

Chapter Twenty Eight

Thieves again

Meredith came quickly down the steps at that moment calling out, 'Pete is on the floor of the library, unconscious come quickly.'

The library had been ransacked, books scattered all over the floor, with Pete lying on his back. Meredith was crouched down beside him, gently helping him to his feet.

Most of the staff had followed them into the house, and Jonathon a pleasant youth reported, 'there were two of them, they came in a Black Toyota 4WD with Perth number plates.' He stopped for a moment, and then continued sadly, 'unfortunately I didn't get the number plate, it was covered in dirt.'

Pete climbing slowly to his feet revealed, 'Christ sorry about this, but I was too slow there were two of them and they knew what they were after. They took the two antique books. They've only been gone a few minutes, so if you take the copter you should be able to track them, they're driving a big black 4WD with Perth number plates,' he paused, grimaced then continued, 'but I didn't get the number.'

There was still blood trickling down his forehead, and Gabriel thought he seemed to be trying to convey something else, but at that point he collapsed back onto the floor, his legs simply crumbling under him.

They were all furious, Bede and Hera were confused and concerned about Pete, and Justin was simply stunned as he gazed around at the shambles.

Hera immediately went across to Pete's side. She helped him to his feet again, and asked Jonathon to help her assist him onto the sofa. Meredith came in at that moment with a bowl of warm water and some soft clean cloth to bath his head. 'We need to look at this without the blood,' she said, 'you may need stitches.'

Pete cursed softly under his breath and watches as Gabe, Martin and Bede raced from the room.

Still cursing softly he suddenly yelled, 'be careful you three.'

Gabe waved to acknowledge the warning as they pelted across to the hanger with Bede in front, 'it's all fuelled up,' she shouted, 'Pete was going to spray early tomorrow morning.' The three of them wheeled the machine onto the pad and quickly climbed aboard.

It took only a few moments for Bede to have the engine revving and then they were airborne.

They started circling; it was coming on dark but would be a good hour before they lost all the light. There was still the spotlight they used for shooting brumbies, when and if they needed it Bede thought. It didn't take long to spot the vehicle it was racing down the Wills Track at about 100kms an hour, the road was a secondary road, but in good repair. Bede spoke into the intercom, 'they're heading west the track meets up with the Great Northern Highway just north of Newman but it's about 250 kilometres, and there's nothing between here and there, so I don't know how they think they're going to get away.' Just at that moment, there was the sound of a shot pinging off the fuselage. Bede

pushed the control forward and they immediately started to climb out of range of what had obviously been a handgun.

Gabe swore in a language Bede didn't understand and Martin put his hand gently onto her shoulder, 'stay out of range and we'll just follow for the moment,' in the meantime Gabriel reached across and picked up the radio controls noting with approval the latest in French communication technology.

'We need to speak to Inspector Campbell, and get him to set something up,' he looked at Bede with raised eyebrows, 'road blocks?'

She grinned at him, 'it's easier out here, there is nothing and almost no-one for miles, we can notify the couple of homesteads between here and Newman, and notify Newman itself.' She shrugged, 'they won't get far, they're idiots if they think they can.'

Gabe continued to talk over the radio, while Bede and Martin watched the speeding car, 'who do you think they are Martin?'

'Well I'd say someone from Europe not used to the distances out here, and I think opportunists. They couldn't have known we'd be at the club until late,' he paused thoughtfully, 'unless they have some connection with those two idiots at the club,' he paused again and exchanged a glance with Gabe, still speaking to Inspector Campbell.

Gabe nodded, then with a wicked grin, 'the Inspector asked if you're carrying a rifle, he seems to think you probably do for culling brumbies, and suggested we try for the tyres, what do you think?'

'Well I have to fly this thing and I'm not a good enough shot, we don't want to kill them.'

Gabe grinned again, 'but I am, if you can keep it steady, I'm sure I'll manage.'

Bede indicated a compartment at the back of the passenger seats, 'it's in there, not loaded but you'll find the ammunition in a separate locked compartment behind the seat,' she handed a key back to him.

Gabe set about loading the rifle it was a L1A1 SLF, 'nice rifle,' he said with a grin, 'and in good condition.'

Bede snorted in derision, but took the helicopter lower and parallel to the speeding car. Martin moved out of the way sliding the cabin door open, and Gabriel positioned himself in the opening wedging his left shoulder securely and with one foot keeping him balanced on the Landing Skids. He raised the rifle to his right shoulder. 'Ok Bede keep her steady,' and he took careful aim.

His first shot hit the road just in front of the car, and they skidded to the left, he aimed quickly again, this time hitting the front tyre causing the vehicle to swing crazily across the road. The driver was fighting the skid, trying desperately to keep the car from rolling over.

Bede brought the copter lower and prepared to land in front of and as close to the damaged car as possible. She held her breath hoping that the driver and the passenger they could see were not hurt. They needed information, and potentially this pair knew quite a lot.

'Keep back Bede, they're likely to start shooting, we've got the greater range, but they might be a bit impulsive.'

He prepared to leap down as soon they touched, and had the rifle to his shoulder. He fired one more round into the back tyre this time as the Toyota finally swung to a stop.

The passenger and driver both erupted from the car, swearing and cursing in Czech. Martin grinning climbed down to join Gabe, 'Well, well, well I recognise these two, things might finally start to make some sense.'

Gabriel was scowling, but keeping a tight control on his rage, and with the rifle held loosely beside his leg, crossed to confront Kamila and Jakub, both still cursing.

Bede switched the engine off, and as the Rotar of the Robinson slowed, she too climbed down, watching the drama unfolding.

Kamila stormed towards Gabriel, while Jakub tried to calm her down, 'you pig Gabriel, you could have killed us, are you still jealous of Jakub?' she rushed at him, with arms flailing. Jakub finally caught her as Martin stepped between her and Gabriel.

'You bitch,' he snarled, 'why do you think Gabriel would be jealous, and where exactly do you think you were going? You stupid cow, do you really think you could get away with such a stupid robbery, here? In the middle of the Australian bush.' He drew a deep calming breath.

'Calm down everyone,' Gabriel sauntered up, still casually holding the rifle at his side, 'now perhaps Jakub,' he looked towards the tall dark man still holding the still struggling Kamila, 'would like to explain what's going on? Which of you two fired on us, and I agree with Martin's question, where did you think you were going?'

They were all caught in the spotlight from the helicopter as Bede switched it on.

She thought they were speaking Czech, she didn't understand anything said, but obviously they all knew each other well. The beautiful slim woman trying to attack Gabe confused her, and her tall companion trying to restrain her, was not having a great deal of luck. Martin seemed furious, but Gabe as usual was his cool unruffled self, but he was pale, and he still had his finger on the trigger of the rifle.

'Could you Pleeese all speak English?' she said mildly as she strolled to Gabriel's side.

Gabriel turned to her and transferring the rifle to his left hand, put his arm around her shoulders and drew her into his side. 'Bede, meet Kamila and Jakub, I told you about them, they're dubious associates of Justin and Lucien, which raises interested question. Did you notify the Inspector that we'd caught them?'

'Yes, and Pete is fine by the way,' she glanced at the two irate seething Czech's, 'which one of you smashed him over the head?'

'My guess is Kamila,' Martin hissed.

'Right,' she snarled, 'he deserved it, he knocked me out the last time I saw him, the bastard.' Kamila was sulking now.

Bede was startled and had to close her mouth quickly, what the hell was going on? She moved away

from Gabe, turned frowning to look first at him, then Martin, and lastly the two book thieves. She was suddenly very cold and frightened.

'I don't know what the hell is going on here, but it's obviously not what I thought.' She said as she grabbed the rifle from Gabriel's loose grasp before he had time to react and, moving several steps back from him, brought the rifle up quickly to cover all four. 'Don't move any of you, and don't think I won't use this.'

Gabriel frowning but still relaxed took one step towards her, 'Bede, take it easy, don't over react, I, we can explain.'

'Stop, don't move, what exactly do you plan to explain.' She was furious, and shaking with rage. 'This has all been some sort of swindle hasn't it and you're all involved.' She moved another step carefully back towards the helicopter, 'which one of you actually killed my father, or was it Pete, the ever loyal employee, that Kamila knows very well of old. You all obviously know each other well.'

There was an awful stillness now, all four were facing her quiet and watchful, even the sulky Kamila had straightened.

'Keep your hands where I can see them all of you,' the light from the spotlight keeping them all in sharp relief. 'I may not be the sharp shooter you are Gabriel, but I'm quite capable of firing off two or three shots before any of you can grab me, and believe me from this distance I can't miss, and I'm not sure which of you four I'll shoot first.'

She continued to move backwards, slowly and carefully, sliding her feet across the loose stones on the road. It wouldn't be a good move to stumble at this point. She moved the barrel of the rifle carefully from one to the other. She couldn't believe she had been such a fool, but couldn't allow herself to think about any of this yet. She had to get to the helicopter, take off and call Inspector Robinson. She also needed to disable the Toyota more completely. It was a hire car so probably had more than one spare tyre in the back. Without the car they wouldn't be able to escape, she could fly on to Newman and get the police from there to come out and pick them up.

'Bede, this is not what you think,' Gabriel held out his hand, 'please Bede let me explain?' he took a step towards her.

'Stand still, I said don't move.' She was moving more quickly now, only a couple of steps and she'd be able to get the cabin door open, then she needed to somehow take off before they reached her.

'Bede listen to me, please, this really is not what you think,'

'Yeh sure, your former girlfriend is in Australia, and steals the two EXTREMELY VALUABLE books, while we're away from the homestead. How did she know we would be away, and Pete, loyal Pete, she knows Pete from before, before when and where, before Pete killed James, or was it one of you two? Or perhaps it was the very versatile Kamila or her husband.'

She was sobbing now and raised the rifle quickly and blew out the other back tyre of the hire car, then swung it back to still keep them covered. All four were still, Martin quietly watching Gabriel.

I suggest you stay put, there are no water holes around here. The police will pick you up.'

'Bede,' Gabriel was seething he'd lost all the colour in his face and his hands were clenched so hard the knuckles gleamed white in the light from the helicopter, 'for Christ sake stop this now, Martin and I had nothing to do with James death or the stupid theft of those bloody books.'

He swung around to Kamila and Jakub, 'tell her or we'll be stuck here all night.'

Kamila shrugged her shoulders and her face took on a mulish and sulky look but she did speak, 'It's true, Gabe and Martin had nothing to do with this, they had no idea we were here.'

Bede was at the Cabin door now, you'd say whatever he told you to, I don't believe you.'

Martin, quiet until now, finally spoke, 'Bede, Gabe is telling you the truth, we neither of us knew these two were in the country, we suspected Justin was up to something, but had no idea these two were here.'

He swung back to Gabriel, 'I told you before you should have levelled with her from the start,' turning around to Bede, 'just take a moment to think, Bede, you know Gabe is besotted with you, he wouldn't have allowed these two anywhere near you if he'd known what they were up to.'

'How can I believe you, you've been lying to me from the start.' She was looking at Gabe now, but still keeping the rifle levelled at them all.

'No Bede, I haven't lied to you at any point. I admit I haven't been completely honest with you, but I've never lied to you.' He was quiet for a few moments then continued gently, 'it's finding out about Pete that's rattled you Bede, but think, he's been on the property all this time on James's invitation. He's been protected you all, James tended to be a little paranoid and as it turns out he was right to be worried, but Pete is completely loyal to all of you.'

He moved one step towards her, 'Bede I would never let anyone or anything hurt you, deep down you know that. When we arrived Martin and I were suspicious of Pete's role here, so we did some checking. He was just as suspicious of us initially. Yes, Pete has a connection to the Family as you've guessed, but you've jumped to the wrong conclusions. James obviously had been concerned about something for a long time, but he didn't let on to anyone what it was. He just went ahead and arranged for Pete to be here and keep an eye on you all particularly when he was away. The reason there are no details in his file is because Pete has in the past had a similar role in the Family as Martin and me.'

Bede was at the helicopter now, and paused.

Gabriel held his hand out towards her palm up, 'It's Pete's story Bede, but I can tell you a little. He had a difficult and messy relationship breakup and left Europe. That was a long time ago, and he'd been wandering around the Middle East when James bumped into him. He asked him to come here and live on the property keep an eye out for any potential problems, but he didn't tell him exactly what he was concerned about. James was always paranoid and far too secretive.

'Bede you're the only one who can fly this thing so you're completely safe. We need to go back to the homestead and try to work this out. You can't really mean to leave us stuck out here all night. Please?'

He seemed more relaxed, his colour had returned and the corners of his lips twitching slightly.

'Please? The whole day has been one shock after another starting with George's death, and then the nonsense at the club - you do know me Bede.'

Kamila yelped, 'George is dead?' she swung around and punched Jakub in the shoulder, 'I knew we shouldn't get involved in any of this. Now we won't get the rest of our money.'

Jakub spoke for the first time in heavily accented English, 'Shut up,' he said and turned to Bede. 'We had nothing to do with any killing.' And more gently continued, 'you don't know either Kamila or me, but believe me, we have killed no-one. It's not my scene.' He was thoughtful for a moment, 'I'll admit to stealing the odd item or two, and spying, maybe some rough stuff, but definitely no killing' Taking a deep breath he continued thoughtfully, 'well, not unless Kamila's life was in danger,' he paused again, 'or mine of course.'

Both Gabriel and Martin looked amused by this speech, and Gabriel said, 'Jakub, I suggest you just stop talking, it's not your thing.'

He turned back to Bede, 'what he means is that he's a thug Bede, but not a killer. Kamila is tricky, unscrupulous and with very few morals, but she's not a killer either.'

He met her eyes, and there was a depth of pain there she hadn't seen before, he leaned towards her, but other than that didn't move. 'Bede, I'm sure you've worked out, over the last few weeks, what we do within the Family. Martin and I are both capable of killing without remorse if the situation requires it,' he kept eye contact with her, 'but neither of us had anything to do with James's death. We really are here to sort it out.' He gestured to Jakub and Kamila, 'these two idiots have just muddied the waters a little.'

Suddenly into the silence Gabriel's phone rang, he cocked an eyebrow, 'can I answer that?'

Bede felt exhaustion pulling at her shoulders, and felt the nausea in her stomach rise, she wanted to believe him, she knew she had been falling in love with him over the last few weeks, but there really had been too many questions and no answers. They needed answers to the questions.... Pete had seemed completely loyal and supportive, particularly over the last few weeks. Yes, James had always been secretive, even Penelope right up to her death had complained about James's Paranoia. The phone was still ringing.

'OK answer it, but put it on speaker.'

Gabe let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding, he pulled the phone from his pocket and switched to speaker.

Pete's voice came out loud and clear. 'Gabe where are you, have you caught those two idiots yet, is Bede alright, Meredith and Hera are just about beside themselves they're so anxious about all this.'

Gabe spoke clearly, 'yes, we've caught them, but there's been a development. Pete I need you to come totally clean about your role on the property since you've been here. Bede is freaked as Kamila confessed to knowing you.'

'I knew this would happen, bloody James and his need for secrecy, put Bede on.'

'We're on speaker Pete just talk.'

As Pete talked Bede relaxed slightly, the tension in her shoulders slowly releasing and the tight band around her forehead unwinding slightly so that she felt she could think properly.

His gravelly voice rolled on, and many of the unexplained and puzzling incidents over the last few years became clear. Pete had arrived on the property just twelve months before her mother's death. It had been a shock, an aneurism, not something any of them could have foreseen. Pete had supported James through his grief over Penny's death and kept Meredith, Hera and her stable in the months following. He had taken over the running of the farm, and even travelled overseas on one occasion when James had been unable to complete the contract. He had always been more than an employee. James had trusted him completely, but not enough to tell him what it was that he feared. Today really had been a day of startling developments. Drawing a deep breath and trying relaxing her shoulders she spoke to Gabe.

'I want to talk to Hera, ask Pete to put her on.'

'Did you hear that Pete?'

'Yep we're all here, including Justin, Damian is with Inspector Campbell and his young constable in the library, they arrived soon after you lot.'

Bede felt the tension drain out of her body, and she signalled for the phone.

Gabriel took the five steps across to her and handed her the phone. His eyes held such sadness and compassion; she could feel the sting of unshed tears, but simply shook her head and took the phone, her finger still on the trigger of the rifle now held more loosely in her right hand.

The phone, still on speaker, Hera's voice came strong and steady, 'Bede everything here is fine. Inspector Campbell arrived about half an hour ago, he'd been on his way here anyway. Pete has a lump on his head, but he's okay now. It's all been a bit of a shock.' There was a pause, then her voice continued, 'I can imagine what your thinking Bede 'honey', but you need to get back here so we can start to sort it all out.'

Bede switched the phone off and handed it to Gabriel.

'Ok everyone into the copter.'

Hera had used their childhood signal for it's 'ok to come home, Dad has calmed down'. Bede had a sudden memory of the time Hera had stayed hidden in the bush for two days when she'd really strained his patience. She had taken the short wave radio apart convinced she could fix the crackle that annoyed her so much, only to discover she'd damaged one of the valves and they had no replacement. She never had managed to fix the crackling.

'I take it 'honey' is a code word between you two,' Gabe spoke softly into her ear, making sure no-one else heard him as he climbed in.

'You really don't miss much do you?' she said frowning slightly.

He didn't answer but gazed deeply into her eyes, then nodded slowly, his expression sombre.

Before getting into the helicopter Bede removed the remaining clip from the rifle and put it into her pocket. She was the only one of this lot able to pilot this thing, she felt quite certain no-one wanted to cause an accident here in the middle of nowhere, but was taking no chances.

They were gathered in the living room. Bede sitting quietly in her favourite chair watching and listening, she could almost see the emotions roiling through the ethers. Would they ever get to the bottom of James's death? It seemed to be submerged beneath a miasma of peripheral events. But someone had ordered his assassination, she was as sure of that as she was of sitting in this chair.