

SHE'S MY BABY

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE DRAPER BABY UNCOVERS A RING OF DECEIT, TREACHERY AND BABY-BROKING.
WILL IT LEAD TO THE AMAZING RETURN OF ALMOST FORGOTTEN CHILDREN?



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SHE'S MY BABY

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*To Cheryl,
For never-ending faith and encouragement –
What are sisters for?*

*And to John,
Again, and always*

Part I

Chapter One

GRACE DRAPER WALKED out on her husband two weeks before her baby was due. She was sick of his seemingly lay back attitude and lack of support. She was sick of the long hours he put in as a policeman and the few short moments he spent with her. Of course, she knew the strain his job put him under, she had been on the Force herself, but she was damned sure she wasn't going to raise her family with a ninety-five percent absent father. Her mother told her she would feel differently when her hormones settled down, but she knew her own mind.

Now here, under her mother's roof – again – lying in the bed in which she'd spent her impressionable years she wondered whether maybe her mother was right. Was it just the hormones taking charge of her mind? She'd been crazy about Charlie and heaven knows he had plenty of good points. But right now she didn't want to think about it, it was after midnight on a wintry night, and she needed to get some sleep. As the wind whistled through trees that scraped against her window, she studied her array of old hockey trophies lined up on the shelves that her mother still proudly kept dust-free. Where had those carefree years gone?

Suddenly she felt a pain in her belly that seemed to radiate to her back and down her thighs. Was it time?

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The labour ward was bright with surgical lights and white walls everywhere. Grace was nearing five hours of labour and just wanted it over. Charlie had rushed to her side as soon as he heard she was in labour, and Grace wished to hell he wasn't there. She'd made up her mind to do this on her own and at this monumental moment in time she had no time for anyone or anything except getting this baby out. She'd left Charlie for heaven's sake. Here he was being all supportive and urging her on. She just wished that right now she could swap places with him – with anyone! 'Aaaaaaggghhhh,' another contraction.

'You're doing well Gracie, nearly there.'

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

'Aaaaaaggghhhh,' she was really over this.

'Here's the head, here's the head,' chirped the excited doctor.

'Thank God. Aaaaaaggghhhh.'

'Here she is, a beautiful baby girl,' the doctor exclaimed and as he lifted the tiny infant towards her mother's arms the baby gave a reassuring wail, signifying her entry into the outside world. The pretty blonde nurse stood by, beaming, there to help if needed.

Grace couldn't believe how tiny, how delicate, how special this baby was. Her baby. And Charlie's. He reminded her of this by being next in line to hold the baby. The blonde nurse took her leave, giving the new parents a little alone time.

Grace should have known he would be there. Of course he would – a new father, just as she was a new mother. Tears streamed down his face as he held his newborn daughter. 'Come home,' he mouthed softly to Grace, and as she turned her head away from him, not fighting the tears of relief, the tears of joy – she just wondered how she could possibly return to the marital home. She'd made her stand and left two weeks ago. If she went home now, he'd still be the same. Nothing had changed, and yet, here they were first-time parents rejoicing at the birth of their incredible new daughter.

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

Oh, she knew he had to work. She had been a police officer too – was in fact still a police officer – just taking extended leave to start her family. Sure, she knew Charlie had an important job to do. There were plenty of people out there in trouble. But what about her? Didn't she need him too? Just some of him at least? Then through her pregnancy things began to dawn on her. He wasn't going to be there to support her. Support them. If he wasn't there now things would only get worse when the baby came. He'd probably want to be out all the time. What with the baby screaming and all the trouble that went hand-in-hand with raising a child.

She started to see just how things would be. Grace believed she could make a good life for herself and the baby without Charlie. She was a capable woman. One of her lifetime ambitions was to start up a women's help group. With her police training and her mother's assistance she knew she could achieve what she wanted and carve out a good life for her and the baby. She'd left Charlie, she could leave the police force for good, too, better that than raising her daughter in an unhappy home.

Looking at her sleeping baby with her tufts of blonde hair and pale baby skin she felt a pang of regret. That beautiful nursery she and Charlie had spent months decorating. The furnishings she'd so lovingly sourced. The puffy white clouds on the pale blue ceiling, the lazy lamas in the meadow on the walls. The little pink bassinet and everything in matching baby-like colours. But it was just too bad. She

needed to move on, put it all behind her. Her mother had offered to help her, especially in these coming months – the early months ... as time went on, she would find a place of her own. Charlie would have to make a decision about the house, selling it would probably be the best thing.

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

Chapter Two

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

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

As he headed the car towards the hospital, he thought about all of the good times with Grace. They had met at the police academy when Charlie was just twenty and Grace a year younger. It was during some weaponless control tactics and handcuffing drills. 'You have the right

to silence,' Grace had said in mock seriousness as she applied the cuffs to this handsome cadet.

Charlie surrendered his hands with no resistance, he had fallen for Grace at first glance, however the last thing he wanted to do was remain silent. He thought she was far too attractive to be a police officer. He'd always imagined female police to be a bit masculine, a bit tough looking. Grace was a long, long way from that.

'You can refuse to answer police questions or decline a record of interview.' She was so soft and feminine with a smile that just lit up a room, yet here she was virtually placing him under arrest. She'd given him a shove in the back as she placed his arms behind him. It looked a little more playful than threatening and the Field Training Officer had noticed.

'This is not Law and Order SVU and you're not Olivia Benson - get with the program Fulham!' barked the FTO. Charlie disagreed, she really looked as though she did belong on one of those TV cop shows where all the female police officers were gorgeous and all the men equally as handsome. She had her blonde hair tied up in a top-knot for training, but he imagined it cascading around her shoulders, tousled and tantalising.

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

When they married over three years later, Charlie had been fortunate enough to be posted into the region of New South Wales they both adored and Grace was raised in, the Southern Highlands, with its rolling hills, rainforests, dramatic waterfalls and national park wilderness. Grace had always worked hard. She took up a bit of volunteer work in her time off, at the local community group and homeless shelter in Riverton, she had always wanted to help those in desperate need, particularly women, and felt as though this could be the begin-

ning of a new avenue in her life. Charlie was happy for her, her tenacity and willingness to help others underscored her selfless personality. That was two years ago now, two years since Charlie married the woman of his dreams.

And now as he was walking into her hospital room, a charming, sun-soaked private room in the little rural hospital. He looked at her honey blonde hair draped across her pillow, her long lashes as she gently slept, the serenity in her beautiful face, so peaceful. Just as peacefully in a cot beside the bed slept the newly arrived Ella-Louise.

Such a picture of innocence.

The world ahead of her. So tiny and delicate.

His daughter.

As he looked at his two girls, he couldn't imagine feeling more love than this. It was so potent he'd thought he'd burst. Just then Grace awoke. She looked dreamily at Charlie but as reality overcame sleep, her mood changed. 'Oh Charlie, why do you have to come here? It's over between us.' Instantly Charlie's saturation of love subsided. Fixing things wasn't going to be as simple as bringing a baby into the world.

'I wanted to see you of course. My new baby daughter, my wife.'

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

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

'You think so?'

Grace was softened by the sight of the baby in Charlie's arms. If only it could be – happy families, normal, just liked she'd always dreamed of. Her own home had been broken. Her father was an explosive man and from what little she knew, had beaten her mother. When he turned to do the same to her at just five years old, her mother had finally packed a few belongings and fled.

Her mother never liked to talk about it, but she did know that they had escaped to a women's refuge and from there began their journey

into anonymity with new identities and a place to live - somewhere far enough away, remote yet friendly with a community big enough to provide work, schooling and a reasonable social life. The Southern Highlands, to the south of Sydney had always been home to Grace, those first few violent years a distant memory, and now it would be home to her daughter as well; but one thing she was certain of was that their home would always be a happy one.

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

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

‘I need time Charlie, just give me some time.’

Chapter Three

GRACE HAD HER TIME. She met some of the other mothers at the hospital and enjoyed comparing notes on their babies and their deliveries. Most people were astounded at Grace's quick birth, especially first-time round, and Grace was starting to realise just how lucky she was. One poor mother had been in labour for thirty-six hours and two of the other mothers Grace met had had Caesareans. Grace had always hoped for a natural birth and was now glad she had toughed it out.

She was just in the middle of breast feeding and having a little trouble, the baby just didn't seem interested, when a stranger entered her room. She had surprised Grace the way she wandered in, but probably what Grace noticed more was her forlorn look. Most of the young women in this ward were all aglow with the joys of new motherhood, but this woman, who was at least ten years older than Grace, looked like she was in some sort of trance – some sort of deep depression.

'Try to relax, a baby can tell if you're anxious, it makes him anxious too,' she said to Grace in a downcast yet instructional tone.

'It's a her actually,' answered Grace to this stranger, this woman clad in a pink polka dot dressing gown with matching slippers. She was obviously a recent mother who had just found her way into

Grace's room, needing to get out of her bed and walk around, exercise the underused muscles.

'I hope you don't mind. I just needed to get out of my room, away from everything - thought I'd go for a wander.' It was then Grace noticed her red-rimmed eyes, they were an unusual colour and the red was making them all the more sorrowful. This woman had gone through some sort of recent trauma and Grace wondered whether she also may be experiencing marital problems. 'I couldn't resist having a little peek when I saw you feeding her. What's her name?'

'Ella-Louise,' Grace replied, 'she's three days old.'

'Three days, it's amazing isn't it?' said the Stranger as she looked in awe at the tiny, suckling baby now finally attached to Grace's breast. Little Ella-Louise's hands opening and closing like a sort of automatic response to the euphoria she was feeling at simply being fed.

'So you've just had a baby?' asked Grace, becoming intrigued as to what this woman's story could be.

'Yes, I ...' the Stranger started to say something but stopped herself.

'Little girl?'

'A boy, he ...' a fresh tear sprang into the Stranger's eye, Grace started to sense that this was the reason for this woman's pain.

'What? What is it? Is something wrong with him?'

'He died. Two days ago. They did everything they could.'

The woman broke down, Grace did not know what to do. She felt so guilty as Ella-Louise nestled in, sucking greedily on her breast. What could she do to help this woman? 'Oh my God I'm so sorry.'

The woman looked at Grace, eyes pleading, then left the room. Not quickly, but slowly shuffling as if it was her last ounce of strength. Grace was lost for words; she could hear her slippers shuffling along the linoleum. She looked down at her own little baby, how precious was this little person she held in her arms? She would protect her with her own life; nothing was ever going to happen to her new-born baby.

Chapter Four

THE STRANGER STARTED to appear more and more often at Grace's bedside. Grace felt so sorry for her that she never objected. She learnt that her name was Martha O'Riley. Her child had not lived more than hour, after a placenta-previa that had brought on a massive haemorrhage during delivery. Martha was rushed in for an emergency caesarean. She was thirty-two weeks along and from all reports the baby was doing alright until he developed a lung complication and just didn't have the strength or the wherewithal to fight it. She was a single woman of thirty-eight and didn't believe there would be another opportunity to have the baby she had desperately wanted. Now, as she sat here cradling little Ella-Louise, she showed all of the tenderness and love she would have given her own baby. Grace's heart went out to this poor woman who seemed to have lost all hope of happiness.

'You are so lucky, with that handsome husband and this beautiful baby.'

Grace felt a pang of guilt. She was lucky. Here was this poor woman with nothing, no partner, no baby ... and Grace had a beautiful new baby and a husband who loved her. She was pondering her plight when Martha pulled her phone from her dressing gown pocket.

'This is all I will ever have of little Logan,' she sighed as she

scrolled to a photo of her newborn child that a nurse had kindly taken for her. Grace looked at the little soul. He seemed so content. His skin was beautiful, and he sported a thick crop of black hair. His nose was quite large for a little baby, sort of ended in a little bulb and his thick lips sat above a very noticeable cleft chin. Grace stared at the photo for a long time, imagining this poor little mite, buried before he would have a chance to be. How cruel life can be.

‘Was there a funeral?’ Graced precariously ventured.

‘Well, there was a cremation. The doctor organised it. He said that way I would have his ashes – I could keep them forever, like he was still with me, you know.’ Grace understood and couldn’t imagine what she would do under the same circumstance. Martha placed little Ella-Louise back in her crib and left Grace’s room, hugging her baby’s photo to her chest, all she would ever know of the child she had longed for, for many, many years.

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

Grace thought Martha seemed a kind woman and wondered if she might like to visit once they were both fully recovered. She chatted with Martha about her home life, how she was currently staying with her mother and what a help Margaret would be when she took the baby home. She didn’t go into her separation with Charlie, she kept their conversations light-hearted, she didn’t know this woman well enough to start pouring her heart out to her.

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Grace was dealing with her streams of visitors - friends, relatives and well-wishers. The questions. The inevitable questions.

How's Charlie?

Are you back together?

What is happening with the house?

Grace was tired of it. She had been feeling quite exhausted and noticed a bit of a spike in her temperature from time to time but thought nothing of it. All she wanted to do was to get home to her mother's and just be at peace with her baby. When the last visitor left on her sixth day, she fell into a deep sleep. It was as though she had needed it for days. She dreamt of Charlie. When they first met. How handsome he was in his police cadet uniform. That smile. Those dimples. She couldn't help but fall for him. She dreamt of the first time they'd made love. They'd hiked to Lodard Falls in the beautiful Blue Mountains west of Sydney. Charlie had found a very deserted and grassy spot just above the falls. From his backpack he had pulled out a blanket and as the warmth of the summer's day soaked into their skin the sensation of their lovemaking made its debut.

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

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

The blonde nurse came rushing in, she'd assisted in the delivery of Ella-Louise and tended to Grace since. 'Oh hell,' she exclaimed as she looked at Grace's bed, 'it looks like you've gone and got yourself an infection. I will call the doctor immediately.'

'But where's my baby?' cried out Grace, 'My baby's not here!' The blonde nurse looked at Grace puzzled.

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

‘Please,’ pleaded Grace, ‘I was asleep, I thought I heard Ella-Louise cry out. I couldn’t wake up.’

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

‘Please just let me know she’s okay.’

‘I will Mrs. Draper, soon as we can get the doctor here, we have got to stop that haemorrhaging.’

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

‘Ella-Louise. Can I see her? Where is she?’ Instinctively she just knew something was wrong.

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

‘Charlie?’

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

‘Looking for her? Get her back? What’s happened?’

‘She went missing, around about the time you started bleeding. We checked all over the hospital, but she’s gone Grace. We believe someone has taken her.’

‘Oh my God who? My baby. She’s just a tiny baby. Oh my God.’ Grace was becoming hysterical. The doctor stepped in and turned up her I.V. Grace drifted into a drug induced sleep, but whether she would find peace within that was doubtful.

Her newborn, her first born, her daughter.

Missing.

How did this happen?

Charlie spoke to the doctor and his staff just outside of Grace's room. He was a locum filling in for Grace's regular doctor while he was on holidays. Dr Waters had every intention of being there for the birth of Grace's child, but when the birth was early that changed things. This new doctor, Dr Dillon, was very different to Dr Waters. He was tall, where Waters was short. He was fair, where Waters was dark. And he had a sort of overconfident look about him, a smugness that was setting Charlie slightly on edge. But still, he was the doctor and therefore he was to be trusted. 'Gracie needs plenty of rest now, but all going well she may be able to go home tomorrow afternoon. Is there someone there who can help her?'

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

'Absolutely, it's the right thing to do.'

'You haven't seen anyone unusual hanging around the hospital at all, have you Doctor?'

'Well no I haven't, but then I'm probably the wrong person to ask. I mean all the faces are a bit new to me. Why don't you talk to some of the longer serving staff – the nurses, see if they saw anything? I'm busy, I must keep moving.'

Doctor or no doctor, Charlie decided he didn't like this Dr Dillon's pompous attitude, he was a bit annoyed that Dr Waters wasn't here to help Grace through all of this.'

Chapter Five

CHARLIE WENT STRAIGHT to the Station, he needed to review the evidence to date and to see if there were any new leads. Ella-Louise had been missing now for five hours and Charlie knew that the more hours that ticked by the less chance they had of finding his daughter.

Detectives Phil Ryan and Sandra Buckworth were reviewing the hospital security footage. There was a lot of confidence and trust that seemed to be part of the bricks and mortar of a rural hospital and the Southern Districts Hospital was no exception. Five years ago they had succumbed to a security camera at the main entrance and in the emergency waiting area when an attack had occurred on an elderly patient. The culprit was never apprehended and so the board had decided a little bowing to the times may be in order.

Charlie had accessed the last few days recording from both cameras and now his team was carefully scanning every available second of footage. So far, they had come up with nothing suspicious. Patients, visitors and staff coming and going, no one carrying a newborn at that time. Charlie was heading up the task force and he wanted action. Every known adoption agency was under investigation and now they were scouring the illegal baby brokers, the idea that Ella-Louise would be sold to some couple wanting a child to call their own, seemed the

most obvious reason for the kidnap to Charlie and his team. His baby was out there somewhere and the hours were ticking by.

Mei Zhang came to Australia as a student from China in 2012, she progressed that quickly through her Bachelor of Computer Science that the University of Western Sydney had invited her to stay on to do her Masters. She then completed her studies in the U.S where she obtained a Doctorate in Digital Forensics, but she had fallen in love with Australia so much that she had wanted to return. Police Headquarters in Parramatta cut through the red tape effortlessly and had Mei join their team in 2018.

Now she was part of the task force looking for Ella-Louise. Meeting Mei for the first time through FaceTime, Charlie was quite taken by her oriental beauty. Her mother was French, her father Chinese, as her silken black tresses testified. Her eyes were captivating, penetrating – a deep amber with a rare coppery glow set enchantingly into the smoothest alabaster skin. As she introduced herself to Charlie, he had to quickly regain his thoughts and draw himself back to the task at hand.

Sharing screens with Mei Zhang, Charlie displayed photos of Grace and little Ella-Louise, the hospital and the area of the Southern Highlands. Mei was quick to understand what was needed and assured Charlie that she would find every legal and illegal baby broking outfit operating in Australia and would stay at her computer until she exhausted every possible avenue.

‘So sorry your baby daughter is missing, Detective Draper.’

‘Please call me Charlie. The important thing now Mei is that we do everything possible to get her home quickly.’

‘As soon as I have something I will contact you. You go now, keep me updated.’

As Charlie ended the call, he felt a pang of gratitude. Even though little Ella-Louise had not yet been found, he understood how dedicated his team was and how hard each and every one of them was trying. Grace was due to go home to her mother's tomorrow, and he knew once she was there, with no baby to look after, the strain and

anxiety would become overwhelming. He desperately wanted to find little Ella-Louise before it all proved too much for his wife. How was he ever going to restore his family to the kind of loving relationship he now longed for?

The night was proving productive for Mei. She had broken into the dark web and identified two outfits involved in illegal baby trafficking operating on the eastern seaboard. She was rapidly gathering details to send through to Charlie.

Bounce was an American-run agency that fronted as a caring organisation offering single expectant mothers solutions by pairing them with adoptive parents who would offer a helping hand throughout their pregnancy. However, Mei had discovered the darker side of their operation, specifically targeting mothers considering abortion or in a quandary about how they would care for their newborn child. As little as ten thousand dollars seemed to be the going rate for a tiny life, small reward for giving up your baby.

Sydney based accountant and all-round entrepreneur, Kevin Fredricks, was director of Bounce in Australia. Mei was running his background and digging up some very interesting threads. As Mei read more, she knew this was a lead she must deliver to Charlie immediately, but not before she quickly researched another possibility that had pinged at the beginning of her search.

She'd been working on the Ella-Louise case for three hours now and was due to update Charlie at 9 p.m. Forty-five minutes, that would give her enough time to gather the information on CradleSong.

When Charlie's laptop pinged later that evening, he was pleased to see it was Mei Zhang. Anxious for her update he listened carefully before gathering together his taskforce. 'Okay, I need everyone in the bullpen now,' Charlie announced as he activated the big wall screen. On it popped up a head shot of Kevin Fredricks. He appeared a little podgy, thinning grey strands of hair splayed across his head with intense blue-green eyes that rested under neatly trimmed brown eyebrows.

There was slight redness to his cheeks that matched his generous lips. He had a look of confidence about him, or perhaps it was a smugness.

'We have Kevin Fredericks, co-director of Bounce. Bounce arranges intracountry adoptions,' Charlie briefed his team, 'and whilst everything appears above board, I am now sure there's coercion going on there somewhere. It's reported that desperate wanna-be parents would pay upwards of two hundred thousand dollars for the privilege of calling a baby their own, and young mothers are offered sums of around ten to twenty thousand to part with their newborns.' Charlie surveyed his team, they were all rigid with concentration, one hundred percent attentive to every word Charlie was saying. 'From what our investigator Mei, has gathered, he had attended one of the best schools in Victoria, Geelong Grammar, before attending Melbourne University. He moved to Sydney's North Shore over ten years ago when he became director of Bounce. We're going to send in an undercover. If this low-life was responsible for my baby's abduction, we need to act quickly.' Charlie activated a video link and an attractive brunette appeared on the screen. 'Team, meet your latest member, Detective Sergeant Melissa Monroe.'

She was around thirty, fair skinned with striking blue eyes, almost the colour of sapphires. She nodded to her audience, the Southern Highlands Police Taskforce. Melissa had been a detective for five years, and when Charlie's baby was taken, she was immediately assigned as part of the Sydney Taskforce to assist. 'Melissa, I will be in Sydney first thing in the morning. Mei has already requested an appointment with this Kevin Fredericks,' Charlie explained. 'We'll go in as Mr. and Mrs. Max and Stephanie Schroeder. We are a wealthy but childless couple, desperate for a baby of our own.'

'I'll be ready Detective. What more can I do in the meantime?'

'It's getting late, get some rest and be looking like a million dollars tomorrow.'

As Melissa smiled in agreement, the rest of the Taskforce awaited further instruction. 'And what are we doing while you're in Sydney boss?' came the question from a young woman at the back of the group.

‘To answer your question Kellie, I am going to send you in undercover as well.’

Detective Kellie Richardson gasped; she had never been sent on assignment before. By comparison to the rest of the team she was little more than a rookie, recently promoted and as keen as mustard. Charlie, in his inimitable supportive fashion, had taken her under his wing and she was just itching to get the bastard who stole Charlie’s baby, it was all Charlie could do to hold her back. ‘Okay, so where do I start?’ she asked, pushing a stray lock of jet-black hair under her cap.

‘I’m going to send you into CradleSong. This is the other organisation that Mei discovered from her search and from what she has gleaned they have been operating since 1998. CradleSong is run by Dianne Lee and Brownyn Harper and they have ties to Kevin Fredericks.’

All eyes were glued to the screen which now displayed photos of Kevin Fredericks, Dianne Lee and Brownyn Harper. From the headshot of Dianne Lee, she looked every bit of her sixty years. Her face was deathly pale, and her thin skin drawn tight across her angular bone structure. Her faded hair was pulled back severely from her face and her stringy lips had no trace of a smile. Her counterpart, Brownyn Harper, on the other hand, was quite the opposite. Her short, wispish, fly away red hair matched her red complexion perfectly. Although this was just a headshot, you got the impression that this was a big woman, her jowls were billowing and her chins triplicated.

‘We suspect these charming ladies of many illegal adoptions. CradleSong is set up to help young, expectant women. Those who find themselves with nowhere to turn. These are desperate girls, because let’s face it – most of these young women are just girls. CradleSong offers them a place to stay throughout their pregnancy with medical support and, from what I believe, a safe and caring atmosphere.’ Charlie studied the reaction of his team who appeared glued to his every word.

‘However, they have been on police radar for several years, suspected of taking part in illegal adoptions. When their place was raided in 2017 police found no real evidence, Lee claimed that all of her historic records had been lost in a fire in 2012. All the current

records appeared in order. Police have been keeping a watch on Lee and Harper for the past five years.'

'Tomorrow Kellie, you will ride with me to Syndey,' Charlie explained to the eager detective. 'You're going to be a young seventeen-year-old drug addict, pregnant, homeless and desperate for money.'

'Seventeen-year-old, bit of a stretch since I'm 23.' Kellie was excited but nervous at the same time. This was her first assignment, and the challenge was really playing havoc with her confidence.

'Come on, you're still just a spring chicken,' Charlie encouraged her light heartedly as the rest of the team appreciated the bit of welcome relief. 'Remember you are posing as a drug addict. You'll be looking worn out, haggard and desperate. Goth's good. Goth'll work,' said Charlie looking at her shoulder length black hair and porcelain skin. 'Melissa,' he now targeted his conversation towards the screen and Melissa, who had been attentively tuned in the entire time, 'can you please give Kellie a hand with her disguise, I have heard you're really good at this sort of stuff. And by the way – you'll need to be if you're about to become my wife.'

There was a smattering of chuckles at Charlie's statement as the team became a little restless, sensing this meeting was about to come to an end. 'Everyone else, we will continue our search of the Southern Highlands district tomorrow. Rose will be in charge,' he explained, referring to his 2IC, Detective Sergeant Rose Everett, 'Phil and Sandra your duties will be assigned. So it's up and at 'em early. 6am, on deck. Let's bring my baby home tomorrow.'

The team had departed but Charlie was too much on edge to even think about home and bed just yet. It was past eleven o'clock and he knew he should get some rest. Perhaps a text to Mei, see if she was still working.

'Hey Charlie,' she said as Charlie picked up his phone. 'Thought I'd just call you rather than text back. That way my fingers can keep working the keyboard.'

'Thanks for your dedication, you really should be home in bed.'

‘I’ll sleep when I’m dead, the important thing is to find your baby.’

‘I really appreciate all of the effort you are putting in. How is it going?’

‘Well, I think I’m onto another starter. His name is Jason Fairchild, a Sydney divorce lawyer, but it is going to take me a little time to unravel his background. The dark web is throwing up some very interesting history on this one. I will have a report for you in the morning. What time are you kicking off?’

‘I’ll be in at sparrows, before 6am. You’re a star Mei, thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it. You go home now and get some rest.’

Charlie decided to take Mei’s advice, there was little more he could do here now. He shut down his laptop and headed for home.