

HOW FAR WOULD YOU GO TO KEEP A PROMISE?

RUN

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MEL A
ROWE

AUSTRALIAN BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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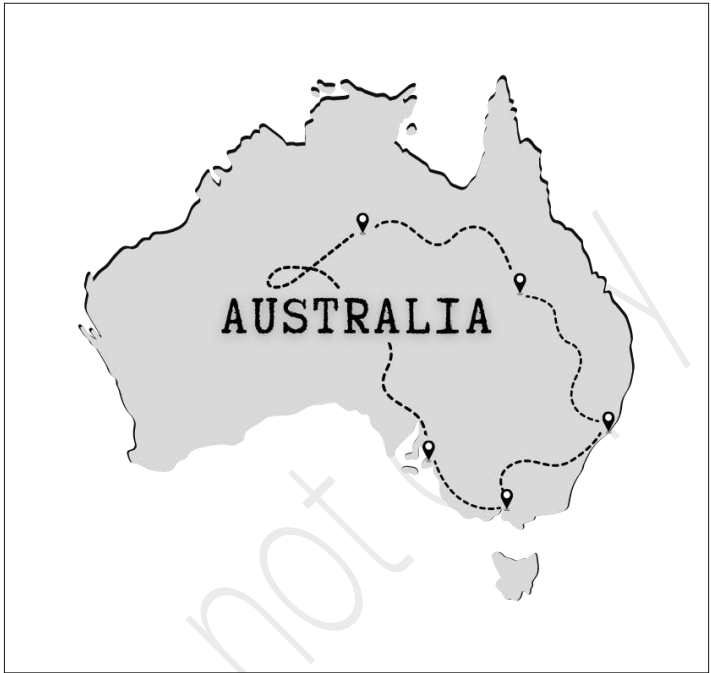
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***Caveat: As a courtesy, since there may be some sparse language choices in this story that may represent an obstacle for the reader, I am offering this warning. Please note this language and cultural references are purely for fictional purposes only and not designed to offend any individual persons, culture, or religions implied.*

The Following Is Written in Australian English



How far would you go to keep a promise?

“The most important person
to keep your promises to,
is yourself.”

Anonymous

do not copy

One

MELBOURNE, VICTORIA

'How does the white rabbit get away with *I'm late! I'm late!* — because I'm freaking late again.' Maddison ran across the road as seagulls glided on the sea breeze that carried the deep-throated horn blast of a freighter docking at the wharves.

She pushed on the glass doors to Lou's Sports Bar and darted behind the bar. 'Sorry I'm late.'

'Been diving again, have we, Maddison?' Wearing his permanent scowl, Laurie tapped on his watch face. 'And today's excuse is ...'

'The boat was late because the tourists kept wanting to extend their scuba diving adventure on the wreck. I don't know why they bothered; the water was that murky this morning.' She tossed her loose plait off her shoulder dampening her shirt's collar, then tightened the straps on her black work apron. 'When you take up my offer for those free diving lessons, I'll make sure it's clear with the tides.'

'If man was meant to swim underwater, we'd be waving around webbed fingers and toes.' He then sighed. 'Why do you do that?'

'Do what?'

'I'm supposed to be giving you a lecture on being late, again.'

'I'm sorry.' Maddison gave what she hoped was her best suck-up smile yet. 'You know I'm good for it.'

'Get to work. I'll be out the back.'

'Will do, boss.' She got busy behind the bar, where time flew, serving a steady stream of customers.

'There she is,' said Paul, a junior detective, strolling in through the front doors with his partner. 'I've been waiting all day to ask you to have dinner with me, Maddison.'

Maddison placed a freshly poured beer on the counter in front of Paul, and hesitated. She'd taken this bar job to help grow more of a backbone, to learn to be more assertive with people, but where was Laurie when she needed him?

'Say *no*, Maddy.' Senior Detective Mick Hetter leaned against the bar, scooping up his beer. 'You're better than that.'

Paul sneered at his partner. 'Are you for real?'

'Never date a cop. The hours suck... My two ex-wives will tell you that.'

The phone behind the bar rang.

Laurie stormed out of the office. 'Lou's Sports Bar.' He paused, listening to the phone cradled to his ear, as his frown deepened. 'Yeah, who's this?' He waved at Maddison. 'Hang on, I'll get her.'

'For me? Can't be, no one rings me.' *And that sounded sad.*

'Well, this modern piece of annoying technology is a phone that allows people to disturb your day and mine.'

'Is the phone for me, or am I getting another lecture?' Maddison grinned at the sizeable man, shaking his head at her. 'Hello?' She asked over the phone.

'Maddy—thank God—it's Bob. Listen, hon, I haven't got much time, I need a favour?' Uncle Bob's raspy breath wheezed with urgency. 'Can you meet me at the train station by the casino? Please, I'm begging you.'

'Are you in trouble?'

'Um ... I'll meet you at the front entrance to explain everything. I'll see you soon.' Bob hung up.

'Is everything all right, Maddison?' Laurie asked, hovering nearby. Which was rare – she hadn't seen her boss all shift.

'Just Uncle Bob being Uncle Bob.' But he didn't sound right.

'Does Bob need you to bail him out again?'

'No, to meet him at the train station near the casino.'

'Don't tell me, Bob's lost all his money at the casino and needs time to hide out at your place, so the bookies don't find him?'

'Excuse me?'

'Yesterday, two men came in here looking for Bob. Don't worry, I told them nothing. But Maddison ...' Laurie stepped in closer and with a lowered tone, he said, 'They were the tough henchmen

variety.'

Henchmen? Who says that anymore? 'How do you know?'

'Trust me on that one, I've seen enough to know from working on the job for thirty years. Your uncle must be into something deep for those two men to walk into a known cop bar like this. I just hope Bob doesn't drag you down with him.'

'Uncle Bob wouldn't do that to me. Besides, I can take care of myself.'

'Make sure you do. Now get out of here.'

'Thanks, I will.' Maddison ripped off her apron and rushed out the door.

At the train station a steady stream of people flowed back and forth, accessorised with headsets and smartphones. The heady scents of coffee, train exhaust fumes, and assorted colognes were torture on the sinuses.

But Bob was a no-show.

Not the first time Bob had failed to appear, so she'd give him ten more minutes, then head home, or go back to work to make up for being late.

'Excuse me, miss?' A pimply-faced kid, carrying a skateboard approached. 'Are you Maddy?'

'Yes.'

'Your uncle told me to give you this.' The boy held out a cardboard beer coaster.

The scribble on the back read:

*Maddy,
Go to platform ten and catch the first train out.
Get off at the first stop in Croydon.
I'll meet you there in the car park around the back.
Uncle Bob*

'Where did Bob go?'

The kid shrugged his skinny shoulders. 'Some old guy told me to look for some lady with blonde hair, wearing a shirt that had *Lou's Sports Bar* on the pocket.' He pointed to the embroidered pocket of Maddison's collared shirt. 'He paid me ten bucks for it, too.' The kid grinned wider. 'He told me you'd give me ten bucks as a tip, once I'd done the job.'

'How do I know you got this from Bob? What did he look like?'

'Old guy, balding head, red face, big guts, wearing a crinkled-up suit like he'd slept in it. He looked like an old drunk to me. But he said you'd be suss and that I was to say *Bob bids it*—whatever that means.' The kid then held out his hand. 'Hey, ten bucks is ten bucks, lady. Are you gonna pay up?'

'*Bob bloody bids it,*' Maddison muttered under her breath. It was one of Uncle Bob's favourite sayings that he'd tell her when she was young. It was also Bob's handwriting on the beer coaster, and the kid's unflattering description of Uncle Bob were unfortunately true.

Maddison searched the large timetable boards. With five minutes to catch the train, she handed ten dollars to the boy. 'Thanks.'

'Miss, no offence, but is this some secret-squirrel kind of thing?'

'Why do you say that?'

'Because the old guy looked scared, sweating badly, looking over his shoulder all the time.'

Bob didn't sound too good on the phone either. Did the bookies find him?

As a flutter of fear shifted in her stomach, tightening her ribcage, she raced down the platform, hoping she wasn't too late.

Two

The train rattled away, leaving Maddison alone in the crisp early evening air. Her boot steps echoed along the station's platform. A flickering light buzzed overhead, causing her shadow to flicker over the stained concrete as she followed the ramp to the dark deserted car park.

Why here? Surely Bob wouldn't put her in any danger?

Peering into the shadows, her shoulders tightened as her heartbeat raced, reaching inside her handbag for her pepper spray.

Only to sigh with relief at the sight of Bob's decrepit car sitting at the far end of the deserted car park with Bob slumped over in the passenger seat.

'Bob?' She tapped on the car window.

'Hey, are you asleep?' She opened the sedan's door and Bob rolled onto the ground.

Great, drunk again.

Anger simmered in her chest at the man who weighed a tonne. 'Come on, Bob, help me out here.'

Bob groaned, as if annoyed at her for disturbing his sleep. But when she rolled him to his back the car park's dull lights exposed his face.

'Oh, no!' She dropped to her knees as a chill washed over her.

Bob's eyelids were swollen shut, with his lips swelling as if he'd been stung by a thousand bees. Blood from his flattened nose ran down his face and soaked his shirt.

'Maddy?' Bob slurred. He'd lost teeth.

'What happened? Who did this?' The blood was everywhere.

'Listen ...' His groan was filled with pain between irregular gasps for air. 'There isn't much time.'

'I'm calling an ambulance.' She dug around in her bag for her phone.

Bob grabbed her weakly with a swollen, shaky hand, slick with blood. 'Maddy, please listen to me.'

Maddison stabbed the emergency numbers on her phone. 'You need help.'

'Do you remember my favourite place at the track?'

'Why are you talking about the track now?' Maddison frowned at the recorded message being played on her phone. 'No way! I'm on hold! Can you believe that? On hold for an emergency number!'

'Maddy!' Bob grabbed her shirt, dragging her down to face him. 'You know my secret place at the track?'

'Yes, of course.' Fear hammered in her heart so loudly it was a challenge to listen to her phone. She dropped it to the ground, the phone's speaker playing some eerie background music.

'Go to the track and find my leather journal. It's got a memory card in there. You need to finish what I started. Promise me you won't say anything to anyone?'

'It's okay, the ambulance will be here soon.' Why was Bob rambling about his journal? He only kept it for his article notes—but it'd been a long time since he'd published anything decent. 'Who did this to you? Laurie said some men came looking for you yesterday. Is this their way of debt-collecting?'

'That mob didn't shoot me. You can't get money out of a dead man.'

'*They shot you?!*' Maddison's voice echoed across the deserted car park. She frantically searched for wounds, but couldn't see anything through the blood, as she tried to remember her first aid while still on hold for an ambulance. Dragging her work apron out of her bag, she pressed it against Bob's wounds.

'Police. Fire. Ambulance,' said the nasally female monotone over the speakerphone.

'Quick, I need an ambulance to the car park at Croydon Train Station near a white sedan. My uncle's been shot and has lost a lot of blood.' Maddison was desperate to keep a grip before the panic truly set in. 'Hurry, please!'

'Ambulance and police have been notified and they'll be with you shortly.'

'They're coming, Bob.' Maddison pressed her apron harder against his chest to stop the bleeding as he laboured heavily for oxygen. 'Hang in there, help is on its way.'

'Trust no one, Maddison.' Bob groaned through gritted teeth.

‘Promise me you won’t tell anyone what I said?’

‘You’re not making sense.’ His warm blood seeped through her apron and between her fingers. The rich metallic scent was distinct.

‘Trust no one. Tell no one. Bob bids it, too.’ He gripped her wrist as she pressed against his bleeding chest. ‘Promise me, you’ll finish what I’ve started. It needs to be finished. Promise me!’

‘Okay, okay, I promise.’ The tears welled up in her eyes.

‘You were always a good kid.’ Bob’s pallor was a pasty grey as his chest rattled with each laboured breath. ‘I just wish you’d find something better for yourself than working in a bar.’

‘You can save your lectures on my lifestyle changes for when you’re recovering.’

‘No need for that, honey, just remember to keep your eyes and ears open. Watch your back. And trust no one—especially the police.’

‘What?’

‘Finish what I started. I know you’ll do it, and you’ll make me proud ... I love you, Maddy.’ Bob’s words slurred into a whisper, ending in a sigh. It was so shallow and slow, it barely registered.

His head lay back. His shoulders relaxed and his entire body went limp, with his eyes staring vacantly across the car park.

The siren screams were too far away.

‘Bob?’ She couldn’t find a pulse. No heartbeat. Nothing. ‘No-no-no-no.’ She desperately pushed down on his chest, trying to get his heart to work. Pinching his nose, she forced the air back into his lungs. ‘Don’t you leave me.’

A sweep of car lights blinded her as a deafening wail of sirens filled the area. The emergency vehicle’s red and blue flickering lights gave Bob’s car a ghostlike psychedelic glow as they pulled up where Bob lay by the open passenger door.

Maddison continued with her compressions as tears streamed down her face, until the police officers pulled her off and the paramedics exposed Bob’s chest.

‘He’s been shot in the heart,’ said the paramedic to his offside and shook his head.

Maddison hiccupped between tears, staring at Bob. The guy was harmless, he didn’t deserve to die like that. Why would anyone want to kill Bob?

Three

With her hands hidden deep in her coat pockets, Maddison's shoulders sagged as she slowly strolled back from the funeral parlour.

Besides the priest keeping Maddison company at the crematorium today, no one else showed up for Bob Farley. It was as if the man had never existed.

But Uncle Bob had left a gaping hole in Maddison's world.

She kept expecting to find Bob on her couch, snoring like an out-of-tune cello. Or to see him stroll into the bar, tucking in his shirt, as he attempted to straighten the wrinkles on his suit. He'd never knock on her apartment door again, carrying beer and pizza with a story to share from his day out at the races.

He was gone.

And she was all alone, with no family left.

Uncle Bob's murder remained unsolved. Mick and Paul from the bar, worked for the Armed Crime Squad, and were the detectives investigating Uncle Bob's murder. No clues had been found as to why Bob had been murdered. But there were lots of rumours claiming it was a payback for Bob's gambling debt of thirty thousand dollars.

Who'd lend that much to Bob to drink and gamble away?

Was a life worth only thirty thousand dollars?

Rubbing the heel of her palm against her achy cold chest, her pain for missing Bob was only magnified by the crisp breeze nipping at her cheeks. In a daze, Maddison walked up the front steps of her apartment building and reached for the main glass door as her elderly neighbour pushed on it.

'Hello, Mrs Jenkins.' Maddison held the door open.

'Oh, hello, Maddison. You look nice, dear. I'm so used to seeing

you in jeans and T-shirts.'

Maddison glanced down at her black woollen dress coat and black shoes. She'd aimed for vintage elegance. It was freaking sad.

'Are you just getting in, dear?'

Maddison's voice croaked as if she'd swallowed a handful of gravel. 'I've been at my uncle's funeral today.'

'Oh no! I'm sorry for your loss, dear.' Mrs Jenkins patted Maddison's hand, wearing sympathy in her eyes. 'But I thought you were home rearranging your furniture. I must be hearing things. Oh, this special delivery came for you too.' She passed an envelope to Maddison. 'Well, I must head to my bingo game. Wouldn't want to be late. You must come down for a cup of tea and a chat, soon.'

'Thanks, Mrs Jenkins.' Maddison stared at the envelope. It looked official, but with no return address, nothing. If it was from the lawyers, she wasn't in the mood to deal with that right now. She didn't want to think.

Shoving it into the inner breast pocket of her tailored coat, she trudged up to the first floor with a sudden craving for scotch. As Bob's favourite spirit it was perfect for drowning her sorrows.

She unlocked the door of her apartment. Its small balcony overlooked the neighbouring park's trees, giving her a grand country view in the city. Sadly, some days it was too cold to sit outside and enjoy it, but today it would be the perfect place to start her drinking party for one.

'Oh. My. God.' Maddison froze just inside her open doorway as broken glass crunched beneath her heels. Her eyes widened. Clutching her stomach, she found it hard to breathe.

Her furniture was tipped over with the stuffing slashed out of the couch. Curtains were stripped off the windows and strewn across the floor. Pictures that once hung on the walls were broken and ripped free from their frames. Dresser drawers lay on their sides and the cupboard shelves were barren, with her book covers torn and their pages flung everywhere.

The kitchen drawers were emptied. Her fridge and pantry doors were wide open, and torn food bags spilled nuts and assorted grains across the benches and all over the floor. Everything. Destroyed.

When her phone rang, she jumped, as she fumbled to tap the screen. 'H-h-hello?' Her tension-filled voice was unrecognisable.

'Hey, its Laurie. I thought I'd see how you're doing?'

'Laurie?' Her bottom lip quivered as she stared at a dishevelled

war zone. 'I've been broken into. They've destroyed everything.' A loud smash of breaking glass carried down the hallway, she jumped, with a squeal escaping from the back of her throat.

'What was that?' Laurie asked.

'No idea? It came from my bedroom.' Her legs trembled and her hands were icy cold.

'Have you checked you're home alone?'

'I've just walked in.'

'Get out of there, *now*. Meet me on the street, you hear me.'

The loud toot of a car horn made Maddison scream.

'Move, young lady. *Now*.'

She slammed the door and ran down the stairs aiming for the light at the end of the hallway.

Too scared to look behind her, too scared to see if someone was chasing her, she didn't stop running.

She forced her way through the front doorway and out onto the street, to flinch at the deafening burst of traffic noise. She winced at the bright afternoon sunlight, as pedestrians brushed against her on the sidewalk. Taking in desperate, deep breaths, with the acidic taste of fear at the back of her throat, only then did Maddison turn to the building's front door and come face to face with her terrified wild-eyed reflection.

Four

Time stretched into aeons for Maddison, staring at the finite cracks and crevices that made up the steps to her apartment building's front landing, where she sat hugging her knees.

A sedan pulled up to the curb, with Laurie exiting from the rear seat. 'Maddy, are you okay?'

She barely nodded, sighing with relief to see her grumpy boss.

'How come Mick and Paul are here?' She pointed to the two detectives getting out of the car.

'They were at the bar when I called you, and they are the investigating officers into your uncle's murder.'

'Are you saying this is connected?' The fear she'd been trying to keep to a simmer jolted inside her chest.

'We're here to make sure you're okay,' said the senior detective, Mick Hetter, patting her upper arm. 'Take a deep breath, Maddy. Nothing will happen while we're here.'

She exhaled, pasting on a brave face.

'So, which is your place?'

'First floor.' She led the way.

'This is a swanky building,' said Paul, bringing up the rear as their footsteps echoed up the grand staircase. 'Can you afford to rent here on your barmaid's wage?'

'I can.' Maddison stabbed her door key at the lock, but her hands wouldn't stop shaking.

'Here, let me.' Taking the keys, Paul gave her hands a gentle squeeze.

His hands were so warm, and she was so cold, she had to bite down to stop her teeth from chattering. She hated being cold.

'Stand behind me, Maddy,' said Laurie. 'We'll stay outside while the boys check out the place.'

As Paul unlocked the front door, the detectives removed their handguns from under their jackets and headed inside.

Laurie listened from the corridor, poised and ready for attack, while Maddison was ready to run for the stairs.

‘All clear,’ called out Paul from inside.

‘What the ... They’ve ransacked the place.’ Laurie squinted his eyes at the chaos.

It looked like a tornado had let loose in her apartment, tossing everything around. It broke her heart.

‘Can you tell us what happened?’ Mick asked, sliding his pistol back into its holster, while his partner poked around the tipped over furniture.

‘I left to go to the funeral and came back to this.’ Maddison shook her head at the mess. ‘Why? Who?’

‘Did anyone see you? Or go with you?’

‘No one went with me.’ Which dropped another smothering blanket of loneliness over her. ‘This morning, when I left, I spoke to Mr Williams when he was collecting his mail. When I returned, I spoke with Mrs Jenkins.’ She frowned at the spilled rice mixed with broken glass spread across her floor tiles. ‘Mrs Jenkins said she’d heard noises while I was out. She thought I was home moving furniture around.’

‘Do you see anything missing? Stolen?’

‘It looks like all of your electrical equipment is still here.’ Paul pointed to the wide-screen TV on the floor. ‘You’ve got all the top brands for gear here. How can you afford this stuff on a barmaid’s salary?’

‘Um?’ She glanced at Laurie beside her.

‘You can tell them, it’s routine questioning.’

‘I have a trust ...’ She shoved her hands deep into her pockets, toeing at a broken coffee cup. ‘From my mother—it’s an inheritance thing.’

‘Are you rich or something?’ Paul asked, with Mick arching an eyebrow at her.

‘It depends on what you’d call rich.’

‘Do you own this apartment?’ Mick tossed his thumb back at the room.

‘I own the building. Well, the trust does.’ Maddison gave a meek shrug. She hated anyone knowing about her financial affairs; people treated her differently when they knew.

'How come you work as a barmaid?' Paul asked.

She repeated what she'd told many others. 'I like it. It's easy work and I get to hang out with some wonderful people.' She wasn't a part of the false world her mother belonged to. She'd escaped all that, hoping to reinvent her introverted self and find her spine when it came to speaking to people.

'Well,' said Laurie, scratching at his salt-n-pepper crew cut, 'they were searching for something. Do you have any idea what?'

'I don't know, not with this mess. Have you found Bob's murderer?' Maddison asked Mick.

Mick, in a suit that had seen better days, tugged at his loose tie. 'We haven't found anything new in our investigation. And the word on the street is Bob's death was a message from his bookie for others to pay their debts.'

'But Uncle Bob said it wasn't them. He said you can't get money out of a dead man.'

'Bob knew you had money, didn't he?'

Duh! The guy crashed on her couch because she didn't have a spare room.

'Did you ever pay his gambling debts?'

'Bob refused to take anything from me. I even offered him an apartment here in the building, rent free, but he refused. He was happy to just crash on my couch.' That now had its innards shredded across the floor. Pity, it was a good couch.

'I'll ask again,' said Mick, 'did Bob tell you what story he was working on?'

'No. Nothing.' Again, fear crawled over her chest like spiders, sending a rush of tingles to the top of her scalp.

'So where did your uncle keep his notes? Bob was a journalist; he must have written things down? What about a laptop?'

'I gave Bob a laptop for Christmas, but he hocked it for a bet on one of his sure things at the racetrack.' Maddison blinked hard at the floor, suddenly remembering Bob's words—*the track!*

She glanced at the detectives stepping over the wreckage. Her mouth opened just as the memory of Bob's words came to mind—*trust no one.*

She bit down on her tongue to stop the urge to spill all, and suddenly remembered the unopened envelope inside her coat. In her lower pockets, she squeezed her hands into fists trying to get the circulation back. She needed to focus. Time had slipped away from

her, stumbling through the days ever since her uncle's death. She needed to wake up. And now.

'So, what happens now?' She asked the detectives picking over her place like it was a lawn sale.

'Do you have any insurance?' Paul asked.

Maddison nodded.

'We'll get the forensic boys to do a sweep on the place for prints,' Mick said to Paul who grabbed his mobile to carry out his instructions. 'Let's hope they can make a match with our database. There's no signs of forced entry, but I think they came in through your front door.'

'Who else has a key to your apartment?' Laurie asked, his shoes crunching on broken plates and cereal as he inspected her door's lock.

'Only Uncle Bob. Did you ever find his car keys?'

'No,' replied Mick, scrutinising the windows. 'I'd get a locksmith in if I were you.'

'I know one.' Laurie dragged out his phone and started scrolling. 'We'll beef up the security in here, Maddy, don't you worry none.'

'Why? Are they going to come back?' Maddison again swallowed that horrid acidic taste of fear. It was fast becoming a familiar friend you'd never forget. But she wanted to.

'I don't think so,' interjected Paul.

'How can you be so sure?'

'Calm down, Maddy, it's only a precautionary measure,' said Laurie. 'I'll make sure you're all nice and safe in here. Otherwise, you won't be able to sleep at night and you'll be no good for work. Have you still got that pepper spray I gave you?'

She nodded.

The buzzer for downstairs rang.

'Sounds like the forensic team's here.' Paul approached the panel by the front door, pressed the intercom button and spoke through the microphone, 'Hello?'

'Forensics,' replied the male voice over the speaker.

'Come on up. First level. Apartment four.' Paul then pressed the button to unlock the door to the main foyer entrance.

'Hey, how did you know which button to push for the intercom and the door?' It had taken her ages to work it out.

'Oh, that 6... my mum has the same type in her apartment.' Paul

headed into the hallway.

‘Well, Maddy, we can’t do much more in here except let the forensic team do their job.’ Mick jumped over her shattered coffee table and torn magazines. ‘Listen, if you think of anything, and I mean anything, about your uncle or his notes, please call me or Paul, anytime. Trust me, every little bit helps us to catch these guys. Okay?’

She nodded, even though she was on the verge of spilling all. But she didn’t know if Bob had been rambling. She needed to think, but she couldn’t, not while the detective was watching her—the detective Bob had never liked.

do not copy

Five

Stiff as a surfboard, Maddison lay in bed gripping the borrowed Taser to her chest. Under the low glow of the bathroom light, her wide eyes darted to the shadowy corners at every little sound.

She'd tried to find comfort in Laurie's words that she was safe. She had new locks and new security screens that ran like prison bars along her windows. They'd even installed cameras in the hallway outside her door. But Maddison still didn't feel safe.

'Why?' Maddison stewed over the same question she'd been asking since her uncle's murder.

Giving up on sleep, she turned on her bedside lamp, which only depressed her when she saw the dishevelled mess. She'd spent ages trying to restore some sort of order out of the chaos but hadn't even made a dent.

Tiptoeing into her walk-in closet, she slid on some socks and a baggy jumper like a security blanket.

At least she'd put her wardrobe back together, with her clothes hanging on the racks and her shoes back in pairs. Her mother's couture outfits, even her mother's authentic jewels, were all left behind.

Could they still be called thieves if they'd stolen nothing?

In the mirror's reflection, her long coat hung on the rack. She retrieved the envelope from the inner breast pocket. She'd forgotten all about it, too busy cleaning while getting lessons on personal security.

Inside the envelope was a first-class plane ticket and a small white card that read:

*My darling Sweet Cheeks,
I have only just heard about your uncle. I am so sorry.
Call me because I've lost your numbers, again!
Then use the ticket to come stay with me.
From the wickedest of godmothers,
Nancy McCann.
Remember me—how dare you forget!*

Maddison gave a weak smile, clutching the card to her chest.

The wicked godmother strikes again.

Maddison searched the time on her phone, who knows where her clock was? Was it too late or too early? Did she dare?

'To hell with it.' Putting it straight on speaker, she waited to leave a message.

'This had better be bloody good and by invitation only that someone should dare to wake *moi*,' grumbled the gravelly female voice of a heavy smoker.

'Nancy, it's me, Maddison.'

'Sweet Cheeks, is that you?'

Maddison rolled her eyes at the nickname. 'I'm sorry to call so late.'

'Darling, you've never needed an invitation to call me.'

Maddison heard the distinctive flick and hiss of a lighter, followed by a deep exhale as if smoking a cigarette. Sounds that were so familiar to Maddison.

'I could do with a midnight drinking session. You?'

'Um ...' From her bedroom's doorway, Maddison faced a war zone.

'Darling, find something wet and alcoholic now. We'll call it a nightcap as we watch the sunrise together. Do it!'

'I'm doing it.' Well, she had been trying to have that drink all day.

She slipped into her hiking boots, then tiptoed through the torn furniture. On the kitchen bench, she left the phone on speaker and stared at her empty liquor cupboard.

Laurie had made her toss out any open bottles, while telling her scary stories about what thieves did with people's

toothbrushes and toilets. It had made Maddison invest in a stash of thick gloves, garbage bags, and industrial-strength bleach as her weapons for a cleaning frenzy that began in her bedroom.

The rest would take a week to clean.

It might be easier to toss it all out the window and into a dump truck.

'Are we there yet?' Nancy cried out, as the distinct pop of a cork escaping from a champagne bottle carried over the phone. *'I'm pouring my coffee now.'*

Champagne to Nancy was her water, coffee, and go-go super juice. It was always paired with a cigarette.

'Almost ...' Maddison opened her freezer, which held only her favourite vodka bottle. Did Laurie, the bar manager, sneak this in? Did she dare hope?

It was like drawing Excalibur from the bed of stone, pulling the bottle free as her eyes widened as if it was gold. And cold. She searched for the seal around the lid ... It was unbroken. *Yes!*

She scrounged around for an unbroken coffee mug off the floor and washed it twice. Cracked the bottle's seal, poured, and sipped. *'That tastes so good.'*

'So, darling, I was starting to think my assistant, Farkwit, stuffed up that card I'd sent you with the air ticket.' Nancy spoke between sips of champagne and exhales of her cigarette.

'It arrived earlier,' replied Maddison, searching for a place to sit.

The stuffing from her favourite reading chair spilled from wounds like it had been slashed at with a sword. Five out of six dining room chairs had no legs. Only one survived, barely.

She flipped it over, then dragged it behind her as she cleared a path to her oak table, now bearing deep scratches. She positioned herself in the corner with her back to the wall, facing the door.

With vodka bottle, phone, coffee cup and Taser on the table in front of her, she tucked the pepper spray into her pocket. *'Okay, I'm ready.'*

'Well, darling, you'd better have a bloody good excuse

as to why you're only ringing me now?

'I buried Uncle Bob today.'

'Oh. Did many go?'

'Nope. Just the priest and me.' Maddison emptied her coffee mug and let the vodka burn inside her chest. She reached for the bottle, flicked off the lid, which disappeared into the crap crowding the floor. 'I wanted to have a drink for Bob, and so here it is ... To Uncle Bob. May he rest in peace.' She raised her coffee mug to the room of rubbish.

'Oh my darling, drink up.' Nancy swallowed hard, again and again, no doubt emptying an entire champagne glass. Then came the glug-glug-glug of more being poured. 'I'd only just found out about Bob's death. Was he really murdered?'

'Yes, but no one knows why.' It sucked not having the answers. It was worse than being left with a cliff-hanging end to a TV series and having to wait to find out what happened in the next season, only for the studio to go broke.

'So, tell me everything and let's see if we can solve the problems of our world.'

'Most people say they solve the problems of *the* world,' corrected Maddison, feeling better from the icy vodka defrosting her limbs.

'Oh, my darling Sweet Cheeks,' crooned Nancy, 'there are only four things that matter to me in my world: me, myself and *moi*, and you. Not even my toy boys get that sort of attention. Now, tell your wicked godmother everything, it's been far too long between drinks.'

'Well, um, last week ...' Maddison explained all, wiping at the tears, with her feet resting on the table beside the lidless bottle of vodka and bottles of water. 'And today, my place got broken into. They trashed it.'

'Was anything taken?' Nancy asked.

'Not that I can see. Laurie, my boss, said they were searching for something because the stuff that thieves normally take is still here, broken.'

'Is it something to do with Bob's murder?'

'I think so,' Maddison confessed in a whisper.

Dropping her feet to the floor, she faced the kitchen. Did she have any coffee in her cupboards because she needed to

wake up.

'What does breaking into your apartment have to do with Bob's murder?' Nancy asked loud and clear over the phone's speaker.

'Bob was working on a story. He never told me what it was about, only making me swear to finish it.' But how?

'Oh come on, darling, Bob was always working on a big story.'

'I know,' said Maddison, skipping over the couch stuffing as she headed for the kitchen. 'But this time it was different because Bob didn't drink. He was busy on my laptop while he stayed here.'

'What was Bob researching?'

Yes! Another win. She'd found an unopened box of coffee bags she'd bought for Bob, who hated wrestling with the coffemaker. But she couldn't see the kettle. Her microwave was smashed, so she dug around for a saucepan off the floor.

Again, as was her new routine, she washed it twice before filling up the dented pot, while hoping her stovetop worked. 'I have no idea what he was researching, and I can't check the history because my laptop got destroyed.' Like everything else in this place.

But the stove worked, so she could boil water. It was another small win.

'By whom? The criminals?' Nancy asked.

'No. Bob spilled his drink on it.'

'Scotch, no doubt?'

'No, it was coffee.' Bob's coffee bags were now her most treasured possession.

'I don't believe it. Darling, are we talking a straight coffee? Without the scotch?'

'Straight. Black. Coffee.' Just like the one she was looking forward to, since they'd spilled her sugar all over the floor.

Seriously, did some goons hire a bunch of kids armed with baseball bats and steel-cap boots for a trash party? The more she looked at the mess the more it hurt her eyes.

'Where is the laptop now?'

'The guys at the IT store said it was beyond repair. Bob said he needed to do more research, and that was the last time I saw Bob alive...' Her shoulders sagged as she leaned

her back against the kitchen counter to watch the pot of water on the stove.

'Does Bob back up his notes?'

'Yes, he does.' Maddison stood taller.

'Do you know where Bob kept them?'

'I think so.'

'Well?'

Maddison braced herself for it ... 'Bob told me to tell no one and to trust no one. He made me promise.' Those words of a promise whispered in her ear, curling around inside her as if committing it to her soul. 'I've made plenty of promises that didn't matter in the past, but this one,' she said, patting her hand over heart as if swearing an oath, 'this promise I have to keep.'

'FINE! Don't bloody tell me then. Just who the hell do you think I am? *Don't trust me.* Trust nooooo one!'

'I trust you, but it was Bob's last dying request. I didn't even tell the detectives.' Had she done the wrong thing by not confiding in those trying to catch Bob's killer?

'Fine, you can't break a promise made to Bob on his deathbed.'

'He died on the asphalt floor of a train station car park.'

'Oh, sorry, excuse the poor choice of words.' Nancy poured more champagne and lit another cigarette.

'What would you do if you were in my position?'

'Me? Drink.' Nancy's tone then softened as she said, 'But I know what your mother would do.'

Maddison frowned. 'What?'

'Janice would keep her promise and she'd start by finding those answers herself, like she always did. Just like you. You both were so—'

'Different.'

'My darling Sweet Cheeks, you have the same qualities as your mother. Even though you've run away to find yourself this past year, we both know you are your mother's daughter. And my darling Sweet Cheeks?' Nancy paused in her monologue for dramatic impact, as always.

'Yes?' Maddison poured the boiling water into her coffee cup.

'You come from a line of strong women. Your mother

was a queen who fought for everything she had, clearing the path for all those who followed, which was you and *moi*.'

No wonder Maddison struggled to get out from under Janice Farley's shadow.

'What I'm trying to say, my darling Sweet Cheeks ...'

'Okay ...' Maddison leaned away from the phone as Nancy wound herself up for a lecture.

'Don't you dare let your standards drop and forget who you are and where you come from. You never give up.'

'Uh huh.' Maddison sipped her coffee. It was black, bitter, and hot. *Best coffee ever*.

Inhaling the rich dark roast, while Nancy ranted over the phone, Maddison admired the sunrise creeping over the small park's treetops. The teeny tiny country view she used to adore was now ruined by thick ugly black bars.

'My darling, you've never been a girl who gave up and let others fix things for you. It's a quality you and your mother shared that I've always admired. You both have that inner strength to achieve anything you wanted.'

'Uh huh.' Maddison now pictured Nancy raising her champagne glass like a sword in the air and her cigarette like a microphone, talking to a crowd of ... one.

It was a passionate speech.

'And darling, I truly believe with the utmost of confidence, that you'll run at full steam ahead like the day you worked out how to stand. So, what are you going to do? Hmm?'

'Well, I can't sleep here,' blurted out Maddison, surprised by her own words.

'Oh, I remember when my dingy flat got broken into; that's why I married my first husband. But darling, I do believe there's more to your home invasion, don't you agree? Hmm?'

'Yeah.'

'Good. So, how are you planning to fix it?'

'Um ...' Maddison hesitated, staring at the aftermath of a bomb blast.

'HELLOOO! Have I got you so drunk you can't think?'

Maddison laughed, cradling her hot coffee cup. 'No. I'm stone-cold sober.' For the first time in a week, she was

awake.

'Wonderful. Now, I gave you a first-class plane ticket, use it. Your room is always here and waiting for you, darling. Besides, it wouldn't hurt to come home and be pampered while you look at this situation from another angle.'

'You do have a point.' A pampering, even better.

'Of course, I'll take you shopping, and we'll go to all of my favourite restaurants. Oh, it'll be like a holiday for the both of us. So when can I expect you? Hmm?'

And just like that, Nancy had backed her into another corner.

Although, Maddison had no other offers, and she didn't want to be alone. 'Hopefully, today? But there's something I need to do first.'

'Well, don't bother touching that place, darling. I'll get my assistant, Farkwit, to send someone in to do the cleaning.'

'Yes, please.'

'So only pack a few things, it'll give us an excuse to go shopping,' said Nancy, all excited. 'Christ, who put the sun out?'

Maddison faced her window on a fresh new day with the sunlight creeping between the tall buildings. 'Sunrise is a daily miracle, you know.'

'Well then, my darling Sweet Cheeks, I'll see you before the sun sets?'

'Um?' Maddison needed to make a stop first and had no idea how long that would take.

'I'll book us a table for dinner.'

'I may have to call—'

'I'll get the stylist to deliver a new outfit for you, so don't bother packing much.'

'—if there's a change of plans.'

'I must tell Theresa to stock up on your vodka.'

'Is Theresa still there?'

'Oh my darling, as if Theresa would ever bloody leave. That old battle-axe will be so excited to have you home again. Well, until sunset, Sweet Cheeks?' Nancy said as if raising her glass in a toast.

'Until sunset,' replied Maddison, raising her coffee cup

for another sip.

'Be safe, my darling,' Nancy whispered as if in prayer.

'I will.' Maddison ended the call, smiling to herself while ignoring her chaotic surroundings. She knew exactly what she was going to do.

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