

NOVEL EXCERPT

Helen's mind was pre-occupied as she drove into work that morning, justifiable given that she had less than four hours sleep the night before. It had been six years to the day and she wasn't feeling any more comfortable about what had happened. For every anniversary, she dreaded the unlikelihood that someone would upset the apple cart. She knew the probability of such an occurrence was doubtful but a niggling feeling within her constantly remained. There were for too many malicious individuals on the outset to be too insouciant. Unfortunately, as the old saying went, everything that could happen would and today was one of these days.

As she turned the corner into the police car park, her communicator bleated for attention. Almost instinctively, she parked her car, flipped open the casing and answered it.

'Mitchell,' she greeted in her usual authoritative flare.

There was a short pause for a moment before a heavily modified voice replied on the other end.

'I know your secret,' it claimed though Helen couldn't be sure if it was a male or female.

Helen froze in mid-thought. The situation wasn't assisted by her current musings which were a direct reflection of the call's objective. The fact that someone other than herself had knowledge of her shameful past skyrocketed her anxiety, causing her defensive barriers to shoot up instantly.

'Who is this?' she demanded.

She was answered with what she thought was a menacing chuckle. It sent a small shiver up her spine but she was determined not to be outdone. Fed up with childish pranks, she was about to hang up when the voice spoke again.

'Oh, come on, Helen. Did you really think that no one would find out?' it asked. 'I can still keep it secret if you want but I'll need a small favour in return.'

'I have no idea what you're talking about,' Helen insisted defensively.

She knew exactly what the person on the other end of the line was referring to but refused to let them gain the upper hand. She was more

than a little irate when the same chuckle travelled down the line once more. This continued for some time before it eventually died down.

‘Surely you haven’t forgotten the jailing of a certain someone over the murder of your ex-boss,’ the voice spoke knowingly. ‘I thought you’d be the last person to forget.’

Helen was fuming. Of course, she hadn’t forgotten. She couldn’t forget it if she tried. The voice didn’t wait for her response however.

‘You know what they say - the higher up the ladder you are, the harder you fall,’ it continued calmly. ‘You wouldn’t want that now, would you?’

‘Are you trying to blackmail me?’ she growled. ‘Cos if you are, I’ll-’

‘You’ll what?’ the voice interrupted tauntingly. ‘You’ll arrest me? Do you have a death wish, Inspector? You don’t really want me to tell everyone, do you?’

Helen knew she was fighting a losing battle. No, she couldn’t afford for anyone to find out the truth. Admittedly, the truth the person claimed to have knowledge of was something of a fragmented version of what truly happened. Nevertheless, the facts, if challenged, would leave her no better off than her current predicament. In fact, it could very possibly make things much worse. No, she couldn’t risk it. Not if she wanted to keep her reputation - and career - in tact.

‘What do you want from me?’ she asked, trying to maintain some form of composure.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ the voice dwindled. ‘I do need someone to deliver a package for me.’

‘Forget it,’ Helen responded automatically.

She could just imagine what the package would contain. No doubt it would contain something highly illegal. Inwardly, however, she knew that she didn’t really have much choice.

‘Alternatively, I do have the number of a local journalist,’ the voice replied, thoughtfully. ‘I’m sure he’ll be very interested in the story.’

Helen took a deep breath and tried to calm down. Screaming and threatening the other person wasn’t going to keep the secret quiet. She had to play along or she could lose the lot.

It had been a truly gruesome murder. Helen had remembered looking down at the corpse of her boss, Superintendent Alex Lynch of the New

South Wales Police Service in shock. While she had no recollection of the night before, her colleague and fellow detective, Michael Templar, had told her in confidence that she had blurted out Lynch's demise at the local pub. She recollected being tempted to admit her intoxication but was strongly advised against doing so by Templar who suggested she check her bank account for missing money. As feared, Helen discovered that nearly fifty thousand dollars had been transferred from her account to Templar's, effectively ending her plans to admit to her naivety.

As the investigation progressed, it became more and more evident that her daughter, Fiona, was being set up to take the blame. Unfortunately, the electronic transactions of her bank account made it impossible to defend her own daughter without the killing being exposed as one of a professional nature under her name. In the end, Fiona had been convicted of first degree murder and jailed for six years.

It had taken her at least three months before she had enough courage to pack her bags and move to Adelaide permanently. It had been her reasoning at the time that no one would find out about her past in such a small city. Unfortunately, she didn't bargain on her past ever coming back to haunt her.

'What sort of package are we talking about?' she asked, truly hating herself for getting herself in this precarious position in the first place.

'Now, now. Beggars can't be choosers, can they, Helen?' the voice returned. 'I'll contact you with further details. It's been nice doing business with you, Detective Inspector Mitchell.'

With that, the person hung up. Helen stared at the communicator for a minute then did the only thing she could think of doing at the time - she swore.