckily, it was easy to blot the tears with my sleeve. The others didn't notice, because Mum was wiping her own eyes and Uncle Melvin was blowing his nose.

'All those fights with Rina seem so stupid now,' he said. 'She and I couldn't have children, so I felt bad when she went off and had three kids with Jim. But in the end Tansy and the boys were like the children I never had. I just wish I'd spent more time with Tansy, before ...'

He jumped up and blundered out into our back garden. It's quiet and green there. I figured it would be a good place for him to sit and think about Tansy Dimitropoulos.

'Poor Melvin,' Mum said. 'This has hit him really hard, How about you, Harris? I suppose everyone at the unit's talking about Tansy all the time.'

'Not really,' I said. 'Well, not in my area, at any rate. I was working in the Grief Counselling Unit and they kept me pretty busy.'

'Your supervisor seems like a sensible woman,' Mum said approvingly. 'So, what were you doing today?'

For once, she sounded genuinely interested and for once, I would've actually liked to tell her about my day, until I remembered Gia warning me not to blab about the cases.

'Ah, y'know,' I said. 'Just stuff.'

Mum got that look on her face that says, 'Boys! They never want to talk about anything,' which wasn't exactly fair.

'Okay,' she said briskly. 'I'm going to make Melvin stay for dinner, so we'll need some more chops. Will you cycle down to the supermarket for me, Harris?'

## CHAPTER SEVEN

On the way home from the shops, I had a brilliant idea about the Grief Counselling Unit's waiting room. I worked on it that night and next morning I went in early again, to put my plan into action. Gia wasn't there yet but Belinda and Kellie were chatting together at the reception desk.

'Heard the latest, Harris?' Kellie said straight away, like I was part of their gossip gang after yesterday. 'The cops talked to the bushwalker who spotted Tansy's trainer, sticking out from the rocks. He reckoned that, before he moved the rocks away, they were stacked up in a pyramid on top of the body.'

'Like a cairn,' Belinda said with a shiver. 'People used to make cairns in the old days as memorials for the dead.'

'Hey, pyramids are graves too,' I told her. 'That's where the ancient Egyptians were buried. We did it in Social Studies.'

'Either way, it's spooky,' Kellie said, hugging herself. 'Sounds like one of those serial killers to me. I hope they aren't going to find lots of missing girls buried under cairns all over the country.'

I had to bite back a grin, while Kellie was talking. Spooky serial killers and missing girls aren't funny, of course, but they proved that Kellie could say "s" again today, although she still kept poking her tooth with her tongue.

'Oh, I dunno,' I said, to cover the grin. 'I reckon it was kind of respectful to at least want to bury Tansy properly.'

'Be real, Harris,' Belinda snapped. 'Killing someone's not a great way to show respect.'

She glared at me over the top of her extreme glasses but I refused to back down.

'Fair enough,' I said. 'But if the murderer did it for thrills or by accident, I bet they would've just hidden the body. Building a cairn makes it seem like they cared, in some sort of way.'

'Or like they knew Tansy,' Kellie chipped in. 'You're thinking along the same lines as the cops, Harris. The pathologists found traces of asphalt and rubber and oil on Tansy's body, so they figured she died in a parking lot, not out in the hills - and there's a car park at the Highton community centre where Tansy worked, which is the last place where she was seen. Okay, she could've been run over by accident but the cops reckon that a hit-and-run driver would've left the body where it was. In which case, the cairn suggests she was killed on purpose.'

I frowned down at the floor, while I thought that one through. I could see how there might have been some sort of freak accident - like, if a kid was fooling round with a cricket ball and it knocked Tansy out and then a car reversed out of a parking space, without the driver noticing that she was lying there on the ground.

But for one thing, that was a bit of a stretch, and for another thing, the driver would've been more likely to speed off straight away. Since the killer had heaved the body into the back seat or the boot and driven it all the way to the Selleck Range, it made sense that the cops were treating it as murder, not manslaughter.

'And if she was killed on purpose, it has to be a serial killer or someone who knew her,' Belinda was saying, when I tuned in again. 'It looks like the cops are going for the second option, because they're interviewing everyone at the unit who knew her.'

'Well, serial killers are usually more hands-on,' I said, remembering my forensics books. 'Strangulation's the most common method and stabbing comes second.'

Belinda gagged. 'Oh, right. I think the lecturer said that in my psychology course but I used to zone out when he got to the gruesome parts.' She sighed and added, 'Although I'm not sure whether it's better or worse to think of Tansy being killed by a friend or a relative or -'

'Or one of her work mates,' I cut in. 'They'd have to be top of the list, seeing she was killed in the car park at her work place.'

‘Not from what I’ve heard,’ Kellie said round the bulge in her cheek, where her tongue was prodding her tooth. ‘Tansy had only just started at the Highton community centre. And plus they were moving from their old building to a new one, so everybody was running round with boxes of stuff and setting up their offices and getting ready for the opening party. Apparently, only her boss and a few other people had even noticed that Tansy was working there.’

‘Doesn’t sound like she’d had time to make any enemies at her job,’ I agreed. ‘But she was killed on the night of the party, right? Like, nobody saw her again after that, which has to narrow things down. Did any of her family or friends go along to the opening?’

‘Just two of her girlfriends from school - oh, and Jim and Rina, of course,’ Kellie said. ‘But someone else could’ve easily been waiting around in the car park. It was a smart time to pick, in a twisted sort of way. There were heaps of people milling around, so the killer could count on not being noticed.’

‘It was a smart place to pick too,’ Belinda said gloomily. ‘Tansy lived in a shared house with half a dozen other kids. It would’ve been hard to sneak up on her there but in a car park at night ... not a problem. The cops haven’t found any witnesses yet and I bet they’re not going to.’

We all sighed in unison. I don’t know what the others were thinking but I was hoping that Tansy’s killer wouldn’t get away. Not that I intended to do anything about it myself - like, after stuffing up over the Thomasville Highway Disaster, I knew I wasn’t equipped to play junior detective. But I really wanted to believe that the police would track down the murderer.

‘So who have the cops interviewed from the unit?’ I asked.

‘Travis Walker from the Coroner’s Court,’ Kellie said promptly. ‘He and Tansy went out for a while last year. As far as I know, they stopped when Tansy got heavily into studying for her VCE and they never started again. That doesn’t sound like a motive for murder but I guess there could’ve been more to it.’

‘More than *you’ve* found out?’ Belinda said, a bit sarcastically. ‘Frankly, I doubt it. You seem to know all about everyone, Kell. How do you do it?’

‘Good hearing,’ Kellie said. ‘It’s genetic. My dad’s a sound technician at a music studio and he can pick up problems with the bass line from half a block away. Me, I can pick up what other people are saying from the far side of the foyer.’

We were laughing about that - and feeling pleased to have a reason to laugh, after a pretty intense discussion - when Gia came in. She laughed too, the way you do, even when you don’t know what the joke is.

‘Early again, Harris?’ she said. ‘You can’t stay away.’

I thumped my forehead. 'Hey, thanks for reminding me. I almost forgot I brought in some posters for the waiting room. My uncle's a graphic designer and he keeps giving me stuff. Here, I'll show you the ones that I chose.'

I grabbed the cardboard tube that I'd propped against the desk, shook the posters out and started to unroll them.

'I figured it'd be good for people to have something to look at, while they're waiting for a counsellor,' I explained. 'These are all kind of abstract. I've got some paintings of trees but I remembered the case notes on that woman who killed herself in one of the national parks, so I decided a tree picture would be too sad for the relatives of someone like that. And I almost brought in a picture of a city skyline but then I realised that'd be sad for people who come here to talk about a relative who died in an industrial accident ...'

I stopped halfway through unrolling the fourth poster. None of the others had said anything, so I thought I might've stepped over the line. But when I looked up, Kellie was fishing a roll of tape out of a drawer, Belinda was holding the first poster up against the wall behind the desk and Gia was beaming at me.

'Thanks, Harris,' she said. 'That's terrific. I can't believe we never thought of it before.'

'Well, you're always really busy,' I pointed out. 'I was just working the switchboard. That gave me time to notice the kids getting restless and the old guy getting cross and all that.'

Kellie finished taping the first poster to the wall and stepped back to admire it. 'I'll let you know how people react, Harris,' she promised. 'Where are you going to be today?'

I looked at Gia, who consulted her diary. 'Oh, that's right,' she said. 'I thought you should sit in on an inquest, to see where all our work at the unit ends up. I don't want to expose you to anything too traumatic, when you've had to deal with a corpse and a murder already, but I checked the listings for the Coroner's Court and the first case for this morning seems pretty straightforward. Would you like to drop in and take a look?'

'Sure,' I said. 'What's the actual case?'

'An old guy who was found dead in his home. He had heart trouble, diabetes and a zillion other health problems, so it'll just be a matter of deciding which one finally killed him.'

I was a bit disappointed that I wasn't going to watch something more exciting. But it was nice of Gia to worry about me and besides, I figured the coroners probably spent most of their time on that sort of stuff.

I waved goodbye to the others and headed off. The courtyard at the front of the unit had been empty when I arrived but now there was a bunch of journo

waiting on the corner. I hoped Jim Dimitropoulos had managed to avoid them, if he'd come into work today.

As I crossed the courtyard, I spotted Lara at the edge of the group, looking small and forlorn. I guessed the other journos were ignoring her, because she only worked for a suburban paper. But that wasn't my problem. I still wasn't prepared to help her get a scoop, so I ducked my head and went hurrying into the Coroner's Court.

The room looked as cosy as the first time I'd seen it, with people wandering round in a relaxed sort of way and a grey-haired lady sitting behind the circular desk. I figured she had to be the coroner, because she was telling a young guy to make sure the recording equipment was working.

'It's part of your job as clerk of courts,' she said, half cross and half puzzled. 'You do it every morning, Mr Walker. I don't understand why you've suddenly forgotten today.'

I changed my mind about hiding in the back row and charged down to a seat at the front, where I could get a good look at the clerk of courts. Travis Walker. If that was Tansy's ex-boyfriend, I could understand why he was off his game this morning. The cops must've been interviewing him already, to find out whether he had anything to do with Tansy's death.

Travis fiddled with the tape deck, then stood up and announced the opening case - only he said "McDonald", instead of "McDonnell", and had to correct himself. After that, he faffed around, hunting for the Bible that the witnesses were supposed to swear on. He seemed really rattled, which can't have been typical, because the coroner kept glaring at him.

The first witness was the sister of the old guy who'd died. Travis led her through the oath - 'I swear by almighty God that the evidence I shall give in this case shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' - reminded her to put the Bible down and got her to tell the court that she was Evelyn McDonnell of Hopetoun Crescent, retired. And after that, the coroner took over and started asking Evelyn questions about her brother, which gave me a chance to study Travis properly.

He was a cool dude, with surfer-blond hair, a perfect profile and teeth like a toothpaste ad. But his skin was kind of pasty and looked as though it had broken out in zits overnights. That's often a sign of stress. During exam time at my school, you see more zits than at any other time of the year.

I wondered whether Travis was just sad about Tansy or whether he had a reason to worry about what the cops might find out. Like, maybe he'd been really hung up on Tansy. Maybe he'd felt as if she'd rejected him, when she said she

needed time to study. Maybe he'd taken it so badly that he'd started stalking her, then cornered her in the car park and lashed out and ...

At that point, Evelyn McDonnell burst into tears. 'My poor brother,' she wept. 'Why can't I just bury him decently? Why do we have to go through all of this?'

I saw a different side of Travis then. He jumped up and passed Evelyn a box of tissues in this really nice way - not like he was trying to make her stop crying, just like he wanted to help. And he went on standing beside Evelyn, waiting for her to give the tissues back but also looking concerned and protective, while the coroner explained that, by law, there had to be an inquest on anybody who died without medical attention.

I could see why Tansy had liked him. Travis was an okay sort of guy. Part of the family of the dead, just like Gia and the other people at the unit.

Evelyn McDonnell pulled herself together and told the coroner how she'd called the cops, because her brother hadn't answered her phone calls for two days. Then she tottered away from the witness stand and Travis swore in the cop who'd kicked her brother's door down. The cop was followed by a doctor, who launched into a long rave full of ten-syllable words. It was pretty boring, so I kept myself entertained by trying to guess who the cops would be interviewing about Tansy's murder.

There was Travis, although I wasn't keen on seeing him as a suspect, after he'd been so kind to Evelyn. There were Tansy's girlfriends from school, the ones who'd been at the Highton community centre party. There were the people Tansy had lived with, and plus she'd probably had other boyfriends, apart from Travis, and other friends at her school. Any of them could've had it in for Tansy but I found it hard to believe that she'd made someone mad enough to kill her.

Not unless she'd changed a lot, since we played together on the beach.

A double knock startled me out of my thoughts. Travis was tapping on the desk and saying, 'All rise.' The coroner swept in, which meant she must've gone out to consider her verdict, while I was dreaming on.

'You may be seated,' Travis announced.

We all plonked back into our seats and the coroner consulted a document. 'It is the court's opinion, taking into account the evidence of Evelyn McDonnell, Constable Bates and Dr Singh, that the verdict on Angus McDonnell is death by bodily infirmity and natural causes,' she said.

I realised I hadn't heard most of the evidence, because I'd been busy puzzling about Tansy's death. Worse still, I'd been thinking like a detective again, even though I knew it was a stupid idea. Gia had told me I could spend the day in

the coroner's court, if I liked, but it looked as if I was too wired to concentrate on the inquests.

It'd be better to go back and get another job somewhere in the unit, to take my mind off the Tansy Dimitropoulos case.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

I sneaked out while Travis was calling the witnesses for the next case. The courtyard was still full of reporters, watching the front door of the unit like seagulls hoping for a feed. I hurried past them, ducked into the foyer and went to find Gia.

'She's with a client,' Kellie said. 'I'm taking my tea break now, so you can come into the tea room with me and wait for her there.' I hesitated, because I wanted to check out the effect of my posters, and she leaned forward and whispered, '*Please*, Harris. I've got some more news about Tansy and I'm desperate to tell someone.'

I wasn't sure it was a good idea to listen to Kellie, straight after I'd sworn off acting like a detective. On the other hand, she looked like she might explode, if she didn't get the news off her chest, so I shrugged and led the way down to the tea room.

'Guess what?' Kellie said, as she darted over to the urn. 'The cops have gone through all Tansy's friends, without finding a single motive for murder. They're staring to think she may've been killed to get at Jim or Rina.'

'Yeah, right,' I said sceptically. 'How do you know that? The cops came and told you personally, did they?'

Kellie grinned. 'Nah, the guy in charge of the investigation was talking on his mobile in a corner of the foyer. I just happened to stroll over that way and - well, like I said before, I've got excellent hearing.' She topped up her coffee with milk, took a thoughtful sip and said, 'Y'know, I would've made an ace reporter, except that I can't stand the way they go about things. Poor Jim had to get here

at 9 am, to avoid the lynch mob outside, and they've been hassling him at home as well.'

'So he's here today?' I asked and Kellie nodded.

'I dropped into the path lab, to tell him how sorry I am about Tansy,' she said. 'I wasn't sure whether he'd want to be left alone but Gia reckoned it'd help to know people were thinking of him. He just stared at me, the way he does, so I'm not a hundred per cent convinced that it *did* help. But it made me feel better, anyway.' She wriggled her shoulders, as if she was shaking off the memory, and added, 'Okay, enough about that. What do you think of the latest news, Harris?'

'It fits with what I know about Tansy,' I said. 'She seems to be the type of person that everyone liked. But Jim ...'

I stopped, because I liked Jim and I didn't want to run him down. Kellie nodded energetically.

'Yeah, I know what you mean,' she said. 'Jim isn't nasty or cruel or anything but he's not exactly big on people skills. He's got a few of the path staff offside - for instance, some guy he sacked, who came back later and shouted at him and had to be hustled out by the cops on duty in the Coroner's Court. And everyone knows he adored Tansy, so it'd be the most obvious way to -'

She broke off suddenly, handed me her cup of coffee and smiled over my shoulder.

'Oh, hi, Gia,' she said. 'Harris wants to see you. I was just getting him a coffee and chatting to him while he waited.'

Gia raised one eyebrow. 'Not gossiping, I hope. It's hard enough for Jim already, without people talking about him behind his back.'

'Gossiping?' Kellie said, wide-eyed. 'Me? No way ... Um, I better get back to work now.'

She scuttled out and Gia laughed. 'Kellie's a great kid,' she said. 'She's so interested in people that she gets carried away sometimes. I want to talk her into doing a psychology course part time, so we can take her on as a grief counsellor.'

I frowned and kicked the leg of Kellie's desk. For some reason, I felt a bit jealous. It was like I wanted to be the only junior star of the Grief Counselling Unit. That was weird for two reasons - first, because I liked Kellie, and second, because I was planning to be a pathologist, not a counsellor.

Luckily, Gia didn't seem to have picked up on the frowning and kicking. 'So, what did you think of the Coroner's Court?' she asked.

'The case was kind of boring, so my mind kept wandering,' I admitted. 'I'd rather do some real work for the rest of today.'

Gia thought for a moment. 'Well, you haven't been to Human Resources yet. They can always use a hand - but I warn you, it'll just be more data entry and filing.'

'Fine,' I said. 'That'll keep my brain occupied. Whereabouts are they?'

Gia gave me directions and rang ahead, to tell the boss of Human Resources that I was on my way. While they were chatting, I edged over to the door of the waiting room and heard a little kid telling her mum a story based on one of my posters. That made me feel good. I strode off down the corridor, practically bouncing with every step.

But, as I got close to the door of the pathology lab, my feet started to drag. I hesitated for a second and then pushed the door open, before I could chicken out. Jim Dimitropoulos was in his office, staring blankly at the computer screen. I walked up to him and looked straight into his eyes. They weren't grey holes any more. Instead, they were overflowing with sadness.

'It's bad about Tansy,' I said. 'Mum reminded me of the time when we went on holiday together. She was really cool.'

When Jim's eyes focused on me, I realised I must be closer to Tansy's age than anyone else in the unit. For a moment there, I wished I hadn't come in and stirred up all his old memories. But a second later the corners of Jim's mouth lifted into the sort of smile that can't be faked.

'That means a lot, Harris,' he said. 'It's good to know people will remember Tansy. I suppose that's the most that any of us can hope -'

Then he stopped in the middle of the sentence, as a woman came marching towards us. She was wearing a lab coat, which showed she was one of the pathologists, and she had a huge mass of iron grey hair that stuck out like a koala's ears. She was obviously dead set on talking to Jim, because she didn't even seem to notice that I was standing on the other side of him.

'The *police* called me into the incident room to ask me about my appeal against your appointment,' she burst out. 'They've got this ridiculous idea that I might've wanted to ... to punish you for taking my job. You have to tell them that I'm absolutely loyal to the unit.'

'I can't do that, Christina,' Jim told her. 'Did you hear what you just said? You still think it's *your* job, six months after they gave it to me. That doesn't sound as though you trust all the unit's decisions. But don't worry, I can certainly tell the police that I've worked with you for five years, without seeing any signs that you turn homicidal if things don't go your way.'

Christina tugged angrily on a strand of her hair. 'Oh, that's typical,' she snapped. 'You're still not prepared to admit that I would've done the job just as

well as -' She broke off suddenly, gulped and said, 'Omigod! What's the matter with me? How can I talk to you like this when ... when you ...'

Her face crumpled and she started to sob. Jim stood up and put his arms around her. As she fell forward onto his shoulder, he looked at me through a cloud of grey hair and mouthed, 'Thanks, Harris.'

I figured that was my signal to leave, so I headed for the door, feeling glad I'd made the effort to say something.

\*\*\*

Human Resources ran the whole unit, which meant that the work there was pretty much like any office work anywhere. That reminded me of Seb, slaving away in Water and Sewage. I checked my mobile and - guess what, I already had eight messages from him, mostly about Lara Page. The last one said:

'dun kEp me in suspense. hav U seen her?'

Yeah, sure, I'd seen Lara, outside with the mob of reporters who were after Jim's story. I didn't feel like talking about that, so I texted Seb back, saying: 'ive got wrk to do, even f U dont. ttyl.'

Then I got stuck into the photocopying that I'd been given. I had to copy some articles from medical journals, which were kind of a weird shape. I spent a while enlarging and shrinking the text, to make it fit onto A4 paper. But after I'd sorted that out, the job didn't use much of my brain, so I found myself thinking about Christina.

No doubt about it, she'd wanted the top job in Pathology and she still wanted it. The only question was: would she have gone in for revenge? I couldn't answer that after studying her for five minutes max. But it didn't sound like she'd done anything to Jim so far - stuffing up the test results to make him look bad, for instance, or slashing his lab coat or whatever. If she had, Jim would have definitely mentioned it, when she was asking him to clear her with the cops.

On the other hand, if Christina was seriously crazy, she might've brooded for six months and then decided to hit Jim where it would really hurt. Killing Tansy had hurt him, for sure, more than anything else could've done.

I sighed and started stapling the photocopied articles together. Three days at the unit, plus reading half a dozen books on forensic psychology, wasn't enough to make me an expert on craziness. I could see why the cops were interested in Christina but there was no way for me to tell whether she could be a killer, so I gave up on her and thought about Jim instead.

He'd handled Christina really well, especially considering that he had huge problems of his own. The first few times I'd met him, he'd struck me as someone who was pretty closed off but, when Christina cracked up, he'd been able to give her a hug. It had never occurred to me before that, when people were grieving, they had to deal with everyone else's grief, as well.

I was making a mental note to ask Gia about that, when one of the IT guys sidled over. 'Hey, Harris,' he said out of the corner of his mouth, like a spy in a movie. 'Would you do something for us? The journos are going to stick around till they get their story, so Jim Dimitropoulos is giving a press conference out at the front of the unit in five minutes time. The boss doesn't want any of us to go, so she'll be keeping an eye on us ... but *you* could get away, no problems. Could you listen in and report back to us?'

I didn't need to think twice about that. If the reporters were putting Jim on the line, I wanted to be there. Okay, I wouldn't be able to do anything to help him but at least there'd be a friendly face in the crowd.

'Sure,' I said. 'Where's the toilet in this section? I'll pretend that's where I'm going. See you later, okay?'

The guy jerked his chin towards the door at the end of the room and sidled off. I glanced at the boss, to make sure she hadn't noticed his spy act, and went striding across to the door. (Striding is way less suspicious than sidling.)

The foyer was empty but the courtyard was packed with people, including two TV camera crews. I saw lots of faces that I recognised - some of the staff from the unit and the reporters who'd been hanging around. Kellie was there, of course, listening to everyone and collecting more gossip. Gia was standing on the sidelines and frowning, like she was concerned about Jim.

And at the front of the crowd, Travis Walker was talking to Lara Page. He didn't look withdrawn and out of it, the way he'd looked in the Coroner's Court. His face was flushed, instead of pasty, and his eyes were fixed on Lara, like they were the only two people in the courtyard.

I was surprised at first, because I thought the Coroner's Court would've warned their staff not to talk to reporters, same as Gia had warned us. But then I started to wonder whether Travis had cornered Lara on purpose. Maybe he was desperate to know how the police investigation was going. Maybe he figured a reporter would have some inside information.

If that was true, then Travis Walker suddenly looked much more like a suspect for Tansy Dimitropoulos's murder.

## CHAPTER NINE

I looked around for Kellie. She wasn't anywhere near Travis and Lara, worst luck, so I couldn't rely on her excellent hearing to pick up on what they were saying. I started to wriggle through the crowd, aiming towards them. While I dodged round elbows and pushed through gaps, I kept an eye on my target.

Travis was bending over Lara, who was a head shorter than him. She was laughing up at him and he was joining in. I had to admit that didn't look too suspicious. Come to think of it, Travis and Lara were around the same age. They might've met each other before - hey, they might've even been at school together, which would make the whole thing totally innocent.

Either way, though, I was only guessing. I went on shoving towards the front of the crowd, hoping to get close enough to listen in,. But I was still a few metres away from Travis and Lara, when the main door of the unit swung open. Everyone fell silent straight away. We watched the CEO of the unit and the media liaison officer walk out and face the crowd, with Jim Dimitropoulos hovering behind them.

'Okay, you win,' the media liaison officer said with a smile. 'You've made it clear that you won't go away till you get some answers to your questions about the murder of Tansy Dimitropoulos, so Jim's agreed to speak with you.'

'But I hope that, after this, you'll leave Jim Dimitropoulos alone and let the unit go about its business, without constant harassment,' the manager added.

‘And I’d like to ask you to show respect for Jim’s tragic bereavement, when you’re choosing your questions.’

The media liaison officer patted Jim on the shoulder. ‘Okay, Jim,’ she said, ‘now it’s over to you.’

The journos all started shouting at once, which was completely pointless. It was impossible to hear any of their questions, and plus Jim looked totally freaked. The media liaison officer had to take over again, pointing to people in the crowd and telling them to speak one at a time.

‘I’m Jason Fenech from the *Messenger*,’ the first guy said. ‘Mr Dimitropoulos, did you take part in the autopsy on your daughter?’

Jim was pale already but he turned a shade paler. ‘No,’ he said forcefully. ‘No, of course not.’

‘But it must be convenient for you to know what’s going on,’ Lara called out. ‘Like, it gives you a chance to monitor the results.’

That seemed like a weird thing to say. It almost sounded like she thought Jim was tampering with the evidence. I wasn’t the only person who’d got that impression, either. Some of the other journos turned to stare at her and the media liaison officer moved forward, shielding Jim with her shoulder.

‘One at a time, please,’ she repeated. ‘There’s no need to interrupt. You’ll all get a turn in the end.’

She pointed to the guy beside Jason Fenech. ‘Cameron Atkins from the *Globe*,’ he said. ‘Jim, you’ve seen a lot of murder victims in your time. Can you tell us how you felt, when you discovered that your own daughter was a victim of violent crime?’

Jim cleared his throat. ‘I don’t think my job made any difference to the way I reacted,’ he said quietly. ‘I felt the same as any father would, under those circumstances.’

‘*Any* father?’ Lara yelled back. ‘Some fathers have been known to murder their daughters.’

I stared at her, feeling sick in my stomach. That settled it. She was definitely attacking Jim. I remembered our conversation in the coffee shop and wondered how far she was prepared to go, in order to get a good story.

Further than the other journos, at any rate. They were glaring at her, like she was giving journalists a bad name, and the people from the unit were muttering angrily together. Even Travis was edging away, like he didn’t want to be associated with Lara any more.

For the next twenty minutes, the reporters went on firing questions at Jim. Most of was pretty obvious stuff about the case and the progress of the investigation and what Tansy was like. Basically, they seemed to be after

something personal from Jim that they could quote in their stories. They got it, too. When Cameron Atkins asked about Tansy, Jim straightened his shoulders and seemed to grow a few centimetres taller.

'Tansy was an amazing kid,' he said. 'She was interested in everything and everyone. She lived more in eighteen years than most people do in a full lifetime. She's going to be greatly missed - not just by her family and close friends but by anyone who ever met her.'

There was silence for a few seconds after that. I was thinking about the girl I'd played with on the sand dunes and the people from the unit must've been running through their memories of Tansy too. But the journalists were as silent as the rest of us. I guess they were thinking about the kids in their own lives who'd be greatly missed, if something tragic happened to them.

The silence gave Lara her big chance. She stood on tiptoe and waved her hand frantically. The media liaison officer had been trying to ignore her but now she had to point at Lara.

'Okay, you've talked about Tansy,' Lara sang out. 'But you haven't said anything about your relationship with her? Was it happy? Or was it unhappy? Were there times when, like they say, you could've killed her?'

The entire crowd gasped in unison. I was so shocked that it took me a few seconds to notice the tears streaking down Jim Dimitropoulos's cheeks. He reached into the pocket of his coat, brought his hand out empty and started patting the pockets of his trousers. I figured he was looking for a hanky and I had one. Mum always made sure of that.

So I went over and gave it to him.

Flashlights went off in my face and the TV cameras swung towards me. I hadn't thought about that in advance and actually, I didn't think about it then. It was more important that Jim Dimitropoulos was smiling at me and saying, 'Thanks again, Harris.'

Then I turned and saw three reporters closing in on me. That made me realise what I'd just done. I panicked and bolted for the front door, to get away from the reporters, skidded across the foyer and locked myself in the first toilet I came to.

\*\*\*

News travelled fast in the forensic unit. By the time I got back to Human Resources, ready to give the guys the news, it turned out that everyone knew it already. There was a message on the whiteboard - GOOD ONE, HARRIS - and



Coke cans and packets of chips were lined up across my desk, like an on-the-spot party.

'It was wonderful of you to stand up for Jim Dimitropoulos,' the HR boss said. 'I only wish I'd been there to see it.'

She opened a packet of chips and started to practically hand-feed me. The IT guy winked at me.

'Hey, you can see it tonight,' he told the boss. 'I bet Harris'll be the main story on all the TV stations.'

The HR staff cheered but my stomach started churning. 'Oh no,' I groaned. 'Could I get the media liaison officer to phone the TV people and ask them to leave me out? I didn't do it to get on TV. I just thought Jim needed a hanky.'

'Maybe,' the IT guy said with a grin. 'But now the newspaper headlines are going to be KID DOES SOMETHING NICE. That has to be an improvement on PATHOLOGIST ACCUSED OF KILLING DAUGHTER, right?'

When he put it that way, I had to agree it was worth a bit of embarrassment. People tend to believe what they see on TV or read in the papers. They would've gone away thinking Jim was a murderer, which would've been totally unfair.

'Okay, I can live with it,' I decided. 'I just wish I knew why Lara got stuck into Jim. I talked to her the other day and she seemed kind of nice.'

The boss sniffed. 'Well, you know better now. She's not a nice girl at all. I'm glad you put her in her place, Harris.'

She made me eat another handful of chips and then swept off. The others relaxed and started quizzing me about the press conference and making me go over everything Lara had said.

'You reckon this chick's really ambitious, right?' the IT guy said finally. 'I bet that's the answer, Harris. She's just being outrageous, to get herself noticed.'

'I guess so,' I said sadly. 'I must've read her wrong ... Oh, blast! Now I'll have to tell my mate Seb. I think he had a crush on her, which means he'll be totally wrecked.'

I spent the next hour filing documents and trying to compose a message to Seb in my head. It wasn't easy to work out a tactful way to break the news. In the end, I just said:

'prss conf here 2day. Lara thinx JimDim offed Tansy!!! n way.'

Seb texted me two minutes later, same as usual, saying,

'so wat? L weird. fone me @ lunch & tel me bout prss conf.'

I stared at my mobile for half a minute, wondering how come Seb had gone off Lara so quickly. Then I messaged him to say I'd rather ring from home. Within five seconds, I got another message:

'cnt fone 2night. hotx3 d8 w Fee frm W&S.'

I laughed. Trust Seb. He'd fancied Lara yesterday but today he was cracking onto some girl from Water and Sewage.

Oh well, that solved one mystery, at any rate.

## CHAPTER TEN

I didn't phone Seb at lunchtime. I made him come down to the unit again. His folks are loaded, so they pay his mobile bills without even blinking, but Mum's trained me to use the mobile as little as possible.

Seb grumbled at first, because he wanted to have lunch with his new girlfriend. I pointed out that she mightn't go on being his girlfriend for long, if she had to sit around watching him talk on the mobile for an hour. He changed his mind after that and rocked up for the Grief Counselling Unit lunch. They'd picked an Italian place this time.

'Do you like eggplant, Harris?' Gia asked. When I nodded, she said, 'In that case, you have to try the *melanzane alla parmigiana*, because it's the house speciality. My shout, okay? It's a small way of saying thanks for what you did for Jim.'

'Huh?' said Seb. 'What's Harris been getting up to?'

I groaned and wished I'd settled for talking to him on the mobile, after all. That way, I could've accidentally forgotten to tell him about the hanky incident. This way, he insisted on hearing the full story, complete with a rave from Gia and Kellie about what a hero I was.

'I don't know why everyone keeps going on about it,' I complained. 'I only did what I'd normally do.'

'Exactly,' Gia said. 'Most people don't behave normally, if there's a TV camera pointing at them. I'm a trained grief counsellor, right? I *thought* about

helping Jim but I was still wondering whether I'd look like a fool, when you walked over to him.'

Seb said, 'Yikes!' so loudly that the people at the next three tables turned to look at us. 'You mean *Harris* is going to be on telly?' he asked. 'What a hoot. I gotta ring all the guys from school and tell them to tune in.'

'Thanks a lot,' I said bitterly. 'Want to ring the principal too?'

That was another mistake. Seb's hand went straight to his mobile and I realised he was actually thinking about it. Luckily, Seb doesn't quite have the nerve to make a personal call to our principal. Even more luckily, Belinda asked me what I thought about Lara Page, so we got into another Lara-discussion. The others mostly said the same stuff as the Human Resources guys, except that Seb came up with a new idea.

'On *Top Cop*, they reckon most murders are committed by someone close to the victim,' he said. 'Like, if a wife's killed, the husband's always the first suspect. Maybe Lara figured that, if a daughter's killed, it makes sense to suspect the dad.'

Belinda choked on a mouthful of pasta. 'That's statistically true,' she said, trying to swallow and speak at the same time. 'We learned it in our psychology lectures. It can't be true in this case, though. Jim's too ... oh, I don't know how to explain. If you'd met him, you'd know what I mean.'

Seb hadn't met Jim, of course, so he wasn't convinced. But we didn't go on arguing about it, because Belinda was coughing and choking again. For the next five minutes, everyone kept thumping her on the back and pouring her glasses of water and telling scary Forensics Unitstories about people who choked on their dinner and died. And after that, it was time to go back to work.

I tried to concentrate on my filing but I knew where everything went by then. I wasn't able to blank out any more, so I couldn't stop myself thinking about what Seb had said. Okay, he'd got his information from a TV cop show but the writers must've read up on forensic psychology, because I'd seen the same sort of stuff in my forensic books.

It had made sense at the time - like, people are obviously more likely to be killed by someone they know than by a mysterious stranger. But that was just a general theory. I couldn't make it apply to Jim and Tansy, not after hearing him talk about her at the press conference.

Well, not before that, either. Jim just wasn't that sort of guy.

Then again, I knew that approach wouldn't work on Seb. Like Belinda said, you had to be there and see Jim in action, in order to understand. Besides, I bet even the most gruesome murderers have friends or family who go, 'Come off it. He's a great bloke. He couldn't possibly do a thing like that.'

In other words, the only way to stop people like Seb - and the cops - from thinking that Jim was a killer would be to find the real murderer.

So, even though I'd promised myself that I wouldn't do any more amateur detecting, I began to sort through all the clues again. From what Kellie had told me, I figured the cops had read the forensic psychology books too, because they seemed to have started by looking for a murderous husband . (Well, boyfriend, in Tansy's case.)

I still thought Travis seemed kind of suspicious, especially after seeing him sleaze up to Lara at the press conference. But the cops had gone on to interview people like Christina - people who had a grudge against Jim - so they obviously didn't have anything definite on Travis.

That made my job pretty clear. If I wanted to help Jim, I either had to find out more about Travis or else I had to track down someone who had it in for Jim or his wife. There was only one problem with that.

I didn't have the faintest idea of how to go about it.

For a moment, I almost wished I'd taken up Lara's offer to work on the case together. She'd have access to different sources. I knew more about what was happening inside the unit but she'd know more about the police investigation. If we pooled our information, we might really get somewhere. I was actually flipping my wallet open, to get her card out, when I remembered what had got me going on this line of thought.

Hang on. Jim wouldn't be in such trouble, if Lara hadn't practically accused him of killing Tansy in front of two TV cameras. There was no point in asking *her* to help me defend him.

That brought me back to the place I'd started from. My brain kept going round in the same circles for the rest of the afternoon, right up to the point when I pushed the front door of our house open. I could see straight down the corridor to the lounge room, where Ricky was watching TV, as usual.

Oh, right. No wonder I'd been obsessing about murderers. It beat stressing about how everybody I knew was going to see me looking like a doofus on statewide TV.

'Mum,' I said, heading for the kitchen. 'Mum, there's something I have to tell you.'

She gasped and dropped the magazine she'd been reading. I realised she thought I had more bad news, so I hastily explained about the press conference. Mum went all dewy.

'Oh, Harris, that's lovely!' she said. 'I must've done something right, if I've produced a son who's so kind and thoughtful.'

She raved on about how nice I'd been to Jim, until I told her I'd had enough of that already. After that, she raced around, getting cans of fizz from the fridge and putting nachos and cheese in the microwave. She hustled me into the lounge room and plonked the food down on the coffee table, like we were having drinks and snacks at the movies.

'What's this in aid of?' Ricky asked suspiciously. 'You don't usually let us stuff ourselves before dinner.'

'Well, your brother isn't usually on TV,' Mum said. 'It's a special occasion, Ricky. Now, where can I find a blank cassette? I want to record Harris's first TV appearance.'

'But I'm watching *Dog Eat Dog*,' Ricky whined. 'It's this ace serial killer movie. One of the kids at school lent it to me. I just got to a really exciting part and I don't want to stop.'

'Did you hear me?' Mum asked. 'I said, *Harris* is going to be on TV.'

'So?' Ricky said. 'I can see him right now. I don't need to see him on the telly.'

'That's enough,' Mum said in her stern voice. 'Watching Harris'll be more fun than any movie.'

My little brother didn't agree. He complained about having to switch off his video. Then he complained even more when Mum couldn't find any blank cassettes and had to use one of his *Top Cop* tapes. He carried on so much that we'd only just got everything set up when the TV news started.

Mum wriggled forward, till she was sitting right on the edge of her chair. Her excitement must have been catching. I was actually looking forward to it by then. So the news item was a total let down. There were a few seconds of Jim saying, 'Tansy's going to be greatly missed', a few more seconds of Lara saying, 'Were there times when, like they say, you could've killed her?' - a second where the camera focused on my back as I gave Jim the hanky, while the TV announcer's voice said, 'However, Jim Dimitropoulos has his supporters as well' ... and then it was over.

Mum loved it. She played the tape back three times. (She *said* she was making sure it had recorded properly. But I couldn't help noticing how she kept pointing at the screen and going, 'My son. That's my son.') Then she switched across to another channel, where the news started half an hour later. Their camera had been in a better position, so you could see half of my face this time, which was an improvement.

And after that I scored two phone calls and a text message from kids in my class. The ones who phoned were the school's greatest gossip hounds but

the message came from a guy I really like, saying he wanted to hear all about it as soon as we got back to school.

So, okay, the kids at school weren't laughing at me, and plus Mum had seen a positive side to me being involved with the unit. I was feeling pretty famous and pleased with myself, when Uncle Melvin dropped in again. My good mood crashed within two seconds. Uncle Melvin walked straight past Ricky and me, without even seeing us, like he was wrapped up in a black cloud.

'I spent the day with Rina,' he told Mum, not bothering to say, 'G'day' first or anything. 'Would you believe, Jim went off to work this morning. The two boys are with their grandparents, which means he left Rina there all alone. I always thought the guy was a cold fish and now he's proved I was right.'

'You wouldn't think that, if you'd heard him talk about Tansy in the TV interview,' Mum protested. 'Perhaps Rina liked the idea of some time on her own.'

'Yes, that's what she told me,' Uncle Melvin said darkly. 'But I reckon she was just putting a brave face on it. She's very loyal, even when Jim doesn't deserve it.'

He went on dissing Jim Dimitropoulos for the next ten minutes, telling us how badly Jim was behaving. When someone leans on you really hard, it often has the opposite effect to what they want. In this case, Uncle Melvin had succeeded in making me wonder whether *Rina* was the one behaving badly.

I mean, it was a bit suss, telling Jim to go to work, then calling her ex-husband around, so she could bitch to him. Maybe Rina hadn't got on all that well with her daughter. Maybe she was setting Uncle Melvin up as a witness, to prove she was upset about Tansy, when actually ...

No. No, that couldn't be right. I'd met Rina a couple of times at Uncle Melvin's place and she seemed like a nice lady. Not the sort of person who'd kill her own daughter, any more than Jim was.

Although she could still be involved with the murder indirectly. I waited for the next gap in Uncle Melvin's rant and said casually, 'By the way, where's Rina working now?'

He frowned. 'Same place as always. She runs that second hand bookshop, near to where she and Jim live. I had to go down and put a note on the door for her - "Closed due to family problems". Jim hadn't thought of that, even though he passes the shop on his way to -'

'So Rina doesn't have anyone working for her?' I cut in.

'Hardly. Second hand bookshops aren't the world's greatest moneyspinners. Rina has her regular customers, of course, but -'

‘Oh, right. What are the regulars like? I guess she has a few crazies coming into the shop.’

Uncle Melvin’s eyebrows did a little dance. ‘Got it!’ he said, snapping his fingers. ‘For a moment there, I thought *you’d* gone a bit crazy, Harris, but now I can see what you’re on about.’

‘Well, I can’t,’ Mum said crossly. ‘Why’s Harris asking all those questions?’

‘Because he’s been listening to the gossip around the forensic unit,’ Uncle Melvin explained. ‘The police think Tansy might’ve been murdered as part of a vendetta against one or both of her parents. Rina spent half the afternoon going through her address book and trying to work out whether she had any enemies. She doesn’t, of course. Everybody loves her, just like everybody loved Tansy.’

His eyebrows sank down so low that I couldn’t see his eyes. It was like he was trying to hide his feelings, except that I was pretty sure he’d just told us how he felt about Rina. ‘Everybody loves her,’ he’d said ... including Uncle Melvin, who’d never lived with anyone else in the whole eighteen years since he and Rina split up.

What if he loved Rina so much that he was prepared to do anything to get her back? Uncle Melvin wasn’t exactly keen on Jim. He might’ve been waiting till Tansy grew up, because he was convinced that Rina would ditch Jim once their daughter left home.

But that hadn’t happened. Maybe Uncle Melvin had decided he had to do something more drastic to destroy the Dimitropoulos family, killing Tansy first and waiting to see whether the stress would wreck Rina’s marriage. If it didn’t, would Jim be next on the list?

All of those questions zapped through my mind in five seconds. A second later, I was practically gagging, like I wanted to spew the thoughts out of my system. It was one thing to suspect Travis of killing Tansy. I didn’t know him, so it was basically just a game, but suspecting Uncle Melvin was totally gross.

Sure, if I wanted to be a cop, I’d have to go round suspecting anyone and everyone. But, like I’d told Gia, cop stuff didn’t interest me. I wanted to help the dead, not hassle the living. In which case, I needed to forget about trying to pin the murder on Rina or Uncle Melvin or whoever, starting right now.

While I gazed at Uncle Melvin, silently apologising to him, he started to rave on about how he was going to babysit Rina tomorrow as well. Mum leaned forward and patted his hand.

‘Listen, Mel, I think Rina meant it when she said she wanted time to herself,’ she murmured. ‘The best thing you can do for her at present is to give her some space.’



Uncle Melvin's eyebrows shot up, giving me a good view of his eyes. They looked startled, so I figured Mum had got it right. So much for my theory about Rina dragging Uncle Melvin in as a witness. Actually, he'd pushed in, because he was so keen to do something to help. It was lucky I didn't want to be a detective, because I was pretty bad at it.

On the other hand, Mum seemed to be pretty good at understanding people who were grieving. I guess she'd had a lot of practice. I mean, she would've had to deal with everybody else's reactions when my dad died, same as Jim had to deal with Christina this morning.

It was kind of weird that Mum had been so touchy about my interest in forensics, when she would've made an excellent grief counsellor herself.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

For the rest of the evening, I watched TV with Ricky. We got on fine, because I didn't say anything critical about his serial killer movie, even when the murder victims spouted more blood than any human body could possibly hold. It was a relief to hang out with someone who wasn't at all impressed by my TV appearance. (Well, at least I thought Ricky wasn't impressed, till I caught him sneaking Mum's cassette out of the VCR next morning, to show his friends at school.)

TV cameras chased me through my dreams all night, like I was a celebrity trying to escape from the paparazzi. I woke up in a foul mood, stomped out to the kitchen and found Mum reading the morning paper.

'Look, Harris!' she said. 'You're on the front page.'

It was too much. I grabbed an apple, mumbled something about going to work early and split. A bus turned up just as I reached the bus stop. I sat down near the back and sulked all the way to the city, vowing that I was never going to do a good turn for anyone, ever again.

As the bus nudged through the morning traffic, it occurred to me that everyone at the unit would be talking about that stupid newspaper story. That meant I'd better read it. I hopped off the bus at the stop before the unit and bought a paper at the corner shop. When I spread it out on the counter, I saw a photo of me and Jim and the hanky, with a caption underneath.

‘Harry Jackson, nephew of Jim Dimitropoulos, comforts his uncle at the press conference.’

I blinked and read it a second time, then burst out laughing. I’d skived off, before the journos cornered me, but the newspaper reporter must’ve asked someone from the unit who I was. He’d written my name down wrong, and plus he’d mixed Jim up with Uncle Melvin.

‘D’oh. I’ll never believe anything I read in the papers again,’ I told the woman behind the counter.

‘No, all lies,’ she agreed. ‘They say the weather fine today but see, more rain ... Hey, that little boy in the paper - he look a bit like you. He your brother, maybe.’

‘No way,’ I said. ‘His name’s Harry Jackson. *I’m* Harris Johnson. Nothing to do with me, right?’

I bounced out of the shop and strode down to the unit, feeling my bad mood dissolve in the rain. The mistake about my name had settled my worries about all the publicity. Even if other people went on fussing, I was totally over it.

There was another advantage to the rain, as well. When I walked into the courtyard, it was completely empty. No journalists hanging around there today. It looked as if they were leaving us alone at last, because they weren’t prepared to get drenched.

Then, as I headed towards the front door, a guy came rocketing over from the plaza. He was wearing a handknitted jumper with squiggly patterns, trousers that didn’t quite cover his ankles and floppy sandals over white socks. His face was covered with grey stubble and he smelt like a wet dog. I backed away but he followed, wagging a soggy newspaper under my nose.

‘Tell your uncle I’m glad everyone knows he’s a murderer now,’ he yelled. ‘He murdered me, six months ago.’

‘Huh?’ I said, wondering why a fruit loop was sending messages to Uncle Melvin. ‘You don’t look all that murdered.’

‘Not literally,’ the guy snarled. ‘But Jim stabbed me in the back, when he took my job away.’

Oh, right. The newspaper. The fruit loop obviously believed what he read, so he thought Jim was my uncle. Come to think of it, that explained who he was - the guy Kellie had mentioned, who’d been sacked by Jim and come back to make a scene.

‘Sure, I’ll pass on your message,’ I said in a calm, soothing voice, trying to prevent another scene.

Some hope. The guy flapped his newspaper so hard that it whacked me on the shoulder.

‘You’re lying,’ he shouted, which was a bit spooky, because it was true. ‘You’re a coward, like your uncle. He’s hiding in there, too scared to face me, but I’ll drag him out and give him a piece of my mind.’

Something spattered on my cheek - not raindrops this time but drops of spit. Oh, gross. The guy was actually frothing at the mouth. I wiped my face with my sleeve, backed off even further, to get out of spitting range, and looked round for help. There was someone over in the plaza. Someone in a glossy black raincoat, with matching black hair and a silver gleam of piercings.

Lara Page. She was hanging onto the statue of the man on the iron bench, doubled up with laughter. I had a feeling I couldn’t expect any help from her. I started to stroll towards the door, acting cool and casual, like the conversation was over. But the guy came after me with his arms flailing, swinging the wet newspaper like a club.

I was about to crack and make a run for the door, when I heard Gia’s voice from behind me. ‘Eric!’ she called out, sounding pleasant and friendly. ‘I haven’t seen you for ages. How are you?’

The guy turned and watched Gia hurry across the courtyard. ‘Not too good,’ he said mournfully. ‘I don’t like the pills. They make my mouth dry. Then that girl brought me here, so I could tell Jim he’s a bad man. She said I’d feel better after that but I can’t find him anywhere.’

‘Oh dear, have you stopped taking your medication, Eric?’ Gia said. ‘Come inside and tell me about it. Maybe we can ring your doctor and work something out.’

She took Eric’s arm and led him into the unit, glancing sideways to give me a reassuring smile. I waited for a bit, to give them a head start. Okay, Gia felt sorry for Eric, which meant I’d probably end up feeling sorry for him too, but I needed to get over being scared first.

I was still hanging round in the courtyard when I remembered what Eric had said about “that girl”. Apparently, it wasn’t a coincidence that he’d turned up today. The scared feeling in my stomach did a backflip and changed into anger. I stormed across the road and went marching up to Lara.

‘Are you some sort of sicko or what?’ I demanded. ‘Did you get a kick out of setting that guy onto me?’

Lara shrugged. ‘I didn’t mean to let him loose on you. He was supposed to go after Jim Dimitropoulos. But hey, it was your own fault, really. You should’ve told me you were Jim’s nephew.’

It sounded as if she believed what she read in the papers as well. That was pretty stupid of her, considering the way she went about getting her own stories - like, by accusing Jim of murder and stirring up poor old Eric.

'You brought that guy here on purpose, to hassle Jim, didn't you?' I said accusingly. 'That's really cruel. What's your problem, Lara?'

Lara wasn't tall, in the first place, but she seemed to shrink and become two sizes smaller. 'You *know* what my problem is,' she whispered. 'I told you before. I need a big story and I'll do anything to get it. I have to succeed as a journalist. I'm not like you. I don't have a family to back me up. My mother died when I was little and my father - well, *he* stuck around till last year, worst luck.'

'Why "worst luck"?' I asked. 'What's wrong with having a father?'

'Some fathers are okay, I suppose,' Lara said. 'But some fathers just want to boss you around and tell you what's wrong with you . I wish he'd died first, instead of my mum.'

She frowned down at her feet and kicked the iron bench. I tried to go on being angry but I couldn't help understanding some of how she felt.

'My dad died when I was little,' I said. 'One of those freak accidents. He dived into a swimming pool and broke his neck. I think he was the okay kind of father but I don't remember him that well.'

'I don't remember my mother either,' Lara said. 'Funny, I remember my aunt better. I thought I'd go and live with her, after Mum died. But then she died too.'

We stood there, side by side. Raindrops were trickling down inside the collar of my coat and sliding off the tip of my nose but I didn't feel like moving, all the same. I hadn't met many people with dead parents, so I wanted to keep the conversation going.

'So, do you know Travis well?' I asked, just for something to say.

'Huh?' Lara said, puzzled. 'Do you mean the pop group or some guy?'

'A guy. The one who was standing next to you at the press conference.'

'Oh, him. Nah, never met him before. He just started coming on to me and he's a good-looking guy, so I flirted right back. He went off me after my first question to the media officer, but.'

She grinned, like it was a great joke, but she'd lost me again. I stopped feeling sympathetic, ditched the idea of checking to see whether Travis had been fishing for information about Tansy and scowled at Lara.

'Fair enough, too,' I said. 'You practically accused Jim of being a murderer. That's totally warped.'

'*If* he's innocent,' Lara said. 'What makes you so sure of that?'

'How long have you got?' I asked. 'It'll take a while to explain what a great guy Jim is.'

Lara looked up at me through her eyelashes. 'Tell me about him and Tansy,' she said. 'How did they get on? Was he strict with her? Did he criticise her much?'

She was back in the business of accusing Jim but this time I thought I knew where she was coming from. "Strict" and "critical" sounded kind of like her own father. They hadn't had a great relationship, so she was assuming that Tansy's relationship with Jim must've been unhappy too.

'Hey, you heard what Jim said at the press conference,' I reminded her. 'He loved Tansy, y'know.'

'Sure, sure,' Lara said. 'I guess you have to defend him, because he's your uncle. But try taking a more objective approach, just to see how it plays. You must've seen Jim and Tansy together a lot, while you were growing up. Don't tell me he never lost his temper with her. What sort of things made him mad? Did she ever seem scared of him?'

I couldn't give Lara what she wanted, because I hadn't grown up round the Dimitropoulos family, the way she thought. But even if I had, I wouldn't have told her anything. I'm not stupid. I could see where it would end up - like, on the front page of the daily paper.

'Sorry,' I said. 'It was nice talking to you but we better stop before it goes pear-shaped.'

I turned away and Lara grabbed my arm, so hard that it spun me back towards her. She might have been little but she had a really strong grip. I said so and she laughed.

'Actually, I was using your own strength against you,' she said. 'That's karate. I've been doing classes since I was twelve.'

While I rubbed my arm, I checked out her muscles. Lara noticed me checking and turned small and vulnerable again. She ran her hands through her wet hair, making it stick out like the fur on a bedraggled kitten.

'Please don't go,' she said. 'We don't have to talk about Jim and Tansy. We could have a cup of coffee and talk about our families or whatever.'

I would've liked that idea five minutes ago but I wasn't going to fall for it twice in a row. I mean, Lara had known how to find Eric 's address. For all I knew, she could've looked me up in the public records as well, found out about my dad and used the information to get me on side.

She must've realised I wasn't going to buy that line, because she tried another one straight away, saying smoothly, 'Or we could put our heads together and solve the mystery. After all, you need an answer for your uncle's sake, just as much as I need an exclusive story.'

Lara really knew how to press my buttons. It was like she'd read my mind and found out that I'd been trying to find the killer and get Jim off the hook.

'You know you want to,' she said, reading my mind again. "Come on, give it a go. We'd make a great team.'

I sighed. The trouble was, Lara had pushed too many of my buttons in the last ten minutes. She'd been a tough reporter, a sad orphan, a karate kid and a girl detective, depending on what she thought would work best. By that time, I couldn't tell which one of them was the real Lara and I didn't trust any of them.

'Thanks but no, thanks,' I said. 'See you round - and lay off Jim Dimitropoulos, okay?'

Then I walked off and left her standing there in the rain.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

When I got to the Grief Counselling Unit, Gia was in her office, talking to Eric, but she'd left a message with Kellie to say I'd be working with the project group today. I headed on down there and five minutes later I was sitting in front of another computer, while one of the project officers dumped a stack of printouts on the desk beside me.

'We're the research side of the forensics unit,' he explained. 'That means we're responsible for putting together all the statistics about workplace accidents or SIDS or whatever. We're working on a project about suicide at the moment, trying to figure out whether there are more suicides in particular suburbs. It ought to be fairly simple but the problem is, the people who entered the data didn't always include the postcode.'

'So you want me to go back through the old cases and put the postcode in?' I guessed.

The guy nodded. 'Yep, that's it. You catch on fast, Harris - although I'm afraid you won't be using your brain much in this job. We'll get the actual stats by running the data through a computer program. You'll just be entering the data into the files.'

'Hey, I'm used to it,' I said. 'It's all that anybody's let me do here. I'm not expecting anything glamorous.'

'Good,' the guy said with a grin. 'You'll get on fine then. Give me a yell, if you have any problems.'



I didn't have any problems - like, you don't exactly need a degree in psychology to look at an address and see whether it's got a postcode. I was pretty slow at first, though, because I kept reading all the case notes.

Like, I'd see the surname "Abbott", check the address and then get totally involved in a story from ten years ago, about some woman who broke off her engagement and killed herself, a few days after the death of her twin sister. I'd stare out of the window for a bit, wondering whether the twin stuff was relevant and whether twins had some sort of psychic connection ... and after that I'd remember I was supposed to be working and get back on the job.

Luckily, the novelty wore off after a while. By the time I reached the "D" surnames, I was just glancing at the address, adding the postcode, if it was missing, and moving right along. That meant I got through the files faster but it also gave me more time to think.

Well, "think" might be the wrong word. Mainly, I was just obsessing about Lara Page. She was the most confusing person I'd ever met. One minute, I'd find myself admitting that I'd enjoyed talking to her. I would've liked to be part of her team, if only I could've trusted her more.

Then, next minute, I'd be convinced she'd invented that whole sob story about her parents, to con me into doing some detective work for her inside the unit. I even wondered whether she could've topped Tansy herself - not seriously, because no one would go that far for a story, but the thought *did* cross my mind. I got so wound up that, in the end, I decided to discuss it with Gia at lunchtime. But that didn't happen, because Gia had already decided to discuss Eric with me.

'I hope he didn't freak you too much,' she said, while the others were over at the counter, ordering the felafel sandwiches. (We were at a Turkish place this time.) 'Eric's basically harmless but he gets a bit paranoid if he's not taking his pills ... Oops, sorry, I'm using psychological jargon. Do you know what "paranoid" means?'

'Yeah, yeah,' I said. 'It means he sees enemies everywhere. He thought I was an enemy, for sure.'

Gia looked alarmed. 'Oh dear, he didn't attack you physically, did he?'

'Not exactly. I mean, he whammed me with a soggy newspaper - the one with my photo in it - but I think it was an accident. He was basically just waving it around.'

'Damn,' Gia said. 'I wonder whether we should mention that to the cops. They questioned Eric briefly this morning but it seemed pretty clear that he'd only turned up at the unit because that wretched reporter brought him along. They figured he hadn't been stalking Jim ever since he lost his job, so they let him go.'

But if the cops knew Eric was behaving violently this morning, they'd probably call him in again ...'

Belinda dropped two felafel sandwiches in front of us but Gia sat there chewing her fingernails, instead of her lunch. I coughed, to get her attention.

'You don't think that's a good idea?' I asked.

'Yes and no,' she said, frowning at her sandwich. 'Eric's in a fairly bad way at present. Another session with the cops could tip him right over the edge, especially if he *hasn't* done anything about Jim.'

But if he's innocent - no, wait a minute,' I said, catching up. 'You mean that, if the cops picked him up for something he didn't do, he'd have a reason for thinking they were his enemies?'

'Exactly,' Gia agreed. 'On the other hand, it's always possible that Eric *did* attack Tansy, because of his delusions about Jim. So we've got a choice between protecting Eric and protecting any other potential victims.' She looked up, gave me a faint smile and said, 'That's the sort of tough choice counsellors sometimes have to make, so you can definitely count this as part of your work experience.'

'Okay, if it's part of my job, I vote for not telling the cops,' I decided. 'Eric didn't say anything about Tansy, while he was raving on. I got the impression he said whatever came into his head, so it doesn't sound like she's part of his paranoia.'

We didn't have time to go into it any further, because the others came milling over with their sandwiches and drinks. They started teasing me by calling me Harry Jackson, then went on to make bad jokes about my new career as a TV star. I spent most of the lunch hour trying not to blush.

As we walked back to the unit, Gia fell into step beside me. 'Have you had any more thoughts about the soggy newspaper incident?' she asked. 'Do you still think we should keep quiet about it?'

We were crossing the plaza at the time, so I could see the place where Eric had charged at me. It didn't make me feel scared all over again. In fact, I could hardly remember what Eric looked like, although I could still remember the way he smelt.

'If we go to the cops, that makes it seem like a major issue,' I said, thinking out loud. 'And it wasn't. Let's leave it, okay?'

\*\*\*

It had been a big morning - hey, it had been a big week. When I sat down at the project group's computer again, I couldn't stop yawning. The words on the

screen kept blurring in front of my eyes. I actually fell asleep for a few seconds, with one finger on the keyboard, and woke up to find a line of “zzzzzzzzz” across the screen.

I looked round guiltily, deleted the “z”s and went off to make a cup of coffee. On the way back, I slopped coffee over my trainers. When I pulled my hanky out, to mop up the mess, my mobile dropped onto the floor. I stared down at it, feeling even more guilty. Sure enough, when I checked, there were twelve messages waiting for me. Eleven of them were from Seb and there was one number I’d never seen before, meaning that I’d been messaged by a total stranger.

Seb’s first message said,  
‘saw U on TV. U nEd a haircut.’

His second message said:  
‘saw U on TV. U walk lk a duck.’

After that, the messages got more and more desperate. The second last one was headed “i h8 U” but by the last one, Seb was saying:

‘TLK 2 me, Harris. jst jokN. U wer kewl. lets hav dinner so U cn teL me aLbout it.’

Oh, and the total stranger turned out to be Seb’s new girlfriend, Fee. He must’ve talked her into messaging me, as an extra bit of emotional blackmail.

There was one good thing about all of that. It woke me up, better than the coffee. I had to text Seb and the girlfriend, phone Mum at her work to ask if it would be okay to stay out for dinner, then text Seb again and tell him that it was on.

After that, I sped through the rest of the postcode list and finished the job around five o’clock. I wasn’t meeting Seb and Fee till six o’clock, so I wandered back to the Grief Counselling Unit, to see if anyone was still around. I found Gia and Belinda in the tea room, chatting with Alan, one of the other counsellors. I guess it had been a big week for them too. They were all drinking coffee and yawning, like they were too tired to get up and go home.

‘I had one of the silent types for my last appointment,’ Belinda was saying, as I came in. ‘I hate it when people just sit there and stare out the window.’

‘Hmm, I don’t mind them so much,’ Alan said. ‘I reckon the talkative types are the hardest.’

‘Isn’t talking supposed to be good for people, when they’re grieving?’ I asked.

‘In theory, yes,’ Alan said. ‘But only if they talk about their real feelings. Some people use words as a way to hide what they feel. They babble on and on about what they had for breakfast and where they’re going for their next holiday.’

You have to pin them down and make them talk about their dead partner or child or whatever.'

'And some people tell you what they think they *ought* to be feeling,' Gia added. 'That's no use, either. As a matter of fact, it's worse than saying nothing, because it locks them into pretending to be something they're not.'

'I pretend sometimes,' I admitted. 'I pretended to be cool with Eric this morning, when I wasn't *totally* cool.'

'Oh, that's different,' Belinda said. 'It's a sensible type of pretending. Nothing's all good or all bad.'

They went on talking and I went on listening but Belinda had summed it up. She and Alan and Gia were all saying there weren't any definite rules for counselling. They just tried to figure out what would work best for each person they talked to. I got so into it that I lost track of the time. When I looked at my watch, I had to check the numbers twice, before I was convinced that it was quarter to six.

'Sorry, gotta go,' I said, jumping up. 'See you tomorrow, okay?'

The corridors were empty and a bit spooky, although there were lights here and there, which showed that some people were working back. I hurried past the morgue, skidded through the foyer and pelted across the courtyard.

It was dark outside, way darker than usual, partly because I'd been hanging round at the unit and partly because of the rain clouds. If I'd been on time, I would've gone around by the main road, where there were plenty of street lights. But I was running late, so I decided to cut across the plaza.

No one seemed to use the plaza at night. The food shops were shut by now and the workers from the office buildings were on their way home. When I crossed the road, I stepped into a world of shadow. It took a while for my eyes to adjust and focus on the gap between two cafe windows, opening onto the bridge that went across the river and into the city.

Even then, I couldn't see too well. I fixed my eyes on the neon signs, glittering in the gap, and kept ploughing through the darkness towards them. That meant I wasn't watching my feet. I tripped on a paving stone that stuck up at one corner, flailed wildly and looked round for something to grab. The only thing near me was the iron bench where the statue sat.

Except that there seemed to be two statues sitting side by side tonight.

Oh, great. Now I was seeing statue-ghosts. That was all I needed.

I shivered, pulled myself together and went hurtling on. Too fast. A few seconds later, my foot rammed into another uneven paving stone. I thought I'd definitely fall flat on my face this time but, at the last minute, someone caught

hold of me. I leaned into the arm that was wrapped across my chest, gasping for breath.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘You saved my life.’

Which turned to be a pretty stupid thing to say, because next minute I realised the person was jabbing a knife at my throat.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The point of the knife was touching my skin. It felt cold and it tickled. I went completely still, although my brain was racing. I could hear every sound - cars buzzing along the main road, the river splashing against its banks, the steady breathing of the person behind me.

I was also totally aware of the space around me. Twenty metres to the gap ahead, thirty metres back to the road and three centimetres between the blade of the knife and my throat. I wanted to make a dash for the bridge or the unit but - hey, you do the maths. They were close but the knife was way closer. I forced myself to stay still and listened to my heart pounding, louder than the traffic by now.

‘Saved your life?’ a voice said in my ear. ‘Not a chance. You’re my next message to your uncle.’

‘Hang on!’ I yelled. ‘You’ve got it all wrong.’

Something warm and wet dribbled down the side of my neck. Blood. My throat had moved when I spoke, rubbing against the knife blade. That was freaky but I couldn’t let it stop me. Luckily, I’d been through it all with Eric that morning, so I knew what to say.

‘You think Jim Dimitropoulos is my uncle, right?’ I gabbled. ‘But I’m actually the nephew of his wife’s *first* husband. My real uncle’s called Melvin. He works as a graphic designer at an advertising firm. They did that big campaign for Roo Beer, the one with the dancing kangaroo. In other words, Uncle Melvin’s got absolutely nothing to do with forensics.’

I'd managed to say such a lot, because the knife had pulled back after my second sentence, although it kept on hovering close to my throat. I could practically hear the person behind me thinking it through, trying to decide if I was telling the truth.

I guess all the detail about Uncle Melvin must've been convincing. At any rate, the knife blade lifted and wheeled away. A second later, the arm released me but, when I started to turn, a fist thudded into my back.

No chance of keeping my balance this time. I toppled, crashed forward and sprawled full length on the ground. As I squinted at the paving stones, I heard footsteps drumming across the plaza, aiming for the gap that led to the bridge.

So I scrambled up, winced as I straightened my bruised leg and ran like blazes in the opposite direction.

\*\*\*

The main door of the unit hadn't been locked, which was a relief. On the other hand, the woman from the front desk had left ages ago and there was no one else in sight. I limped across the foyer and plunged into the dark corridor, feeling more scared now than I'd felt with a knife at my throat.

I could see a light in the pathology lab. If I'd been sure it was Jim, working late, I would've gone in there. But I couldn't handle explaining the whole thing to someone I didn't know well, so I kept limping on towards the Grief Counselling Unit.

Gia and Belinda and Alan were still there. That made sense, when I thought about it later - I mean, I'd only been gone for about five minutes - but at the time I felt so grateful that I almost burst into tears.

'Harris!' Belinda said, leaping to her feet. 'What happened? You look terrible.'

Gia clapped her hand to her mouth. 'Omigod!' she said, between her fingers. 'Your neck's bleeding. Someone attacked you. Was ... was it Eric?'

'I don't know,' I told her. 'They didn't say much. Just some stuff about sending a message to my uncle. They meant Jim, not Uncle Melvin - like, they'd been fooled by that story in the paper. When I explained, they let me go.'

Belinda stared. 'Harris, that's so clear and concise,' she said. 'How can you be that calm? If someone'd pulled a knife on me, I'd be screaming my head off.'

‘Not necessarily,’ Alan said. ‘You might go into a state of shock, like Harris. Right now, he’s suffering from adrenaline overload. He needs a hot drink, with plenty of sugar, and something to keep him warm.’

If you have to go into shock, a Grief Counselling Unit is a good place to do it. While Belinda made me a cup of hot chocolate, using the emergency kettle, Gia fetched the blanket they kept there for little kids who needed a nap.

I hadn’t realised how cold I was, till I started to warm up again. My hands were shaking so badly that I had to hang on tight to the cup. At the same time, part of my brain was watching everything and making notes about all my reactions. If I was going to be working in forensics, I’d be dealing with people in shock quite a lot, so it’d be useful to know how they felt.

As well as shaking, I was looking at the world through a zoom lens, which made things seem really close or really far away. I noticed that when Gia bent towards me and her face became as big as the moon.

‘Harris, we’ll have to call the police,’ she said, speaking very slowly and clearly. ‘Will you be okay about talking to them?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘That’s fine. I just met Tansy’s killer, didn’t I? I might remember something that’ll help the cops to catch them.’

My voice echoed in my ears and the room seemed far too bright. I stared down into my cup, till my eyes recovered. When I looked up, Alan was squatting in front of me.

‘Your parents’ll be worried, when you don’t show up,’ he said. ‘Tell me their number and I’ll give them a call.’

‘It’s just my mum,’ I said. ‘And she’s not expecting me home for dinner but - oh, help, you better phone Seb, before he calls Mum, to ask where I am, and freaks her right out.’

I seemed to have passed through the clear and concise stage and gone into a babbling stage, where I said everything that popped into my head. It took a few minutes to explain who Seb was and a few more minutes to get his number from my mobile, which was buried at the bottom of my backpack. (I usually knew the number by heart but my brain wasn’t working properly.)

Alan stood up and went to phone Seb from his office. When he moved away, I saw that the room behind him was full of people. Gossip still travelled fast after hours at the forensics unit. Everyone who was working back had rocked up to get the details. I’d met most of them, because I’d worked all round the unit, but I didn’t know any of them well, except for the IT guy from Human Relations and Christina and Travis.

Christina surged forward and clutched my hand. ‘Did this man really threaten Jim?’ she said breathlessly. ‘We have to warn Jim straight away.’



That sounded more sensible than the last time I'd listened to Christina. I tried to tell her I agreed but I could only manage a froggy croak. Gia frowned, took Christina by the arm and marched her towards the door.

'Not now,' she said. 'Let Harris recover first.'

She flapped her hands at the others, shooing them out as well. Travis was the last to leave, because he was getting Belinda's mobile number.

'That guy's quite an operator,' Belinda commented, as the door closed behind him. 'I'd heard about him from the girls at the Coroner's Court but I wouldn't have believed he could turn a crime scene into a pick-up.' She pushed her glasses into place and added, 'Okay, Harris, we better clean you up, before the cops get here.'

I knew I'd hurt my knee and I knew about the cut on my neck. But I hadn't realised I'd scraped my hands and my face on the pavement, as well. Belinda found the first aid kit and she and Gia picked gravel out of my palms and put antiseptic and bandaids on all the cuts.

'Oops, and Christina reckons Pathology'll want to look at Harris's windcheater too,' Gia remembered. 'She says there might be some fibres from the assailant's clothes on it. We better give them the blanket, as well. Otherwise, the cops could end up hunting for a blanket-wearing maniac.'

It wasn't the greatest joke in history but at the time I thought it was incredibly funny. I was still giggling when the door opened and Alan came in, followed by Seb and a tall girl with long, straight blonde hair, who had to be Fee.

'Your friends wanted to make sure you were okay,' Alan said. 'I told them they could have five minutes, no more than that.'

Seb and Fee watched, open-mouthed, while Gia pulled on a pair of surgical gloves, eased the windcheater over my head and tucked it into a giant paper bag.

'It's probably contaminated,' she said regretfully. 'We should've whisked it off straight away - but hey, we're grief counsellors, not pathologists. When a kid walks in, white as a ghost and bleeding, we don't think about preserving the evidence. We just start treating him for shock.'

'Bleeding, dude?' Seb said, impressed. 'Did this guy really cut you? Will you have a scar?'

Fee punched him. 'Shut up,' she said. 'He's had a rough night. Leave him alone, Seb.'

I laughed. Fee seemed like the total opposite to Lara, in just about every way. But that's Seb for you. He doesn't have a type, unless you count "girl" as a type.

'See?' Seb said, elbowing Fee. 'My man Harris laughs at danger. He's totally on top of it. Show us the cut, mate, and then we'll split.'

'All right, just as long as you don't phone everyone from school tonight and tell them about it,' I bargained.

I peeled back the bandage on my neck. Seb whistled and said, 'Awesome', made me promise to phone him next day and headed off, towing Fee behind him. She looked over her shoulder and rolled her eyes at me. I knew what she meant but actually, Seb's visit had made me feel a whole lot better.

Okay, he was a clown but he'd come through for me. That's what friends are for, right?

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The cops turned up a few minutes after Seb and Fee left, while I was rolling up the sleeves of the jumper that Alan had lent me. There were two of them. I'd noticed them both in the foyer, while the police were interviewing people from the unit about Tansy's murder, but I'd never spoken to them before. Sergeant Mitrakis was small and bustling, with springy dark hair and sharp dark eyes. Constable Bloom was tall and blond, with smile creases around his pale blue eyes.

'We want to begin by getting the facts straight,' Sergeant Mitrakis said, pulling up a chair and sitting down beside me. 'Don't give us any of your opinions yet. We'll come to that later on.'

Constable Bloom smiled down at me. 'This part's pretty informal, Harris,' he said. 'You'll have to come to the station and make a statement eventually. At present, though, we just want to find out as much about the perpetrator as we can.'

I wasn't all that hopeful. The whole thing had happened so fast that I hadn't had time to take it in. But it was amazing how much I remembered, when Sergeant Mitrakis and Constable Bloom got to work on me.

They made a good team. The sergeant was speedy and sparky and kept firing off questions that jogged my memory. And the constable was more laidback and lateral, so he thought of things that filled in the gaps. For starters, they

quizzed me about the size of the knife blade and the colour of its handle, until we established that the blade was fairly long and the handle was chunky and dark.

‘Hmph,’ Sergeant Mitrakis said. ‘Sounds like an ordinary kitchen knife to me. That’s not a lot of help.’

‘Well, it suggests that the perp was improvising,’ Constable Bloom pointed out. ‘In other words, he - or she - isn’t a habitual criminal, with access to illegal weapons.’

Sergeant Mitrakis snorted. ‘We knew that already. This is someone who’s after Jim Dimitropoulos for strictly personal reasons. What else can you tell us, Harris?’

We went through everything I’d observed about the person who attacked me. They had to be taller than I was, because their arm had gone round my chest and their mouth had been on a level with my ear. But that was the best piece of information I could come up with. I wasn’t even able to tell Constable Bloom whether the person was a “he” or a “she”.

‘They only said a few words,’ I apologised. ‘The voice was kind of husky. It didn’t give much away. And plus, I couldn’t hear too well, because ...’

‘No need to explain,’ Constable Bloom said, smiling. ‘I’ve been on stakeouts where my heart was banging so loudly, I was sure the crims would hear it and take off. Don’t worry, Harris, you’re doing fine. We’re the detectives, remember. You have to leave something for us to do.’

The next part was the hardest, although it sounds easy. The cops asked me to go back to the plaza and point out the spot where I’d been attacked.

‘You never know, the perp might’ve thrown the knife away,’ Constable Bloom said. ‘They do some stupid things at times.’

Sergeant Mitrakis sniffed. ‘It’s not very likely, when the river’s only a few metres away from the plaza. Our friend would have to be amazingly stupid, not to take a few extra steps and chuck the knife in the water. But we’ll have to go through the motions, anyway.’

She swept me out of the unit and into the courtyard. It was darker than ever outside. When I stalled at the edge of the plaza, Gia and Constable Bloom looked at me sympathetically. (Alan and Belinda had gone home by then but Gia had stuck around, because I was supposed to have an adult there while I talked to the cops.)

‘Are you sure you’re ready for this?’ she asked and the constable added, ‘Take your time, Harris. There’s no rush.’

At the same time, Sergeant Mitrakis switched on the big torch she was carrying and glanced back, clicking her tongue impatiently. I couldn’t help grinning, even though I’d gone cold and shaky again. Sergeant Mitrakis and

Constable Bloom were just like the main team on *Top Cops*. The constable was the nice cop and the sergeant was the nasty cop.

It worked, too. I didn't want to look chicken in front of Sergeant Mitrakis, so I squared my shoulders, took a deep breath and followed her into the darkness. I knew I'd been attacked somewhere near the iron bench - like, the second statue had obviously been the Perp. (I'd started to think of the attacker that was, because it was what the constable kept saying.) But it had been so dark that I couldn't identify the exact spot. We wandered around for a while, with Sergeant Mitrakis's torch beam probing the shadows.

'That'll do,' she said finally, putting the torch down on one of the concrete boxes and marking the area. 'I'll tell the rest of the squad to search around here for the knife. Now we'd better go back to the unit and finish up, then get you home to bed.'

The word "bed" made me yawn till my jaw cracked. I set off straight away, ahead of the others. As I strode across the plaza, I realised I wasn't afraid any more. Telling the story, then going back to the crime scene had changed things. The Perp and the knife were just part of a video in my head now, not something that kept on scaring me, over and over again.

So, when Sergeant Mitrakis sat me down in the tea room and said, 'Okay, Harris, do you have any ideas?', I didn't mind thinking about it.

'I reckon the Perp's totally off the air,' I said. 'Pulling a knife on me, just because the papers called me Jim's nephew - that's not exactly normal behaviour.'

In the background, Gia started to fidget with her shirt, undoing the wrist buttons and then buttoning them up again. 'Harris,' she said uncomfortably. 'Harris, I reckon it's time to tell the police about Eric. I know we decided to keep it to ourselves but -'

'But *what?*' Sergeant Mitrakis snapped, scowling at Gia. 'Concealing evidence is a serious matter, you know.'

'Chill,' I said. 'It was no big deal. Eric accidentally bopped me with a newspaper, when Lara Page brought him here to hassle Jim. But he definitely wasn't the Perp.'

'What makes you so sure?' Constable Bloom asked with one of his lazy smiles.

Actually, I'd just said that to get Sergeant Mitrakis off Gia's back but when I checked my memory, I realised it was true.

'Eric smelt like a wet dog,' I said. 'The Perp and I were right up close and personal but I didn't get any whiffs of wet dog then.'

Sergeant Mitrakis stopped looking annoyed with Gia and started looking annoyed at herself. 'Scent,' she said. 'I should've thought of that. Did your attacker have any other kind of body odour?'

I closed my eyes and breathed in, imagining myself back to the plaza. 'No,' I decided. 'Couldn't smell any sweat or perfume or aftershave. But no wet dogs, either.'

'Oh well, at least that's negative evidence,' Constable Bloom said. 'Was there anything else that we haven't covered?'

When I shook my head, Sergeant Mitrakis pushed her chair back and leapt up. 'Thanks, Harris,' she said, halfway to the door. 'I wish all our witnesses were as clear-headed as you.'

Coming from the sergeant, that felt like a double compliment. I beamed at the door, as it slammed behind her and Constable Bloom, and decided that they were both nice cops. Gia collapsed into Sergeant Mitrakis's chair and fanned herself.

'Phew!' she said. 'I've been feeling incredibly guilty about telling you not to report the newspaper incident. It's a relief to know Eric's off the hook.'

'You didn't *tell* me,' I said through a yawn. 'We decided together. You reckoned it was one of the hard choices counsellors sometimes have to make.'

Gia smiled wryly. 'Sure, but we don't usually have to make those choices till we've had years of training and experience. You've been on a pretty steep learning curve for the last week, Harris. It's lucky you're a quick learner. Now, you must be exhausted, after everything you've just been through. Have a rest, while I phone your mother, so she can come and collect you.'

As she headed out, I pulled Alan's baggy jumper up round my neck and snuggled into its woolly folds. I closed my eyes, just for a second ... and when I opened them, the minute hand on the tea room clock had moved in a half-circle and the media officer was standing over me.

'Sorry to wake you but I think you'll sleep better in your own bed,' she said with a smile. 'Your mum's here, Harris. I just wanted to have a word with you first, to assure you that you won't find yourself in the headlines again tomorrow. The cops want to keep this latest development under wraps, until they see whether it gives them a lead to Tansy's killer.'

'Did they find the knife?' I asked drowsily. 'Hey, and has someone phoned Jim?'

'Yes, he and Rina know they need to be on their guard,' the media officer assured me. 'But I'm afraid there was no sign of the knife on the plaza.'

'Oh well, Sergeant Mitrakis reckoned that'd be too easy,' I said. 'I bet she'll be pleased. I have a feeling she likes a challenge.'

I tried to fight my way out of Alan's jumper but it had wrapped itself round me like a cocoon. I was still wrestling with it, when the door opened and Mum walked in. The folds of the jumper dropped away and I went hurtling over to her.

I'm fifteen years old, right? I'm not exactly keen on being hugged in public. But right then, I couldn't have cared who saw me being hugged by Mum.

\*\*\*

Mum had to bring Ricky with her, of course, so on the drive home we just talked about the least scary parts of my encounter with the Perp. Not that Ricky was the slightest bit scared.

'This is so cool,' he kept saying. 'When I do work experience, can I go to the unit too?'

'No,' Mum said sharply. She softened her voice and added, 'Even if you did, there wouldn't be another murder investigation. They don't have murders there every week, you know.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'Most of the work I've done is totally boring - like, filing and data entry or whatever.'

'Yeah, right,' Ricky said, sounding unconvinced. 'But you got to meet an actual crim and some actual cops. That'd be cool fun.'

'No, it wasn't,' I told him. 'It's not like your TV shows, where you know the hero has to be there at the end. Fact is, I was lucky to get out of it in one piece.'

Mum nodded approvingly. 'Mind you, it sounds as though you were smart, as well as lucky,' she said. 'But Harris is right, Ricky. Danger isn't fun. It's just ... um, dangerous.'

'Sure, sure,' Ricky said. 'I know that. I've seen *Dangerman*.'

He started to tell us the plot of some movie, leaving bits out and going back to fill them in later. After a few minutes of that, I was completely muddled, so I had another nap in the back seat. When I woke up, the car was pulling into the garage. Mum hauled me out, steered me into the kitchen and packed Ricky off to bed. Then she came back and stood over me, hands on hips.

'Well, that settles it,' she said. 'I didn't like Melvin's work experience idea in the first place, although I never thought it would get quite this bad. I went along with it, because you seemed so keen, but I can't go along with it any more. You're not going back to the unit tomorrow. I won't let you, Harris.'

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Trust me, that jolted me right out of feeling sleepy. I sat up straight and glared at Mum.

‘You can’t do that,’ I said. ‘I’d never see Gia again. Or Jim or Belinda or -’

‘Or the person who just stabbed you in the neck,’ Mum said. ‘Think about it, Harris. You don’t seriously expect me to send you back into that sort of danger, do you?’

‘It was only dangerous while the Perp thought I was Jim’s nephew,’ I protested. ‘I’ve set that straight now. The Perp won’t come after me again.’

Mum shivered. ‘So you say. Who knows what goes on in the minds of people like that?’

‘Cops do,’ I said. ‘If Sergeant Mitrakis thought the Perp was likely to have another go at me, she’d get someone to watch our house. It’s her job to catch the Perp, right?’

‘You’re not making this sound any better,’ Mum said shakily. ‘I wish I hadn’t let you get mixed up in any of it. I’ve never liked your fixation on forensics, right from the day when I saw the horrible photo in that book of yours.’

I’d heard Mum say stuff like that a hundred times before, so I don’t know why I lost it then. Maybe it was one time too many or maybe it was just because I’d had a bad day. At any rate, I suddenly snapped.

‘This is so not fair,’ I shouted. ‘You keep acting like there’s something wrong with being interested in forensics. You just don’t get it, do you? I know



what I want to do with my life, so why can't you be pleased, instead of bitching about it all the time?'

Even when I stopped shouting, I could still hear the echo of my voice in the air. We're not the shouting type of family. I thought Mum was going to tick me off but she just stood and studied me for a while.

'It's true,' she said in the end, sounding calmer than before. 'I *do* think there's something unhealthy about your interest in forensics, because of your father.'

That was the last thing I'd expected her to say. I stared at her blankly.

'Duh?' I said. 'What's Dad got to do with it?'

'Well, there was an inquest into his death and an autopsy on his body,' Mum said, like I should've known it all along. 'I hated all of that and I just want to forget about it ... but it seems like you can't forget.'

Actually, it had never occurred to me that the Coroner's Court would've had to check out Dad's death. I should've guessed, after the coroner told Evelyn McDonnell that there had to be an inquest on anyone who died without medical attention, but I hadn't made the connection with Dad.

'I was ten years old when Dad died,' I reminded Mum. 'I don't remember anything about inquests or autopsies. If you really want to know what got me into forensics, it all started when Ricky's spaniel died. One minute it was prancing around and next minute it was, like, gone. I spent ages thinking about what that meant. And Ricky cried and cried but we dug a grave in the back yard and buried the spaniel and you said a poem and after that, Ricky felt okay. So that was when I decided I wanted to work with the dead.'

I paused because I'd run out of breath, and also because I felt kind of embarrassed. I hadn't talked about that stuff to anyone before and I wasn't sure how Mum would take it. I was waiting to see whether she'd yell at me again, when she leaned over and hugged me.

'Okay,' she said. 'Okay, Harris. I'm sorry, I should've asked about that ages ago.'

I hadn't minded being hugged at the unit but I didn't want Mum to make a habit of it. I wriggled until she let me go, then looked up to find her smiling mistily at me.

'If you're over it now, can I go back to the unit tomorrow?' I asked, pushing my luck.

Mum dropped into the chair opposite me. 'Oh, I don't know,' she sighed. 'if it means so much to you - and if you promise to stay inside the unit and not go wandering round after dark - and if I call Melvin and see whether he can drive

you there and back, so you don't have to take the bus ... then, all right, I suppose you can go.'

I punched the air and yelled, 'Yes!' Then I made Mum ring Uncle Melvin straight away. Once he'd heard the full story, he insisted that we had to spend the night at his place, in case any knife-wielding maniacs turned up at our house.

While we were driving over there, with Ricky snoring in the back seat, Mum questioned me as thoroughly as the cops, to see whether i was still freaked about the Perp. I dozed off, in between two of her questions, which convinced her that I was basically fine.

And after that, I staggered off to the double bunk in Uncle Melvin's spare room and fell asleep within seconds.

\*\*\*

I woke up at dawn, feeling really buzzy. Yesterday had been huge. I hadn't got a chance to think about everything properly, because there'd been too much going on, and plus I'd been too stressed out. But now my brain was working overtime, trying to process all the new data.

The Perp was completely fixated on Jim Dimitropoulos. I was positive about that, after the stuff about "sending a message to your uncle". It might have meant that I was supposed to go and tell Jim to watch out - or it might've meant that the Perp was planning to kill me, as well as Tansy. But either way, it proved that Tansy was murdered by someone who wanted to hurt Jim.

I took a break and shivered a bit, remembering the feel of the knife against my throat. The shivering didn't last long this time, though. I sat up, pulled the doona round my shoulders and came at the problem from a different angle.

Over the last few days, I'd worked out a shortlist of suspects. Two of them had definitely been in the area last night - Travis and Christina. I'd got suspicious of Travis after he'd cosied up to Lara but, come to think of it, he'd flirted with Belinda as well. It looked as though he was just the flirty type, same as Seb. Even more importantly, he didn't have anything against Jim, as far as I knew. So, basically, I could cross him off my list now.

Christina Patterson had it in for Jim, though. Even when he was grieving for Tansy, she couldn't stop going on about how she should have got his job. I shut my eyes and called up a picture of her, standing next to Jim in the pathology lab, then compared it to what I knew about the Perp.

When Christina had burst into tears and fallen on Jim's shoulder, her bushy grey hair had been in his face. So, okay, Christina was taller than Jim,

which made her tall enough to be the Perp. She'd know how to use a knife too. After all, she worked as a forensic pathologist.

But was she obsessed enough to keep going after Jim? I'd only met her once and frankly, I couldn't guess. On the other hand, Mum was letting me go back to the unit and, with any luck, I'd get another chance to study Christina. She might as well stay on the list till then.

I shrugged and moved on to my other suspects. Eric, who'd been paranoid about Jim. Lara, who'd been persecuting Jim, in order to get a lead story. Unfortunately, neither of them seemed to match the Perp at all. Lara was too small to grab me from behind and I couldn't see how attacking me would help her become a big deal journalist. And the Perp didn't smell like Eric, although I supposed Eric could always have gone home and had a shower, collected a knife and come back to the unit ...

Yeah, right. As if. Eric didn't strike me as the sort of guy who'd bother to clean himself up, if he was feeling homicidal. I was getting desperate now, although at least I wasn't desperate enough to start suspecting Rina Dimitropoulos or Uncle Melvin again.

The fact was, I'd probably never find out who attacked me and killed Tansy, unless the cops tracked down the Perp. There was still a chance of that happening. Sergeant Mitrakis and Constable Bloom seemed pretty smart, and plus they had way more resources than I did.

I tried to run through my theories again but Ricky started tossing and turning in the top bunk. The bed frame creaked loudly, making it impossible to concentrate, so I decided it was time to get up. All that thinking had made me hungry and there were cooking smells wafting down the hall.

And face it, as a detective, I was out of my depth. It would be smarter to give up and work on making the most of my last day at the unit.

\*\*\*

I wandered out to the kitchen and found Mum sitting at the table, watching Uncle Melvin make his famous scrambled eggs. She had dark circles round her eyes like a panda, as if she'd stayed awake, guarding us, in case the Perp followed us to Uncle Melvin's place.

'You're up early, Harris,' she commented. 'Are you still set on going into the unit?' When I nodded, she smiled and said, 'Yes, I thought so. You've found your career, no doubt about it. That's just like your father. He knew he wanted to be a vet, right from when he was twelve years old.'

Mum hardly ever talked about Dad. Something must've changed - but what, exactly? For some reason, I flashed back to the morning I'd spent in the Coroner's Court, when Evelyn McDonnell had burst into tears and asked, 'Why do we have to go through all of this?'

Mum had hated the inquest on Dad too. She'd wanted to forget the whole thing. Maybe she'd stopped talking about Dad, to help her forget - and maybe now she could start remembering again. I liked that idea.

'What made Dad want to be a vet, anyway?' I said, to encourage her.

She launched into a story about how Dad couldn't have pets, because his brother and sister were allergic, so he'd got a job walking the neighbours' dogs. The story went on for as long as it took to eat my scrambled eggs. The minute Mum finished, Uncle Melvin edged over towards us.

'Harris, since you're up already, would you mind making an early start?' he asked. 'That way, I can drop you at the unit and still get to work on time.'

I raced off, beat Ricky into the bathroom and collected my backpack. Then I shuffled from one foot to the other, while Mum checked that I had a clean hanky and made me promise to keep out of trouble. A few minutes later, I was in Uncle Melvin's Alfa, heading into the morning traffic.

'Thanks, mate,' I said. 'I needed some back-up. Mum wouldn't've let me go off on my own.'

Uncle Melvin grinned. 'Yeah, you owe me. I had to walk out halfway through a hot date last night.' He turned serious and added, 'Not a problem. You and Ricky and your mum are family and families should stick together.'

'Even if it means breaking a hot date?' I teased.

'Even then,' Uncle Melvin agreed. 'Mind you, I don't think it did me any harm. Eleni, my new girlfriend, comes from a big Greek family. She's pretty strong on family loyalty.'

I hadn't heard about this new girlfriend before but I guess we'd had other things to talk about, over the last few days. 'So, how did you meet Eleni?' I asked.

Uncle Melvin's eyebrows wriggled in an embarrassed sort of way. 'Actually, Rina introduced us. She's been trying to matchmake me for years. I kept telling her I could find my own girlfriends ... but I have to admit Rina did a great job this time. She knows me pretty well, of course. We mightn't have done too well as husband and wife but she's the best friend I ever had.'

I was glad I hadn't gone on making up stories about Uncle Melvin still being in love with Rina. He was obviously rapt in Eleni, because he raved on and on about how kind and cute and smart she was. That was nice for him but boring

for me. When my mobile beeped, I decided to answer it, even though I was sure it would just be Seb.

'Harris!' Gia said. 'I was hoping I'd catch you, before you got to work. Someone told the media about last night's attack. It's the lead story in the morning paper.'

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

'Bummer,' I said. 'I was hoping everyone at school would've forgotten about me being on telly, by the time I got back. Now it's starting all over again.'

Gia laughed. 'Yeah, thought you'd react like that. I wanted to give you a chance to stay home and avoid the TV cameras - although, come to think of it, I'm surprised the journos aren't banging on your front door already.'

'They probably are,' I said. 'We stayed at Uncle Melvin's last night. I'm in his car on the way to the unit right now.'

'Good one,' Gia said. 'Tell your uncle to come down the side lane, instead of letting you off at the courtyard. The Coroner's Court has a separate entrance. We can sneak you in through there.'

She gave me some more detailed directions and hung up. I explained the situation to Uncle Melvin, who raised one eyebrow at me.

'Sure you don't want to be interviewed?' he said. 'Most people would jump at the chance to see themselves on telly. Just look at all those reality TV shows.'

I shuddered. 'Not me. Once was embarrassing enough. I'm not going through that again, if I can help it.'

After he'd decided that I was serious, Uncle Melvin got totally into the business of smuggling me past the reporters. First, he made me put this daggy old raincoat that was lying on the back seat. Then he rummaged in the glove box and found one of the baseball caps that his firm had made for the Roo Beer

advertising campaign. It was fluorescent green, with a huge sparkly gold logo of a kangaroo holding a beer can.

'Not on,' I said. 'No way am I wearing *that*.'

'Oh yes, you are,' he said. 'See, you can pull the peak down, to hide your face. No one'll recognise you then.'

'They better not,' I said gloomily. 'If the TV cameras catch me in this, I'll have to leave school and start somewhere else, where nobody knows me.'

Uncle Melvin just laughed - and he laughed even more when he saw me in my disguise. To make it even worse, the whole thing was completely pointless. The side lane was empty and, as we pulled up, a door swung open and Kellie leaned out, waving frantically. I made a dash for the door, ripped off the stupid cap and started to struggle out of the stupid raincoat.

Too late. Kellie was giggling already.

'Love the outfit, Harris,' she said. 'It brings out the green tones in your skin.' I pretended to swipe at her and she dodged, saying, 'Follow me. I'll take you down to the Grief Counselling Unit.'

While we threaded through a maze of corridors, she told me the reporters were back on duty in the courtyard. 'But don't worry, you won't have to face them,' she said. 'The cops'll deal with that. Sergeant Mitrakis is ropeable about the newspaper story. She reckons she'll hang, draw and quarter the person who broke it to the papers.'

'Oh right,' I said. 'Haven't had time to think about that side of things yet. I wonder who it was. It's a bit of a puzzle - like, not that many people knew about it.'

'I'd be prepared to bet it wasn't one of the cops who talked,' Kellie said straight away. 'Put it like this, if I worked for Sergeant Mitrakis, I wouldn't do anything that'd get me into her bad books.'

'You're not wrong,' I agreed. 'Then again, half a dozen people from the unit came in to take a look at me, while I was sitting there bleeding. I suppose one of them might've tipped off the reporters.'

'Maybe,' Kellie said doubtfully. 'But this place is kind of like a family, y'know. We're all on Jim's side. I can't see any of us doing anything that'd mess up the investigation.'

'Fair enough. There's always the whisper game, though. Like, someone from the unit could've mentioned it to a friend or whatever. Then the friend could've told a reporter.'

'Guess so. And there's one other person who knew all about it, as well.'

I glanced sideways at Kellie. 'Who's that?' I asked, although I was pretty sure I knew the answer.

She rolled her eyes. 'D'oh. The person who attacked you, of course.'

It was so obvious that I'd missed it. I'd actually been thinking of Seb.

'D'oh to you,' I said. 'Sure, the Perp knew - but why tell the whole world?'

'To send a message to Jim,' Kellie said promptly. 'Isn't that what this is all about?'

I sighed. 'Don't ask me. I've been going over and over the case for the whole of this week and there's only one thing I'm sure of, so far. I don't have the faintest idea of what it's all about.'

By that time, we'd arrived at the Grief Counselling Unit's waiting room. Kellie handed over the morning paper and I scanned the lead story. It had been written by Jason Fenech, one of the guys from the press conference.

He'd got my name right this time and he knew I wasn't Jim's nephew, which was a plus. On the other hand, the photo of me must've been lifted from the TV footage. It showed the back of my neck and a blurry version of my profile, mainly featuring my left ear.

'Awesome,' Kellie said, giggling again. 'You look like Freddie Krueger out of *Nightmare on Elm Street*.'

I couldn't argue with that, because it was true. I just dropped the paper into the bin and collapsed onto the nearest chair. While I waited for Gia to show, I stared at the posters on the wall and tried to work out whether the newspaper story had given me any more clues about the Perp. Ten minutes later, I'd only come to one conclusion.

The posters had been an excellent idea. They'd totally calmed me down. I didn't even care about the horror movie photo any more.

The waiting room was starting to fill up, so Kellie sent me into Gia's office. I roamed round, reading the titles on her bookshelves, then decided I'd better ring Seb. He'd been pretty excited about all the drama at the unit. There was always a chance that he'd decided to get in on the action. I hoped he hadn't but I wanted to check with him first, before I reminded anyone that he'd been there.

When I tapped out his number on Gia's phone, a businesslike voice said, 'Water and Sewage, Accounts department.'

'Oh, right,' I said. 'Can I speak to Sebastian Cartwright, please?'

'This *is* me, idiot,' Seb said. 'You picked a bad time to call, but. I want to hear the whole story but the boss'll go spare, if he catches me chatting on. Ring me back at lunchtime, okay?'

'Just one question first,' I said, before he could cut me off. 'You didn't happen to mention the knife incident to anyone who works for the media, did you?'



'No way,' Seb said, sounding offended. 'Like I'd do that, when you asked me to keep my mouth shut. Anyway, I don't know any reporters.'

'Yes, you do. You know Lara Page.'

Seb thought for a moment. 'Oh, the chick with the piercings. Haven't seen her for days. I'm with Fee now, in case you'd forgotten.'

Actually, I *had* forgotten. 'Thanks for the reminder, mate,' I said 'She wouldn't have talked to the papers, would she?'

Seb hesitated for a bit too long, so I told him to spit it out. 'Well, her big brother's a cadet on the *Globe*,' he admitted. 'But she heard you ask me not to tell. I'm pretty sure she would've gone along with that.'

I groaned quietly. Seb fancied Fee and he was only "pretty sure", not "totally sure". It looked as though I'd found out who'd given Jason Fenech his information. It wasn't a clue, after all. It was just Seb's girlfriend's big brother.

At that point, Seb's boss yelled at him loudly enough for me to hear. Gia walked into the office at the same time, so we both hung up.

'Sorry I'm late,' Gia said. 'I ran into Jim in the foyer and did a bit of informal grief counselling on the spot. Oh, and he wants to have a word with you too, Harris. I'm sending you to the library today, because I figured you could use a bit of peace and quiet, so you can stop off at the Pathology lab on your way there.'

Peace and quiet sounded good to me. I got up to leave but Gia put her hand on my shoulder.

'How are you bearing up?' she asked. 'You did pretty well last night but I was wondering if you'd had any kickbacks.'

'Not that I've noticed,' I said. 'It was a mistake, right? It isn't going to happen again.'

'True,' Gia said. 'But it was a shock, all the same. If you find yourself getting anxious later on, feel free to give me a call - not just today but even after you've finished your work experience.'

She patted my shoulder as a send-off. I was smiling as I headed back into the waiting room. Half a dozen people were lined up on the chairs, all of them with stories they needed to unload. The group nearest to the door was a mum with a baby and a five year old - the same ages that Ricky and I had been, when our dad died.

As I strolled down to the Path lab, I hoped they'd end up feeling as good as I did, after telling the knife story to Gia and the others last night. I wished Mum had been able to talk to someone like Gia as well, straight after Dad's death. Not possible, though. Gia had told me, back on my first day, that there wasn't any grief counselling at the unit ten years ago.

Still, at least Mum and I had finally talked about Dad. That was something. Quite a big something.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Path lab was as silent and busy as usual. I found Jim in his office, checking some test results. When he glanced up, his face looked thinner and paler than before but his eyes were steady and focused.

'Thanks for dropping in, Harris,' he said. 'I wanted to say how sorry I am about what happened last night.'

'Hey, it wasn't your fault,' I said and Jim smiled back.

'Yes, I know. Gia's just been giving me a pep talk, to make sure I'm not blaming myself for everything. Still, one way or another, you've kept getting dragged into this whole business, not just with the knife attack but also by the reporters. Oh, which reminds me - you'd better not go out for lunch today. The journos are still hanging around. That young girl more or less told me I was a murderer again, on my way in this morning.'

His smile faded and his face creased with sadness, which made me feel really mad at Lara. Then he shrugged it off and tried to keep smiling.

'Anyway, I thought I could at least make it up to you, by telling you a bit more about the work we do here,' he said.

I didn't feel as if Jim owed me but I wasn't going to knock back an offer like that. 'Cool,' I said, sitting down opposite him. 'There's one thing I'd really like to ask. Do you reckon I've got what it takes to be a forensic pathologist?'

'Well, you'd have to do a lot of training first,' Jim said. 'Five years of medical school - or eight years, if you do postgraduate study as well - followed by a year as a hospital intern and two more years of hospital residency. Then you'd

have to work for five or six years as a pathology registrar and a year or two as a forensic registrar. So it'd be fifteen or twenty years before you were a fully qualified forensic pathologist.'

I was a bit boggled by that. I mean, I hadn't even been alive for twenty years. Jim noticed and grinned at me.

'The good news is, it's a very secure line of employment,' he said. 'Over the last ten years, there's always been a job going for a forensic pathologist somewhere in Australia. It's satisfying work too - well, I find it satisfying, at any rate. We're detectives, in our own way, except that the body itself is our crime scene. And you never get tired of the job, because there's such a wide range of work - from autopsies to court appearances; from talking to students to testing skin swabs or rebuilding skulls for identification purposes or -'

'Hey, don't let Jim scare you,' a voice interrupted.

I jumped and swung round and saw Christina Patterson in the doorway. She must've been listening in, because she added, 'Okay, there's a lot of variety in forensic work but you don't have to be equally good at everything. If you ask me, it's more important to know how bruises age and change than to be able to ramble on about it in a courtroom.'

'I don't agree,' Jim said, very definitely. 'All right, our scientific findings have to be accurate. But we need to present our findings in a way that'll convince a jury, as well. Juries are just ordinary people. Most of them don't have any medical knowledge. If you want them to take your evidence into account, you have to use language they'll understand.'

I nodded, remembering the doctor in the Coroner's Court who'd totally lost me, but Christina shook her head.

'We're expert witnesses, for heaven's sake,' she said. 'Why can't the jury just accept that we know better than they do?'

Jim sighed. 'This is one of your blind spots, Chrissie. I'm never going to convince you, am I? We had exactly the same argument only three weeks ago, in the middle of that barbecue at your house.'

I glanced nervously over my shoulder, to see whether Christina was going to start shouting at Jim again. But in fact, she and Jim were both laughing, like they were sharing some old joke. As I relaxed and settled back into my chair, I realised two things.

First of all, Jim and Christina worked in a job that needed a lot of co-operation, which meant they were like family. They had rows sometimes, the way Ricky and I did, but basically they were on the same side.

And secondly, they'd been working together for years. They went to each other's houses. They knew a lot about each other's lives. So Christina would

never have thought I was Jim's nephew, no matter what the paper said - in which case, she couldn't be the Perp. It looked as though I'd have to cross the last suspect off my list.

I was still feeling annoyed about that, when I noticed Jim looking in my direction. 'Well, you won't find that a problem, anyhow, Harris,' he said. 'From what I've observed, you'd be good at talking to juries or students. You're very clear and you know how to communicate. And you've got the sort of commitment it takes to do this kind of work. I think you'd make an excellent forensic pathologist.'

He asked whether I had any more questions but I couldn't think of a single one. I floated out of the lab, as if I was walking on clouds, repeating "excellent forensic pathologist" under my breath. Ricky and Seb might think it was exciting to be at the unit during a murder investigation but, as far as I was concerned, the last few minutes had been the most exciting yet.

Jim Dimitropoulos thought I'd make an excellent forensic pathologist - and I thought Jim was top, so his opinion really counted. It didn't matter that I hadn't identified the Perp or solved Tansy's murder, not if I'd scored a gold star from Jim.

\*\*\*

When I floated into the library, the librarian was on the phone. She pulled a face and waved her hand at the shelves. I figured she was telling me to have a look around, because the call was going to take a long time.

That was fine by me. An excellent forensic pathologist can always find something to do in the library of a forensic unit. I started by searching for "twins" in the computer catalogue and browsing through some of the books.

I wanted to test that twin theory I'd come up with, while I was checking postcodes for the project group. It would have been interesting to see whether the woman who'd topped herself straight after her twin sister died had been, like, psychically connected to her twin. The books mainly seemed to be about genes and stuff, though, so I gave up on that pretty quickly.

But the twin stuff had reminded me of the two women in the Thomasville Highway Disaster who'd looked like twins. I decided it'd be cool to go back to the place where I'd started and read the newspaper clippings again. I wasn't planning to solve any mysteries this time, which was lucky for me. I read through a month of newspaper reports and only came across a few facts that hadn't been in the first article or in Jim's lecture.

Most of the new facts were basically irrelevant, anyway. For instance, I found out that Body 6's young daughter was called Khylara Paglianello-Abbott. That told me something about Body 6 - like, it was a shocker of a name to hang on a little kid, especially when Body 6's surname was just Abbott. I couldn't see why the poor kid had to be landed with a double-barrelled name.

The librarian had finished her phone call by then, so I asked her about it. 'That's an easy one,' she said with a grin. 'Some women keep their own surnames when they get married. In those cases, the children often end up with two surnames - the mother's and the father's. But I bet that kid just calls herself Abbott these days.'

She looked down at the book of clippings, nodded thoughtfully and told me that she had five stacks of newspapers taking up space in her office, because she hadn't had time to go through them. For the next couple of hours, I leafed through back copies of the *Messenger*, looking for stories that related to the unit, then clipping them out and dating them and pasting them into a book.

Trust me, that was more fun than filing and photocopying and data entry. I got to read loads of stuff about murders and suicides and accidents. I'd read some of it before but, after a week at the unit, I looked at it differently, so it was still interesting.

The newspapers in the second stack didn't grab me quite as much. They were copies of the *Highton Gazette*, which was a small local paper. I didn't find much that I needed to clip - just a few stories about kids being killed at level crossings or local residents who worked as ambulance drivers.

On the other hand, I came across some stories by Lara Page. That was a bit of a buzz, even though she was mostly just writing about the new playground in the park or the Highton community centre or whatever. Nothing very dramatic. I could see why she'd jumped at the chance to write about a murder.

Apart from Lara's stories, though, the *Highton Gazette* was kind of boring. By lunchtime, my eyes had started to blur and the sentences weren't making sense, so I kept having to go back and read them again. The airconditioning in the library was really full-on too. The librarian told me I could share her lunch but I was desperate to get out and breathe some fresh air.

I pulled on my raincoat, remembered I'd promised to ring Seb and tucked my mobile into the pocket. (It was his idea, so I could call him and make him call me back.) Then, halfway to the Grief Counselling Unit, I remembered Mum making me promise to play it safe and Jim warning me to stay inside at lunchtime. I groaned, gave up on the idea of a last Grief Counselling Unit lunch and trudged back to scrounge some sandwiches off the librarian.

As I crossed the foyer, I decided to step outside, just for a minute. After all, if the reporters came charging at me, I could always duck straight back into the unit. But when I opened the door, the first thing I saw was Lara Page. She was standing on one of the concrete boxes in the plaza, scanning the courtyard, like she was still watching out for Jim.

That made me mad, all over again. I went charging out, to tell her to leave Jim alone. Cars were zipping up and down the road, going twice as fast as normal, the way they always do when it's raining. While I waited for a chance to cross, my brain suddenly started to overflow and spill facts all over the place, kind of like the time when our washing machine flooded.

Fact 1. Jim Dimitropoulos had made his biggest mistake as a forensic pathologist when he read the numbers wrong on two body bags from the Thomasville Highway Disaster. So he thought Body 6 had Huntingdon's Disease, when it was actually Body 8.

Fact 2. Tansy Dimitropoulos's body had been found in the Selleck Range, in a direct line from the site of the Thomasville Highway Disaster.

Fact 3. Body 6's surname was Abbott.

Fact 4. Ten years ago, a woman called Abbott had broken off her engagement and killed herself, after the death of her identical twin sister.

Fact 5. Huntingdon's Disease is genetic. If one identical twin was carrying the gene, the other would have it too – and finding that out would definitely count as a motive for suicide.

Fact 6. Body 6 had a daughter called Khylara Paglainello-Abbott.

Fact 7. Lara Page was brought up by a strict, critical father, after the deaths of her mother and her aunt.

Fact 8. Lara had written a story for the *Highton Gazette* about the Highton community centre.

Fact 9. Someone in the know had passed on the story of the knife attack to the newspapers - and Lara had been looking for her big break into serious journalism.

All the facts fitted together and made a pattern. Even the fact that there was no grief counselling ten years ago seemed somehow significant. I should have turned around then and gone back to the unit.

But I didn't - maybe because there was a break in the traffic right then or maybe just because I was curious. I crossed the road, walked over to Lara and looked her in the eye.

'So you blame Jim Dimitropoulos for your aunt's suicide, do you?' I said.  
'Is that what this has all been about?'



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Standing on the concrete box, Lara was half a head taller than me. Definitely tall enough to wrap an arm round my chest and hold a knife to my throat. She didn't do that, though. She just jumped down from the box and turned small and vulnerable.

'Well, it *was* his fault,' she said.

'No way,' I said. 'You can't lay it all on Jim's mistake about the labels on the body bags. If your aunt had just waited a few days, she would've found out that she wasn't going to get Huntingdon's, anyway.'

Lara's eyes went hard and glassy. 'You don't understand,' she said. 'My aunt was very sensitive, same as me, and she was upset about her sister's death. Jim should never have put her in that position.'

'Hang on, everybody's entitled to a few mistakes,' I protested. 'I bet you've made some mistakes in your time.'

'Yeah, I should've checked with Births, Deaths and Marriages, instead of believing that story about you being Jim's nephew,' Lara agreed. She blinked raindrops off her eyelashes and added, 'Listen, we can't stand about in the rain. Come over here, where it's more sheltered.'

She set off towards a row of pillars in front of one of the office blocks. I shouldn't have followed her. She'd just admitted that she was the Perp, which made it pretty clear that she'd killed Tansy. But I wanted to know why she'd pulled a knife on me, when I thought we were sort of friends, so I followed her.

‘Sorry about bailing you up the other night,’ she said, as she ducked behind a pillar. ‘Hope I didn’t scare you too much. I like you, Harris. You’re a nice guy. That’s why I thought it’d get to Jim. I mean, Tansy seemed like a nice girl, too.’

She was chatting on as if it was all totally normal. Then again, I guess it was normal, in her head. I wanted to point out that she couldn’t bring her aunt back by killing other people but I figured she’d just tell me that I didn’t understand.

‘How did you run across Tansy?’ I asked, to keep her talking.

Lara giggled. ‘Run across her,’ she repeated. ‘That’s funny. It’s exactly what I did, in the end ... It was just a coincidence at first, but. The *Highton Gazette* sent me off to report on the opening of the new community centre and I heard someone mention Tansy Dimitropoulos. I recognised the name, of course. After my father died, I needed to make sense of my lousy childhood, so I went back and looked up the inquests on my mother and my aunt. That’s when I realised it was all Jim Dimitropoulos’s fault. My aunt was the only person who could’ve stood between me and my father - if Jim hadn’t killed her.’

I still didn’t like the way Lara kept blaming Jim but she’d just closed off when I argued with her before. I remembered how Gia and Alan and Belinda had talked about finding the counselling style that worked best for each client, so I decided to try a different way to make Lara talk.

‘So you weren’t actually planning to kill Tansy?’ I said.

Lara flung her hand up, like she was defending herself in a karate match. ‘I *didn’t* kill her,’ she said. ‘Not on purpose. I just followed her out to the car park, to check that she really was Jim Dimitropoulos’s daughter. We got talking and, like I said, she seemed nice, so I figured she deserved to know the truth about her dad. But she wouldn’t listen to me. She kept insisting that her dad wasn’t a murderer. I got a bit steamed and - well, the stupid kid went all nervous and backed away. She should’ve stayed and let me explain. If she had, she wouldn’t’ve bumped into the car next to mine and fallen and hit her head.’

I had a feeling there was more to it than Tansy tripping and falling. According to the autopsy, she’d hit her head hard enough to knock her unconscious. It sounded kind of like Lara might’ve lashed out at Tansy, when she got steamed.

But I didn’t ask Lara about that, because she seemed pretty stressed. A muscle in her cheek was twitching and her eyes were so wide that I could see white right round the pupils. If she’d looked like that when she was talking to Tansy, it was no wonder Tansy had felt scared. I wasn’t all that happy about it

myself. As a matter of fact, I was starting to wish I *had* gone straight back to the unit.

'You think it's my fault that Tansy fell, don't you?' Lara said suddenly. 'Everyone always blames me for everything.'

'Hey, I didn't say that,' I told her, using the soothing voice I'd learnt from Gia. 'You must've been really worried when Tansy didn't get up.'

'Yeah, I was,' she agreed. 'I thought people would definitely blame me, once they found out what we'd been talking about. I guess I panicked. At any rate, I leapt into my car and reversed straight out of the parking space and ...'

My stomach clenched, as I worked out what must have happened next. Lara stared off into the distance and began to talk twice as fast, like she wanted to get the next part over with.

'I jumped out and there was Tansy, lying under the wheels with blood all over her,' she gabbled. 'I did a first aid course at school, so I took her pulse and realised she was dead. I'm like, "Omigod, I'm going to be accused of murder. That'll mess up my chance of becoming a top journo." It didn't seem fair, when her dad had already messed my family up. I found myself checking to see whether there was anyone around, then bundling the body into the back seat and speeding off.'

She smiled at the memory, as if she was congratulating herself on solving the problem. Her mood swings were starting to freak me but I figured I'd better go along with her.

'Why did you decide to bury Tansy in the hills near the Thomasville Highway?' I asked.

Lara looked puzzled. 'Actually, I'm not sure. I drove around for a while, wondering what to do, and ... well, I'd gone down to the Thomasville Highway after I read about the inquest, to see the spot where my mum had died. Somehow I ended up there again and the Selleck Range seemed like a smart place to hide a body. It *was* a smart place, too. The body might never have been found, if that stupid bushwalker hadn't gone nosing about.'

I was beginning to suss out the way Lara's mind worked. She seemed to spend her life worrying about being blamed for things, probably because of her dad. So she kept trying to shift the blame onto other people - Jim, Tansy, even the bushwalker.

'It was lucky that guy found Tansy,' I pointed out. 'Otherwise, her parents would never have known what happened.'

Lara had been leaning against the pillar but now she straightened up, so fast that it felt like she was lunging at me. 'That would've served Jim right,' she snapped. 'Oh sure, I didn't kill Tansy on purpose - but once I got a chance to

think about it, I figured it was fair enough. Jim took my aunt away from me and now his daughter had been taken away from him. It seemed like natural justice.'

She raved on for a while about how it was okay for Tansy to die, if it sent a message to Jim. Then she explained how it would've been okay to top me as well, if I'd really been Jim's nephew. She sounded like she expected me to agree with her, which convinced me that she'd totally lost touch with reality.

It reminded me of something I'd heard recently. I checked my memory tapes and found Gia's voice, saying, 'Some people tell you what they think they *ought* to be feeling, which locks them into pretending to be something they're not.'

Yeah, that was Lara, for sure. She was pretending she felt fine about Tansy's death, when I didn't see how she could. That had locked her into thinking it would be okay to keep the revenge going by topping me, which was totally off the wall. If Gia or Alan or Belinda had been there, they would've got Lara to say how she *really* felt. But they weren't there, so it was down to me.

'Uh-huh,' I said, not disagreeing but not agreeing, either. 'Listen, if you're so sure Tansy's death was natural justice, why did you work so hard at keeping it secret?'

Lara's head drooped and her shoulders slumped, making her seem almost child-sized. She was doing the "small and vulnerable" number again but for once it didn't seem like an act.

'I *didn't* kill Tansy,' she said for the third time. 'But ... oh, I don't know. Maybe I wanted to, in a way. She thought her father was so great. Why should she have a great father, when I - and when her father killed my aunt - and -'

Her words weren't flowing so smoothly now. I had a feeling she was getting closer to the truth. And plus, I was starting to understand why she was telling me all this stuff. She *needed* to tell someone. That was the only way she could sort out whether Tansy's death really was an accident or whether she'd killed Tansy "accidentally on purpose".

I wasn't frightened of her any more, so I was able to take my eyes off her and look around. When I glanced back at the unit, I saw Gia and the others heading across to the plaza. Trust me, that was a big relief. Gia would know how to handle Lara, way better than me. I stepped forward, lifting my hand to wave at them.

And froze, as something pricked my ribs.

Oh-oh. The knife. Lara still had the knife with her.

'No way,' she said briskly. 'You can't bring anyone else in on this. They wouldn't get it. You'll have to promise me not to tell.'

I nodded and eased away from the knife point, so fast that my coat swung out and my mobile tapped the pillar. Lara jumped at the sound, like she thought the cops were shooting at her or whatever. Then she looked round the plaza and relaxed.

'You get it, don't you?' she said, smiling at me. 'I did the right thing, didn't I?'

'Sure,' I said, sliding my hand into my pocket. 'Sure you did.'

Lara frowned. 'You don't sound too convinced. Come to think of it, you said I shouldn't've kept it all secret. You want me to go to the cops and confess, right? You want me to get charged with murder - and go to jail - and wreck my career.'

Every time she paused for breath, she jabbed the knife at me. I gazed back, maintaining eye contact, and ran my thumb across the mobile, till I found the Redial button. Gia had been the last person who called me. I pressed my thumb down and tried to think of the shortest possible message, to get her back here.

'I'm sorry,' Lara was saying. 'I can't let Jim Dimitropoulos win. He destroyed my family but I won't let him destroy the rest of my life. Even if it means k-killing you.'

I'd pressed "S" and "O" and "S", while she was talking. Now I was starting to spell "plaza" ... but I couldn't remember whether I'd pressed the WXYZ button three or four times, so I needed to buy myself some time.

'Are you serious about killing me?' I asked, sounding weirdly calm. 'That *will* turn you into a murderer, y'know.'

I hit the WXYZ button one more time, for luck, and felt for the ABC button. At the same moment, Lara lifted the knife to my throat.

'Don't move,' she said. 'That's an artery, okay? They taught us about them in first aid, as well.'

She was talking too much, as if she was putting off the moment when she had to follow through on her threats. I figured I still had a chance to convince her that topping me wasn't logical.

'Yeah, I know about arteries,' I said. 'The blood spurts out for about a metre. You'd be covered in it. Someone'd notice and stop you, before you got away.'

'Hey, thanks for the warning,' she said. 'I better move round behind you first.'

So much for logic. I gritted my teeth and got ready to make a grab for the knife. It wasn't a smart move, when the blade was so close to my jugular, but it was the only move I had left.

Then, as Lara shifted position, someone came walking towards us. It was Gia. I would've cheered, if the knife hadn't been poised over my throat. Her eyes flicked across us, taking it all in. She looked as though she wanted to reach out and grab me but instead she gave Lara a friendly smile.

'Not a good idea,' she said. 'If you kill Harris, you'd have to kill me next, because I'm a witness. Then you'd have to kill everybody who saw you kill me ... But you don't really want to kill anyone, do you? Here, give me that knife.'

Lara whimpered and held the knife out obediently. As Gia took it, she sank down onto the paving stones, like a toddler that had suddenly decided it couldn't walk any further. Her face crumpled and she burst into tears, clutching her knees to her chest and rocking back and forth.

And after that, Gia *did* reach out and grab me.

\*\*\*

I spent the rest of the afternoon telling the story over and over again, starting with the cops. Sergeant Mitrakis beamed approvingly, when she arrived at the unit.

'Oh good, it's the expert witness,' she said. 'I like this young man. He doesn't believe in wasting police time, the way some witnesses do.'

'Actually he does our job for us,' Sergeant Bloom said wryly. 'You don't happen to fancy taking over Criminal Investigations, do you, Harris?'

'No, thanks,' I said with a shudder. 'That's not my idea of fun. I want to be a forensic pathologist - or maybe a grief counsellor.'

Gia looked startled, then nodded. 'You'd make a good counsellor, judging by the way you got through to Lara,' she said.

I wasn't so sure about that - like, I felt as if I'd made heaps of mistakes. But after I'd gone over the story half a dozen times, answering the cops' questions, I decided I hadn't done too badly.

At any rate, the people at the unit were impressed. They all heard about it in record time. (Nothing mysterious about that. Kellie was in the next room, while I was being questioned, and, of course, she had excellent hearing.) After the cops left, everyone came swarming in to congratulate me. When it all got too much, I ducked through a gap in the crowd and hid in the tea room with my two favourite people, Jim and Gia.

'How are you feeling?' Gia asked, in typical fashion.

'Exhausted,' I said. 'I just want to sleep for a week - but, um, I might come and talk to you about it after that.'

'Well, don't fall asleep before I get the chance to thank you again,' Jim said. 'Rina told me to thank you too. Nothing can bring Tansy back but at least we don't have to keep on wondering about it forever.' He paused and then added, 'You know, I can't even hate that young woman. Tansy would have been so sorry for her. She took that job at the community centre because she wanted to help people in trouble ...'

I remembered how I'd felt on the day when I'd seen Tansy's body. It had made me realise how much I wanted to help the dead and the living people who were connected to them. From the look on Jim's face, I figured I'd achieved that ambition already.

I was trying not to blush when Kellie burst in. 'Harris, can I see the famous mobile?' she said breathlessly. 'It's obviously a good luck charm. I want to touch it, okay?'

While she patted my mobile, I noticed the message logo was flashing. I checked and found nine messages from Seb, with headers like "txt me now!!!!" . I frowned at them guiltily, then decided he'd forgive me when he heard the whole story.

'Oops, I forgot,' Kellie said, as I tucked the mobile back in my pocket. 'I came in because your uncle's waiting at the side door. What do you want me to tell him?'

I groaned. I'd forgotten that I'd have to go through the story two more times, once for Uncle Melvin and once for Mum. Then again, I wasn't dreading it, the way I would've been, before Mum and I had our talk. After she'd yelled at me a bit for putting myself in danger, I figured she'd basically be okay.

'Tell Uncle Melvin I'll be out in a few minutes,' I said to Kellie. 'Gotta see Belinda and the others first.'

Then Jim shook my hand and Gia hugged me and I went to say goodbye to my other family - the family of the dead.

Copyright © 2007, 2016 by Jenny Pausacker.

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the author except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Jenny Pausacker asserts her moral right to be identified as the author of this book.

Ebook produced in Australia.