

PROLOGUE

No, not this.

Detective Sergeant Isabelle O'Connell dragged up every ounce of self-discipline to halt the cry of denial, and it lodged, unsounded, in her throat. She closed her eyes against the sight as tears that couldn't be shed scalded her eyelids.

Nearby, her colleagues cleared their throats, muttered curses, avoided looking at each other.

The heavy mantle of failure kept them all quiet. Seven days, the child had been missing. Seven long, hellish days and nights of searching and hoping and feverishly following any prospect of a lead, no matter how weak, desperately trying to find some trace of her.

And now this.

The fact of the girl's small body, dumped in a hollow in front of them, was horrific enough. But the single gunshot

to the head that had killed her was clearly less than twenty-four hours old. She'd been alive for at least six of those days, and they'd failed to find her. They'd failed *her*.

Superintendent Barrington pulled himself together first. 'I'd better go and inform the parents,' he said, his voice gruff and constrained. 'Detective Fraser, get Forensics up here, now. You two,' he indicated two of the uniformed police, 'secure the scene. Nobody, but nobody, is to touch a thing until they get here. O'Connell, you'll come with me.'

Isabelle stifled the instinct to run and nodded mutely. As senior female officer on the case, of course she had to accompany him for the nightmare task. Ten years on the job, and each time it became worse, not easier. This time, she knew the parents, had grown up beside them in this small town. Somehow she had to find the courage to face them and deliver this news. Somehow tell Sara, whom she'd sat beside in fifth grade, that her only child was dead.

Cope with it. You have to do this.

Despite the orders, no one moved.

Steve Fraser, his face flushed, burst out angrily, 'Sir, shouldn't we haul in that bastard Chalmers again? This is just like that other kid. There's got to be something we can hold him on.'

Barrington fixed the sergeant with a cold stare. 'Evidence, Fraser. If you find me one shred of evidence that connects him with this murder, we'll arrest and charge him. But to date all you've given me is innuendo, gossip, and the fact that he was tried and acquitted on a similar case two years ago. That is not evidence. And I have so far seen absolutely

no reason why Chalmers should be under any more suspicion than anyone else in this town.'

'But he's so weird, sir,' Fraser persisted, reckless in his challenge. 'Everyone thinks he did it.'

Isabelle braced for Barrington's explosion, but the superintendent just sighed wearily. 'Being weird is not a crime, Fraser, and the prejudices of a town are not the basis for thorough police investigation.'

Barrington sat, tense and silent, in the passenger seat as Isabelle drove the short distance back into town. Only as she pulled up in front of the modest home where the girl's parents lived did he speak.

'When we've finished here, O'Connell, you should go and warn Chalmers. Fraser's partly right – half the town does think he did it, and they'll be baying for his blood.'

'Protection arrangements, sir?' she asked, dragging her mind to practical needs to keep away the dread of the task to come.

'If he wants it. Use your judgment.'

She switched off the engine, and her fingers fumbled as she unbuckled her seat belt. Barrington made no move, his face white.

'I'm a week from retirement, O'Connell,' he muttered. 'This isn't the way I wanted to finish.'

She saw a curtain flick in the window, knew she had to move frozen limbs out of the car and do the unthinkable. Mitch and Sara had to come first. Later – much later, when

duty had been done and whoever had committed this crime arrested – she'd maybe have the luxury of time to give in, to weep and grieve. Not now.

'No, sir. We have to go, sir.'

The door jerked open as they mounted the steps, and there could be no escaping the terrible, inevitable moment when all hope and light drained from Sara's eyes, in that instant when she knew, before the words were spoken, before Mitch howled like no man should have to, before Sara folded in on herself and crumpled to the floor.

Because she'd failed them.

Isabelle barely managed to hold herself together, focusing on their needs, doing her job. If she allowed herself to feel, the fragile shell of self-control would crack into a million useless pieces.

Cope with it.

After they finally left the house, she drove the superintendent back to the tiny police station and forced herself to continue to her next duty. An eerie, uncomfortable quiet hung over the town. In the main street, people stood in groups, shaking heads, dabbing at tears, sniffing in handkerchiefs.

They stared at her as she drove past, their eyes critical, accusing, and neither heart nor intellect could begrudge them that judgment. A child lay dead, and she and her colleagues had not been able to prevent it.

Once, long ago, Isabelle had been a part of this small, isolated community. They'd welcomed her back a week ago,

trusting her as one of their own amongst the strangers in the rest of the police team – the very reason the superintendent had brought her in on this case. Yet after this terrible failure, any friendliness, any welcome they might have had for her, would be gone.

Just do your job, O'Connell, she ordered herself, crushing back the emotion that choked her throat. There's a killer out there to find.

During the twenty-minute drive to Dan Chalmers' secluded shack, she kept a bare grip on her sanity by methodically reviewing the facts of the case in her mind, seeking a clue, a lead, anything they might have missed. Like the superintendent, she believed in Chalmers' innocence. The man was certainly strange, a true eccentric, but he had consistently and quietly denied any knowledge of the child's disappearance, and she sensed his honesty. This was the second time that human nature's distrust of difference had singled him out, yet he'd been resigned to the questions, cooperating with their enquiries fully.

As the car rounded a bend in the rough track and the shack came into view amongst the trees, a groan escaped her lips and her pulse skittered unevenly. There were vehicles there already, and a small crowd had gathered. Their angry yells disturbed the bush landscape, and in a glance she recognised that the emotional temperature was rising, fast. Someone picked up a rock and hurled it through the window, to the cheers of the others.

BRONWYN PARRY

She radioed for backup before leaving the car, aware even as she did so that it would take too long to arrive. Apprehension roiled in her stomach. This would be one hell of a situation to defuse, and she'd have to do it herself.

ONE

One year later

Alec Goddard drove down the dirt road as fast as the conditions allowed, determined not to waste time. He swore as he had to stop, yet again, to open another gate. Damn the woman. Couldn't she have chosen somewhere more accessible to hide away? This isolated area, tucked into the mountains north of Sydney, was far from anywhere.

With no cattle or sheep visible, he defied the country conventions and left the gate open, knowing he'd be back this way shortly, whatever the outcome of this visit.

He still wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing. Just because Bob Barrington had agreed with his initial idea, it didn't mean it was necessarily a good one. He'd always trusted

Bob's judgment, but the retired superintendent, laden with guilt and regret, hadn't been the same this last twelve months.

Well, he'd find out soon enough if it was a mistake.

She emerged from the back garden as he brought the car to a stop in front of the old timber cottage. For an instant, he wondered if some of the wilder rumours he'd heard were true, after all. With a scarf wrapped untidily around her head, and a dusty, loose shirt over a pair of equally baggy, grubby jeans, she indeed looked more like a mad recluse than a highly regarded police detective. The pitchfork in one hand and the huge German shepherd standing beside her only added to the impression. Her scowl wasn't exactly welcoming either.

She made no attempt to greet him or come closer as he got out of the car.

'Isabelle O'Connell, I presume? I'm Detective Chief Inspector Alec Goddard, from State Crime Command in Sydney.'

He held out his identity card for her inspection. He'd have taken a few steps towards her if the dog hadn't growled in warning.

She barely glanced at his ID.

'What do you want, DCI Goddard?'

Her voice sounded clear, firm, but the grey eyes that met and held his made a chill wind up his spine. They were like some ancient, black hole in space, holding every sorrow known.

Yet her steady gaze showed no sign of insanity, and he perceived immediately the sharp intelligence that had earned her a formidable reputation.

‘I want your help, Detective O’Connell.’

Her scowl deepened. ‘Drop the “Detective” stuff. I’ve resigned from the police force.’

‘Your resignation isn’t effective until the end of your leave, which is still two weeks away.’

He saw her bristle and mentally rebuked himself for taking the wrong approach. He needed to talk her into this, not bully her.

‘Yes, and I’m officially on leave, not on duty,’ she reminded him coldly. ‘So I’ll give you just three minutes to ask your questions and then you can go.’

‘It isn’t that simple.’

Her eyes narrowed. ‘Go on.’

He came straight to the point. ‘I want you to work with me on a case.’

She gave him her answer just as straight, ‘No.’

She turned abruptly and began to walk away.

If it had been a normal case, he’d have let her go. But for this one, he’d use whatever resources he could gather – even a traumatised, almost ex-detective who’d removed herself from the world.

‘Another child’s gone missing,’ he said. ‘From Dungirri.’

At the mention of her home town she stopped.

Long seconds passed before she slowly turned around, and those grey, ghostly eyes stared at him as if he were a messenger from hell.

‘When?’

‘Yesterday afternoon. On her way home from school, just like Jess Sutherland a year ago.’

She closed her eyes briefly, took in a ragged breath.

‘Who? Which kid?’

He didn’t need to consult his notebook.

‘Tanya Wilson. Her parents are –’

‘Beth and Ryan.’

She said the names clearly enough, but all the colour drained from her face and she wavered, leaned heavily for a moment on the pitchfork. He took a step towards her, hand outstretched to catch her, stopping when the dog growled again.

He saw the effort it took to draw herself back under control.

‘You want me to go with you to Dungirri, now?’

‘Yes.’ He felt like a messenger from hell indeed, asking her return to her nightmares. ‘I appreciate what I’m asking is hard for you. But you know the town, and you were involved in the investigation last time. We need to find her, before it’s too late.’

Biting her lip, she moved to rake her hand through her hair, dislodging the scarf instead. She pulled it off in frustration, a mop of rich brown curls falling loose around her shoulders. With her fine features, the tangle of hair gave an

impression of youth, of vulnerability, yet that keening pain in her eyes wasn't in the least childlike.

'We failed a year ago. Jess died. Dan Chalmers died.' Her voice echoed with bitter hollowness. 'Whether he was guilty or innocent, we failed. Are you sure you want me working with you?'

Was that how she saw herself – as a failure? Hell, from what he'd heard, she had no reason to carry any guilt. She'd been the one to continue searching for other evidence when virtually everyone else had focused on Dan Chalmers. The one who'd stepped in to protect him from the townsfolk's angry accusations. And when she'd recovered enough to be told the investigation had finished with Chalmers' death, she'd argued from her hospital bed to have the case re-opened.

'Barrington speaks highly of you, says you were the best on the team. I'll trust his judgment.' And my own, he thought. He was too familiar with the weight all the 'what-ifs' carried after a failed case. No matter how much you rationalised things, the questions always came back...and the regrets. The more conscientious the cop, the harder it was. Isabelle O'Connell seemed to have taken it very hard indeed.

Abruptly she moved, thrusting the pitchfork at him as she strode past him towards the house. 'Put this away in the shed and shut the garden gates while I grab some clothes.'

Alec let go a breath that he hadn't realised he'd been holding. She'd agreed to come. If asking her proved to be a mistake, he'd deal with that later. But two little girls had

already died, and he was absolutely determined that this time the outcome would be different. Failing was not an option.

He didn't for a moment doubt his own skills, but a crime like this – possibly the work of a serial killer – needed the best team possible and, by all accounts, O'Connell was damned good. Sharply intelligent and perceptive, and dedicated with it. He hoped to hell that she still was.

According to Barrington, she'd hidden herself away these past months, shunning contact with anyone. Although she'd physically recovered from her injuries, the police force had been willing to accommodate her request for extended leave, and apparently no one had been surprised when her letter of resignation arrived.

Yet Alec hated to see the loss of a good officer.

He cast his eyes around, trying to gain an insight into the woman from the place she'd chosen as a refuge.

The closest he'd ever come to gardening was killing potted plants in his apartment, but even to his uneducated eyes, her garden was impressive. Surrounded by a high wire fence, the array of vegetables, berries and fruit trees appeared healthy and productive, an oasis of green in the midst of dry bushland.

The fence initially puzzled him. Why did she need to feel safe in the garden when the house wasn't secured in the same way? But the sight of a kangaroo grazing on the other side of the wire made him realise that it had nothing to do with personal security and everything to do with protecting the plants from the hungry wildlife.

He felt foolish for his mistake. He was Sydney born and bred, and the gap between city and country loomed larger now than it ever had. All the more reason to have O'Connell on the team. Dungirri was way out in the north-west of the state, on the edge of the outback, and her knowledge of the place, the people and the culture would be invaluable.

He found the shed and stowed the pitchfork amongst a variety of other tools. Conscientiously he closed the garden gates, making sure they were properly fastened, before he returned to the front of the house to wait for her.

When she emerged with a duffle bag just a few minutes later, the difference in her appearance had him catching his breath. The navy trousers and short-sleeved white shirt revealed a slim figure that her gardening clothes had entirely disguised. She'd washed the garden dirt from her face and hands, and brushed her hair back into a soft knot. The absence of make-up enhanced rather than detracted from the impression of professionalism, of trustworthiness. Her fine, almost gaunt features held no artifice or pretence, but rather a stark, natural beauty.

Yet her tightly controlled expression and rigid spine brought to mind a queen walking to her execution.

Isabelle clenched her teeth hard as she approached the car and the man who stood waiting. She'd always feared this day would come – another child taken, at risk because she and the others on the police team had botched the job last year. Her stomach coiled so tight that her breath grew shallow.

Dan Chalmers had been innocent, after all. And all these months that she'd been trying to convince herself otherwise, to believe the evidence the others believed, the malevolence they'd left unchecked had not vanished.

Malevolence like that did not simply evaporate, sated. It could never be sated. The twisted specimen of humanity that had taken Jess had undoubtedly been simply biding time; waiting, watching, planning, anticipating.

Cope. The mantra she'd repeated to herself ever since the car had driven up echoed again in her mind. *Don't think about the possibilities.*

She called to Finn, her voice managing to sound almost normal, and he bounded over to her obediently. She caught the man's glance at the dog and at the harness in her hand, saw him about to object as he realised her intention.

'Finn goes with me,' she told him in a tone that brooked no argument. 'I'll put a towel on the seat to protect your car, if you like, but I'm going nowhere without him.'

After a fraction of hesitation, he nodded. 'Will he handle flying okay? We're only driving as far as Richmond – the police helicopter will pick us up from there. There's a briefing in Dungirri at noon.'

So soon. She'd assumed they'd drive out to the town, that she'd have six or seven hours to prepare herself. Now she'd have to face it all again in less than two hours.

She had to fight the tightness in her throat again. 'He's an ex-Air Force guard dog. He's used to aircraft.'

A small, wry smile softened the hard lines of the man's face. 'I hope you fed him this morning. He's looking at me like I'd make a good breakfast.'

She refused to let his attempt at humour affect her. 'He won't attack you unless I order it.'

He seemed to recognise the warning and just nodded, the softness of the smile evaporating. He stowed her bag in the boot, watched while she buckled in the dog, and in a few moments they were driving away.

Trying desperately to keep her mind away from thoughts that could crack her control, she clinically assessed the man beside her.

He was concentrating on his driving, which was just as well, for he drove faster than she'd ever dare to on this rough road. His strong, muscular hand gripped the gear stick between them, and he deftly changed gear in response to the terrain. If nothing else, she had to give him credit for being an excellent driver.

Alec Goddard. She pulled the name from her memory of his brief introduction. Bob Barrington had mentioned him a few times in passing – wasn't there some sort of family connection? – and she had a vague recollection that she'd seen his name in media reports once or twice, but State Crime Command in Sydney had little in common with the country towns where she'd served.

He was tall, six one or six two, she estimated, and the broad shoulders under the sports jacket suggested that he kept in shape. His hands and face were tanned, and his light

brown hair seemed naturally sun-bleached. An outdoors type of man then. Frown lines carved into his forehead hinted at a serious nature, yet the crow's-feet at the edge of his direct blue eyes had crinkled when he'd smiled.

Maybe around his late thirties, he was young for chief inspector ranking. The air of self-confidence, of authority, sat comfortably on him. She guessed he'd be used to getting his own way.

In the past, she might have trusted him, might even have thought him handsome. Now, all illusions she'd had about the innate goodness of people were well and truly shattered, and she didn't trust anyone, not even herself.

She turned away from him, stared out the window. What did Barrington's – what did anyone's – judgment matter when Jess had died? She'd failed Jess, and now...

She closed her eyes, forcing back burning tears. Of all the children in her old home town, why did it have to be Beth's daughter? Beth, who'd made the effort to keep in touch all these years, sending photos of her girls as they grew, samples of their childish artwork. Tanya's kindergarten drawing of a brightly coloured fish had hung on Isabelle's fridge for a year.

Now the child needed her help, and she had no idea if she had the strength, or the ability, to give it.

The chopper put them down in a dry paddock on the edge of town, and the local constable, an Aboriginal man, picked them up in a dusty police vehicle.

So, this is Dungirri, Alec thought, as they drove the short distance to the police station.

The place looked like a ghost town, except the ghosts were out on the streets and they weren't dead. They stood in front of shops which had seen better days, shoulders slumped, turning empty faces and resigned gazes to the police vehicle as it passed.

He risked a glance at the woman in the back seat. She stared straight ahead. The brief discussion they'd had on the flight had been totally focused on the facts of the case, and he'd been impressed by the concise briefing she'd given him of the previous investigation and the sharp questions she'd asked about the search for the missing girl. Yet it had all been delivered in a cold, impersonal manner.

He figured that the veneer was her way of protecting herself, but for the first time he doubted the wisdom of bringing her here. It would be damned hard for her to face those who'd been involved in the attack on Chalmers last year, and he didn't have the time or resources to deal with her if she cracked under the pressure. Barrington had assured him she wouldn't, and for now he'd just have to hope that the former superintendent's assessment was correct.

Still, he'd keep a close eye on her.

He got out of the car, into the hot, parching wind, and looked back along the main street. It wasn't beautiful. A few plants struggled to exist in the garden beds in the middle of the wide road, but most were dead or dying. The buildings – half of them empty – needed painting, and a sign hung

crookedly, squeaking inexorably as it swung in the wind. A few dusty utilities and trucks were parked haphazardly in front of the old double-storeyed hotel, the wrought iron bordering its wide upstairs verandas the only hint of long-gone splendour.

He knew most small towns were struggling, but there was more than that here. This place wasn't just dying of hopelessness and neglect. It was eerie, haunted, and he wondered what secrets still lay festering in the lives of its three hundred inhabitants.

'We're setting up the operations room in the memorial hall, sir.' The constable indicated the dilapidated weatherboard building beside the police cottage. 'The team from Regional Command in Dubbo arrived an hour ago. They'll have computers and communications up and running shortly.'

Alec felt a flash of sympathy for the guy. The New South Wales Police Force covered a huge state. Most of the time, the uniformed officers in these tiny outposts worked in isolation, with even the 'local' commander often hundreds of kilometres away. And then when something like this happened, they were invaded by detectives from larger towns and from Headquarters in Sydney and expected to take a back seat in the investigation, despite their knowledge of the area.

He glanced at the man's name tag – Adam Donahue – and made a mental note to ensure that the local officers didn't just get stuck with the menial jobs this time around.

Isabelle, the dog on a short lead at her side, was already heading into the hall. Behind her, he witnessed the sudden stiffening of her shoulders, heard the slight intake of breath.

A dark-haired man in his mid-thirties stood up from plugging in a computer as he saw them, eyebrows raised.

‘Hello, Isabelle,’ he said warily. ‘I didn’t expect to see you here.’

She nodded acknowledgment, with no hint of pleasure at seeing him.

Well, there’s a history of some sort between the two of them, Alec thought. As long as it didn’t get in the way of them working together on the case, he didn’t care.

The man came forward to introduce himself with the air of someone who planned to make himself noticed by his seniors. That immediately set Alec on guard.

‘I’m Steve Fraser...’

‘DCI Goddard.’ He briefly shook Fraser’s outstretched hand, deliberately giving only his rank and surname to stress his authority.

In their phone discussion late the previous night, Bob Barrington had mentioned that Fraser had been on the team last year. He hadn’t said anything particularly critical about him, but then he hadn’t said anything complimentary, either.

‘We’ll start the briefing in three minutes. Gather everyone together, please.’

A uniformed female sergeant strode into the hall and did a visible double-take. ‘Bella! What on earth... I didn’t realise you were coming.’

The two women embraced – or rather, Alec observed, the sergeant embraced Isabelle, who didn't pull away.

Isabelle introduced them. 'This is Kris Matthews. She's been here a few years.'

The sergeant's handshake was firm and added to the impression of down-to-earth capability and practicality. Good – someone he could rely on. He wasn't yet sure if he could rely on Fraser.

'We've got eight uniformed officers pulled from towns in the region, and Moree may be able to send us a couple more if we need them,' Matthews told him. 'Steve Fraser's come from Moree. There are two detective positions at Birraga, but Jim Holt's in hospital with a burst appendix. Phil Katsinis is on his way back from leave in Cape York, but still at least a day away. He'll be here as soon as he can. Dubbo has sent two comms technicians, and can send their media liaison officer if she's needed.'

He cast a considering eye over them – not a whole lot of resources for an investigation of this nature. He knew all the usual arguments – competing priorities, budget constraints, staff shortages. And out here, police resources were already stretched over vast, sparsely populated distances. He might be granted a few more people if the child wasn't found straightaway, but for now he'd have to work with what he had available, and somehow pull this diverse group into a disciplined, cohesive team.

'Okay, folks,' he called out to the room in general. 'Let's get this briefing underway.'

He gave his name and rank and held up his ID card as procedure required. 'I'm from State Crime Command in Sydney, and I'm in charge of this investigation. Tanya Wilson, an eight-year-old girl, is missing, and as of now this is officially a suspected abduction.'

He pulled some papers from the folder he'd set on the table in front of him, aware, in the periphery of his vision, of Isabelle watching him from where she leaned against the wall.

'Some of you were here just over twelve months ago, when another girl of the same age, Jess Sutherland, went missing in similar circumstances.' He pinned up Jess's photo beside Tanya's as he spoke. 'She was held by her abductor for seven days before being murdered. Two years ago, Kasey Tomasi was abducted near her home, at Jerran Creek, two hours' drive from here.' He pinned the third photograph up. 'Kasey was also held for some days before she was murdered. We will regard these three cases as being possibly connected.'

A murmur rippled through the room, and he caught tones and expressions of surprise, agreement and disagreement. Isabelle remained silent, her face impassive.

Fraser stood. 'This case can't be related. The man who killed Jess and Kasey is dead. One of Jess's shoes was found in his house. And he had the same sedatives that she and Kasey were drugged with.'

Alec fixed him with a steady eye. 'I have been over the case notes, Fraser. The fact that the shoe was found in the ruins of Daniel Chalmers' house following his murder,' he stressed the word, 'is not conclusive. It may well have been

planted. And diazepam is a common sedative that many people have access to.'

He'd deliberately addressed the man by his surname. With his own team, back in Sydney, he used a more informal, even casual, leadership style. In these circumstances, however, he'd decided formality was better, so that Fraser could be in no doubt who was in charge.

The detective opened his mouth again, about to argue, then wisely decided not to. Just as well, Alec thought. There wasn't time to waste in arguments, and he had no desire to be any more heavy-handed than he'd been so far. He turned back to the local officer.

'Sergeant Matthews? Would you bring us up to speed on what's occurred so far?'

The sergeant came up to the front and Alec stepped aside, moving to stand next to Isabelle.

Matthews taped up a simple map, hand-drawn on a large piece of butcher's paper: a standard small-town grid of straight intersecting streets, only disrupted by the curve of the creek.

'Tanya left school at three fifteen yesterday afternoon.' She pointed to the school on the map in the south-west corner of town. 'She bought a few sweets at the Truck Stop Cafe at the west end of Bridge Street at approximately three-twenty. Her normal route home is north along the road past the showground, and then east across the top of town. She usually takes a shortcut through the TSR to get to her home, just out of town on Scrub Road.'

'TSR?' queried Alec sharply.

‘Travelling stock reserve. The distance from school to home is just over a kilometre, and Tanya is normally home well before four o’clock. She’s not the sort of kid who wanders off alone. Her mother reported her missing at five o’clock.’

‘You’ve searched the route for evidence?’ he asked.

‘As best we could,’ Matthews replied. ‘Unfortunately, a mob of five hundred cattle moved into the stock reserve around 4.30 pm, pretty much obliterating any chance of finding tyre marks, scents, or anything useful.’

Yep, I’m definitely in the country, Alec thought wryly. Having a mob of cattle destroy his evidence had never happened in Sydney.

‘We’ve questioned Tanya’s friends and everyone who lives along her normal route,’ Matthews continued. ‘I called in the volunteers of the State Emergency Service last night, and they’ve searched along the creek banks and dragged the swimming hole and the dam in the reserve. There’s a team searching the scrubland north of town as we speak. So far we have nothing.’

‘I suppose this Truck Stop Cafe doesn’t have video surveillance?’

‘Don’t need that sort of thing out here.’ The sergeant gave him a grim half-smile. ‘We’re hardly on a major highway. Most of the drivers are well known – regular district runs of stock, agricultural supplies, that sort of thing. Jeanie at the cafe knew everyone who stopped yesterday.’

‘Thanks, Matthews.’ Alec walked back to the front of the room. ‘Folks, if the person responsible for this is the same

person who abducted Jess and Kasey, then the chances are that Tanya is still alive and is being hidden somewhere. But we have a limited time to find her. Fraser, get a list of everyone who stopped at the cafe yesterday and have a team start checking them out. Donahue, keep the SES crew searching – any place you think the girl could have gone. Matthews, see if any of the kids at the school saw anything. O’Connell, you and I will start interviewing people in town.’

He thought he saw a hint of alarm beneath the expressionless mask. He knew he was throwing her in the deep end, making her face the townsfolk straightaway. Except, in reality, his purpose in getting her out there was exactly the reverse – making the townsfolk face her. Making them face the consequences of last year’s incident in the hope that it would force them into confronting the truth and revealing the menace within their community.

The sense of guilt he felt in using Isabelle this way was only mitigated by the knowledge that it might save a little girl’s life.

Isabelle took a deep, slow breath, pushing down a wave of panic. Concentrate on the job, just concentrate on what needs doing, she lectured inwardly, gradually feeling the iron determination moderate the screaming emotions. As if sensing her unease, Finn leaned against her leg and she touched his head lightly, the connection helping to steady her.

With Finn trotting between them, she and Alec worked

their way down Bridge Street, stopping at the store, the council depot, the hotel, the agricultural and hardware store.

No one had expected to see her. Fists clutched tightly at her sides, she ignored the surprised expressions. Some tried to be friendly, some were guarded, others so uncomfortable that they couldn't meet her eyes. She held Tanya's image in her mind as a shield against the dark memories that would otherwise claw at her, and didn't let herself respond as anything other than Detective O'Connell.

Always beside her, Alec's natural authority and official courtesy compelled attention from those they questioned, yet he showed no need to throw his weight around aggressively. He let her take the lead, working as a team with her, his probing questions complementing hers.

A year ago, he might have earned her respect for his professionalism.

She shut that thought out too, just as she tried to block out the disturbing awareness of his constant presence near her. He never touched her, never came between her and Finn, just stayed within an arm's reach of her, all the time. She clung to the logic that her awareness of him stemmed only from the fact that she'd lived in isolation for months now, hardly seeing anyone.

At Ward's Rural Supplies, Joe Ward's nervous gaze kept slipping from her face as he told them no, he'd not seen Tanya yesterday, and except for one delivery run he'd been out the back stacking feed most of the afternoon. His daughter, who helped run the store, was also unable to help.

Alec was thanking them both when the bell at the door jingled, and almost before she could turn around Isabelle found herself enveloped in a strong hug.

‘Bella, my dear!’ Jeanie Menotti from the cafe down the road let her go eventually, just enough to hold her by the shoulders and look her over. ‘How are you?’ she asked earnestly. ‘You’ve recovered okay?’

Isabelle briefly closed her eyes, battling to maintain her composure. How like Jeanie to talk about the subject that everyone else had studiously avoided. But then Jeanie, with her sane, sensible personality, had never been one to avoid difficult topics when she cared about people.

‘I’m fine.’ Isabelle tried to brush off the elderly woman’s concern, all the while fighting the urge to throw herself into Jeanie’s arms and weep, as she had done sometimes as a motherless teenager. But she wasn’t that naïve, trusting kid any more, and she never would be again.

By the time they arrived back at the hall an hour later, Alec’s respect for Isabelle had grown.

She’d handled herself well, cool when faced with some people’s obvious surprise at seeing her. She’d remained polite but distant with them all, not responding to their reactions, focused only on seeking information.

Yet what had the cost been to her? He’d seen the hurt look on Jeanie Menotti’s face when Isabelle had pulled away from her. It was as though she was denying, even to herself,

any trace of the woman behind the detective – the woman who had spent her childhood as part of this town.

While they compared notes with Fraser and Matthews, she leaned on the edge of a table, Finn at her feet, her concentration on the whiteboard where Fraser scrawled anything that might be relevant. The mask was firmly in place, yet strain etched fine lines around her eyes.

The crack of a gunshot and the simultaneous fracturing of the window behind Isabelle jolted Alec out of his thoughts and into instinctive action. He threw himself at her, pushing her down onto the floor, as everyone else in the room also dropped down.

In the few seconds that followed, while they waited to see if more gunshots were coming, he became aware of three disparate things in rapid succession: he liked the soft warmth of the woman lying beneath him; her dog had its teeth clenched around his ankle; and the white shirt Isabelle wore was turning red with blood.