

**ECHOES
AMONG
WATTLE
PINES**

AMRA PAJALIĆ



MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA

<https://www.pishukinpress.com/>

Copyright © 2026 by Amra Pajalić

First Published 2026

Pishukin Press, PO Box 1081, St Albans Vic 3021, Australia

All rights reserved. This book is copyright. Apart from fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the copyright act, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission from author.

Cover design: Created using Canva elements, cover image attribution Photo 16350541 by WDBGPhoto via Depositphotos

For content and trigger warnings please go to www.amrapajalic.com/themes

Quality control: We care about producing error-free books. If you discover a typo or formatting issue, please contact admin@pishukinpress.com

Paperback Edition: 9781922871688

Content Warnings



OR GO TO

[www.amrapajalic.com/
themes.html](http://www.amrapajalic.com/themes.html)

1-Bang



2000

I lifted my eyes from the glow of my screen and pressed my forehead against the cool glass of our high-rise newsroom. Below me, Melbourne unfurled in every direction like a perfect postcard. It still felt surreal that a girl who'd fled war-torn Srebrenica was now typing stories for Australia's most prestigious paper, the Argus.

The room smelled of burnt coffee and yellowing newsprint—ink and dust mingled with the faint tang of sweat in recycled air. Phones yelped in erratic bursts. A printer rattled out pages, then jammed. Somewhere behind me someone swore and kicked an ancient filing cabinet that had survived three corporate shake-ups and two recessions. I closed my eyes and exhaled contentment.

I stood up, clutching my chipped mug, and made for the tiny kitchen. On my way, I passed Alyssa's desk: the chair still pushed back; a manila folder's corner creased under my restless fingers. Alyssa had been gone three weeks—somewhere overseas, Robert wouldn't say it out loud. War-correspondent territory, with satellite phones, patchy lines, and the

ever-looming fear of silence. I forced myself not to dwell on what “silence” might mean.

On her desk a pot plant drooped, and beside it a faded photo of Alyssa in flak gear, cigarette poised at her lips and eyes fierce. I’d stared at that picture more times than I’d admit—proof that I could build a future just like hers.

Robert clapped once. “Okay, everyone, what have we got?”

Reporters gathered around haphazardly—mugs in hand, notepads open. A chair scraped the floor. The city editor shook his head as if bracing for bad news.

“Another underworld body,” Mark from crime said. “Preston. Execution style. Same signatures, same rumours.”

My heart rate ticked up. Gangland killings had been bleeding into nightclubs, suburban car parks—places that were supposed to be safe. Melbourne pretended to be shocked. It wasn’t.

“And we’ve got an anonymous tip,” Mark continued. “One of their fronts is a hair salon. Cash only. No questions. Linked back to that same figure Alyssa was chasing before she got pulled away.”

Robert’s face went flat. He’d gone quiet whenever Alyssa’s name came up. “We can’t run with that without proof.”

“But we can’t ignore it,” Mark shot back. “They’re laundering serious money through small businesses. This is infrastructure, not just bodies.”

“Hair salon,” I murmured before I knew it, and the words rang in my head. I blurted, “I could go in.”

The room froze. Someone snorted, thinking I was joking. Robert looked at me, really looked. “Go in how?”

“Undercover,” I said, surprising even myself with how calm I sounded. “Back home, I cut hair for my family to get by. I know how to blend, how to listen. That’s exactly where people let their guard down—thinking the hairdresser won’t notice.”

A hush fell. Then Robert said carefully, “You’re not police.”

“No,” I said. “I’m just a reporter.”

“Which means no backup if it goes sideways.” He took off his glasses and wiped them, his tell that he was thinking it through.

“It’s a low-risk angle,” I pressed. “Front desk work—sweeping floors, shampooing. I watch and listen.”

A reluctant murmur went around the circle. Robert pinched the bridge of his nose. “You’ve been doing crime for what—twelve months?”

“Yes,” I replied. “I broke the Riverwood cold-case. My by-lines were picked up by the Sydney Morning Herald and The Age. I’ve knocked on doors at midnight, sat in courtrooms until my back ached, and polished paragraphs until 3 AM. This isn’t about playing hero—it’s about sitting quietly in a corner with scissors and shampoo, watching.”

Silence reigned. Then the newsroom’s background hum crept back: phones, keyboards, distant traffic on Flinders Street. It felt like the city itself was waiting.

Robert exhaled. “One visit. No heroics. If anything feels off, you walk.”

Relief flooded me. “Thank you,” I said, already reaching for my bag.

He paused. “And Seka—remember, you’re not Alyssa.”

“I know,” I whispered, though a part of me ached to fill her shoes.

As we broke up, Tom Nguyen—our sixteen-year-old work-experience kid—hovered by my desk. His blazer was neat over one arm, his haircut impossibly precise. “Seka?” he said.

I smiled. “Hey, how’s your first week in the madhouse?” Alyssa had sponsored him from her former high school, St Augustine’s.

He grinned, nervous. “It’s... loud.”

I laughed. “You get used to it. What’s on your mind?”

He glanced around. “There was something I wanted to ask you about—”

My phone buzzed: Mark texted, salon address coming through. Adrenaline shot straight to my brain. “I’m so sorry,” I said, already pivoting. “Can we talk later? I’ve got to prep.”

Tom’s face fell for a moment. “Yeah. Later.”

As I walked away, I made a promise to help him when I could. Then my mind leapt ahead to that salon: the smell of dye and acetone, the strip of mirrors, the private conversations of men who think no one’s listening. I was already crafting a new name, a new backstory.

This was it—the start of something that finally mattered.



I snipped with my scissors, settling into a rhythm as the tendrils drifted to the floor—lovely curls emerging from the tangle of overgrowth framing my customer’s face. I knelt,

checking each side carefully, brushing away the loose ends, and then held up the mirror behind her head.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

The woman’s eyes widened as she took in the transformation. “It’s beautiful. You were right—a feathered bob *was* the way to go.”

I walked her to the register and rang her up. She handed over cash, and when I passed back her change, she pushed the five-dollar note into my hand. “You keep it. You did such a good job.”

I smiled, dropped it into the communal tip jar, and returned to sweeping up the strands of hair now littering my station.

“Another happy customer,” Carla drawled from her perch at the front desk, twisting lazily in her chair as she watched me work.

I kept my tone light. “Just glad I can make a difference with my job,” I said.

Like clockwork, her boyfriend Tony Gallo entered the salon, his biceps bulged beneath his tight shirt as he hoisted heavy boxes into the storeroom with effortless strength. He owned a gym and considered his body his advertisement, or so he’d said the first time we met on Monday.

“Hey Penny,” he nodded at me, his gaze lingering a moment too long on the contour of my figure, accentuated by the snug black denim jeans and the form-hugging red top, chosen to blend with Carla’s uniform.

“Hey Tony.” I nodded at him, bending my head down as I swept the hair.

He peered in the mirror over my head. Took out his comb and combed down a flyaway.

“Come here, rooster.” Carla stretched like a cat and stood, smoothing down her dress as Tony sauntered toward her.

He pulled her into a hug, his hulking form making her seem even more delicate. The two of them smooched and then walked to the storeroom. Fifteen minutes later Carla exited, her hair mussed, while Tony followed a few seconds later.

“I’m going to be late tonight,” he told Carla at the front door. They smooched once more, and he left.

I breathed easier, finding his leering glances and heavy petting stomach-churning.

Carla strolled over to the till and began counting up the day’s take. She took the communal tip jar and counted it before calling me over and handing me the lot.

“Are you sure?” I asked.

Carla nodded. “You did well today. You deserve a little extra.”

“Wanna grab a drink?” I glanced at the clock. Ten minutes to closing.

“I’d love some girl time.” Carla playfully swayed her hips.

I returned to sweeping, trying to look casual as I watched her. This was my first week on the job, but I’d already clocked the routine. Every evening, Carla counted the register, disappeared into the storeroom, and came out a few minutes later carrying extra deposit bags.

She never said where the extra cash came from—and I never asked. I was undercover after all. I’d been reporting daily to Robert after I returned to a motel that was my place of residence, supposedly because of a recent breakup. Robert had left me undercover when he was satisfied that I wasn’t

in any danger and following his strict “observe and report” protocol.

Twenty minutes later, we stepped out of the salon. I held the bags while Carla locked up. As we walked down the street toward the bank, I glanced down and saw her scrawling \$5152 onto the deposit slip. I’d been keeping track. My notes said today’s real takings were closer to \$2152. Three grand, conjured out of thin air. I didn’t need to be a forensic accountant to know what that meant.

We turned the corner and walked into the pub. It smelled of stale beer and old smoke. Carla cut through the space as if she owned it. A few heads turned but quickly looked away.

She picked a booth in the back, and before we could flag down anyone, a waitress arrived with a tray of Cosmopolitans.

“We didn’t order—” I started.

“Thank you,” Carla interrupted smoothly, already sipping. “They know me here.”

I blinked, then picked up the other glass. “Right.” Seka didn’t drink. Penny loved going out and having a night on the town.

She pulled out a cigarette and offered me one. I took it, even though I hadn’t smoked in years. She lit both with a practiced flick, leaning in, her eyes scanning the room with a bored look.

“You come here often?” I asked, trying not to sound like a tourist in a war zone.

Carla smirked. “You could say that.”

The smoke curled between us. Around us, men hunched over pints, denim and leather stretched tight over bulky frames. One of them stared at me too long.

“Maybe we should go somewhere else,” I muttered, shrinking under the weight of his gaze. Seka would eye-fuck him back until he broke first. Penny was shy, in need of a champion.

Carla placed a firm hand on my arm. “You’re safe with me.”

She met his stare with such intensity that he blinked first and looked away.

“Wow. They really know you,” I said.

Carla’s smile curved slowly, feline and self-satisfied. “You’ve got no idea.”

I leaned in, playing the wide-eyed apprentice. “So... all this,” I gestured vaguely around us, “the extra cash, the salon, these guys—is it just good business?”

Carla’s eyes narrowed ever so slightly. “It’s a reliable business,” she said. “Cash flow, regulars, tips... It all adds up.”

I laughed lightly. “Must add up a lot if we made five grand today.”

She didn’t flinch. Just took another sip. “Some days are better than others.”

“You’ve got a good thing going,” I looked at her with admiration.

She looked at me over the rim of her glass. “We’ve got a good thing going... if you’re smart enough to keep your head down and your mouth shut.”

I smiled, held her gaze, and clinked my glass against hers. “Of course. I’m just here to cut hair.”

The second round came without us asking. Carla was loose-limbed now, laughter bubbling out of her in half-sentences. I’d been nursing my drinks, ensuring I remained clear-headed. Her eyeliner had smudged, and she didn’t care.

She leaned across the table, elbow deep in a story about some “absolute lunatic” who brought a ferret to the salon once.

“He had it on a leash, babe,” she said, wheezing. “Said it was his emotional support animal. I nearly pissed myself.”

I giggled on cue, my stomach warm from the booze and the tension. I swirled my Cosmo, keeping my voice breezy. “You ever deal with real lunatics? Like the dangerous kind?”

Carla gave me a long, loaded look. “You mean the ones who don’t look crazy until they pull a knife?”

“Something like that,” I said, tilting my head.

She leaned in, her breath a whisper of vodka and smoke. “There’s this guy... Theo. Greek bloke. Scar on his neck. Looks like someone tried to garrotte him but didn’t finish the job.”

“Theo?” I repeated, my pulse thudding. She was finally naming names.

Carla nodded. “He’s the one they send when things get messy. Money doesn’t come through. Someone talks too much. Theo handles it.”

“Sounds charming.”

She cackled. “He once shoved a hairdryer down a guy’s throat. Plugged in.”

I grimaced. “That’s... inventive.” We laughed, but mine was a second too slow.

I was about to push for more when a voice cut through the pub din. “*Seka?* Seka Torlak?”

I froze.

Carla’s head snapped toward the source. A middle-aged man stood by the bar, squinting at me. “Holy shit—it *is* you!

From Srebrenica, right? I knew I recognised that face. You were the one who wrote that article about the war criminal.”

Carla turned to me slowly. “I thought your name was Penny.”

My mouth opened and closed. My heartbeat slammed against my ribs like it wanted out. “It’s... it’s a nickname,” I said weakly.

Carla didn’t smile.

I stood, mumbling something about needing the bathroom. My legs felt boneless as I crossed the pub, stumbling through the crowd. I locked myself in the grimy toilet and braced my hands on the sink, staring at myself in the mirror. ‘*You blew it.*’

I turned to the window—a small, foggy pane above the toilet. I yanked it open. It screeched in protest, and my stomach flipped. My buzz was gone. I climbed up, shoving my bag through first, then hoisted myself out.

Cold air stung my face as I dropped into the alley behind the pub. My knees buckled, but I caught myself and bolted without looking back. I burst through the narrow passage onto the main road and came to a trembling halt, lungs burning with adrenaline. This was my last chance to find what I needed. I hailed a taxi and told the driver to head for the salon. Carla’s keys still hung heavy in my pocket—keys I’d never used because she always arrived before me.

I stepped out onto a deserted street. Every shop along the strip had shuttered for the night. I unlocked the salon door, slipped inside, and raced to the storeroom. I flipped off the lights and closed the door behind me. A few days ago, I’d spotted a hidden safe behind one shelf while Carla was at

lunch. And when I rifled through her purse earlier, I'd found the combination pencilled into her address book as Safina Fireproof—the manufacturer's name. My fingers trembled as I turned the dial. At the satisfying click, I swung the door open and withdrew a red ledger, its pages filled with neat columns of numbers.

A slip of paper fluttered to the floor. I picked it up; the St. Augustine letterhead leapt out at me. That was Alyssa's old high school—why an invoice? Before I could think further, screeching tires echoed outside. I peered through the frosted glass to see Tony's massive pickup roll to a stop. He and a hulking goon headed for the front door.

Panic surged. I darted into the restroom, vaulted through the window, and sprinted around the corner to my car. My hands shook so badly I fumbled the keys, but eventually I got the Mazda started and peeled away. In my rearview mirror, Tony's truck loomed, closing fast. I floored the pedal, weaving through quiet suburban streets, aiming for the nearest police station. I hoped flashing lights and uniforms would scare them off.

I hit the train crossing just as the lights flashed, and the barrier descended. I shot through, barely ahead of an oncoming freight train. The pickup swerved sharply behind me to avoid the tracks. Relief was fleeting. I sped up past cruisers doing the speed limit—then felt a massive jolt. Tony rammed me from behind, sending my car into a wild spin. Glass shattered; the world flipped upside down. My body slid across the pavement; blood trickled into my eyes.

Through the haze, I saw Tony step out of his truck in his leather cowboy boots. He crouched by my window, snatched

my handbag, and yanked out the red ledger. “Bitch,” he spat, pulling a gun from his jacket pocket and leveling it at me.

My heart froze. This was it—my end. I closed my eyes and whispered Ramo’s name on my lips. Sirens wailed in the distance. Tony hesitated. I dared to open one eye: he was running, fleeing as a police cruiser screeched to a halt. Relief washed over me—and then darkness claimed me.

I woke to fluorescent lights buzzing overhead, my left side ablaze with pain and the inside of my mouth thick with the taste of coins. It took me a moment to understand the words—the first question the ambulance officer asked was my name. “Seka Torlak,” I managed. The syllables felt strange on my tongue, as if I’d borrowed someone else’s identity and forgotten how to pronounce it.

They loaded me onto a gurney and slid me into the humming innards of the ambulance. Around me, night glared in fractured slices through the small rear windows. The paramedic’s gloved hands hovered patiently—checking, prodding, confirming that I was, for now, more alive than dead. He shone a penlight into my left pupil and said it again, less than a question and more as a confirmation: “Seka Torlak. Good. Stay with me, Seka.” I wanted to laugh at the melodrama. I wanted to tell him I’d survived Srebrenica—I could survive Tony Gallo and a Mazda crash—but even as I thought it, bile curled up into my mouth and I gagged.

At the hospital, I floated through a series of automated rituals: the scissoring of my jeans, the antiseptic swab of my forehead, the click and whoosh of imaging machines that revealed a mild concussion and bruised ribs. There was no one to call. I’d lied to everyone about where I was and what

I was doing. My only friend in town was the enemy, and my family thought that I was safe in a conference hotel, not sprawled on a gurney with glass in my scalp and blood matting my eyebrows.

A nurse handed me a phone, the cord kinked from years of being slammed onto its cradle. I dialled home. It rang once, twice, three times—then Mama’s voice, breathless, half-asleep, “Seka, kako si? How is the conference?”

My mouth was dry. “Mama,” I said, “there’s something I need to tell you.” Her silence was immediate and total, a vacuum that sucked the words from me. I confessed everything in one long, shuddering exhale—every lie, every risk, every desperate move that had landed me in a hospital. I told her there were men, dangerous men, and that she needed to pack up and leave our house for a little while. “Stay with Haseda,” I said, naming her oldest friend as if it were a guarantee of safety. “Don’t tell the neighbours.” I heard the phone clatter, then muffled sobs—the sound of my mother breaking.

The next voice was my brother’s. “Seka, are you in trouble?” He didn’t ask why. He just listened, and when I finished, he said, “We’ll leave tonight. You just keep your head down and do what you have to do.” There was a pause. “Promise me you won’t do anything stupid.”

That made me laugh, even as tears burned under my eyelids. “No promises,” I said, and hung up.

Now it was time to call Robert, editor-in-chief. The man told me, “Don’t fuck this up, Torlak.” He answered on the first ring. “You alive?”

“Barely,” I said, then gave him the short version: the blown cover, the red ledger, the hit man with the cowboy boots. “My name’s out there,” I finished, “and the ledger is gone.”

He didn’t curse me out. Instead, there was a heavy sigh and a sound like pages being flipped. “Can you write?” he asked. “Or should I get someone else to ghost it?”

“I’m fine,” I lied. “Just get me a computer and I’ll file.” He told me to keep my head down, that a lawyer was coming, that the police would want to talk, and to give them only what we agreed.

The hospital room was chilly. I asked a nurse for paper and a pen; I wrote through shooting pain and the dull narcotic haze, mapping out the story in careful lines of text. A headline first—something hot, but not too clever. “Blood Money: Underworld Tied to Hair Salon Money-Laundering Operation.” Carla’s laugh echoed in my mind—that calculated sound she’d perfected, the one that made even leather-clad bikers lower their guard. Tony’s face appeared next: those dead eyes that never flinched, not even at the height of rage, hovering above knuckles crosshatched with old fights. Between them floated that damning red ledger with its neat columns of dirty money, each figure a nail in someone’s coffin.

I outlined their system—how twenty-dollar bills became “tips,” how the hairdressers got their cut for keeping quiet, how each day’s take mysteriously exceeded the last. St. Augustine stayed off my list. Not because I was protecting them, but because I was saving them. Some cards you play immediately; others you hold close until the perfect moment. I’d learned which was which.

It was late when the police came. They looked like models for a cop show: square jaws, neat haircuts, uniforms so crisp you could taste the starch. The detective in charge was so polite it felt like a trick. He asked me to walk him through the events of the night, and I did, skipping only the parts I'd promised Robert I'd keep to myself.

"And this man, Tony Gallo, he chased you?" the detective asked.

"Rammed my car with his," I said. "Took my bag, took the ledger, then tried to shoot me. I think he ran because of the sirens."

He made notes, his pen scratching the air between us. He said, "You're lucky," as if luck were something that could be measured in units of trauma.

"Will you catch him?" I asked.

He smiled, but it was empty. "We'll try."

After they left, a uniformed officer stationed himself outside my door. Officially, it was for my protection, but I knew better: it was to make sure I didn't disappear or try to chase the story myself.

At 3 a.m., Robert arrived at the hospital. His suit smelled faintly of gin, and his tie was askew. He brought a laptop from the office. "You're a fucking disaster, you know that?" he said, but there was something like pride in his voice.

Robert took the pages from my trembling fingers. His pen slashed red through my sentences, leaving hieroglyphics in the margins. When he handed them back, I squinted through the haze of painkillers and transferred his edits to the screen, my ribs screaming with each keystroke. He hunched beside me, muttering about column inches and photo placement

while I typed. The final draft passed between us without ceremony—just the quiet click of the trackpad as I surrendered it. He scrolled through my words, face illuminated by the screen's blue glow, hospital monitors punctuating his silence with electronic heartbeats. "Six a.m. deadline," he finally said. "Your byline will be on everyone's breakfast table."

"Wonderful," I whispered, letting my eyelids fall. "Just what I always wanted."

Sleep was fitful, fevered. Mama's voice chased me through the corridors of my dreams, shouting caution, shame, then pride, then fear. I woke to sunlight striping the foot of my hospital bed and the day nurse clicking her tongue at my sleeping police guard. The paper was already out. Robert had left a copy on my tray table, close enough to reach but just out of arm's length, like a dare. The headline was even bolder in print:

"Blood Money: Underworld Tied to Hair Salon Money-Laundering Operation." Byline: Seka Torlak, investigative journalist.

I held the paper until my fingers went numb, tracing the letters of my name as if I'd never seen them before.

The salon would be open by now. I stared at the phone, counting heartbeats, then picked up the receiver and dialed. Two rings.

"Carla's Cuts," came the familiar voice.

"It's me," I said. "Penny."

A sharp inhale. "You've got some nerve. I saw your byline, Seka Torlak."

My name in her mouth sounded like an accusation. "Listen to me. Tony will see that article. He'll come looking for someone to blame."

The silence stretched between us, taut as a wire.

"Christ," she whispered finally. "He'll think I talked."

"Take whatever cash you have and get out. Now."

The scream hit my ear like a bullet. Something shattered in the background—mirror or window, I couldn't tell. Carla's voice rose to a pitch I'd never heard before: "Tony, please! I didn't—"

A sound like a melon hitting concrete.

"Carla!" The hospital room tilted around me. The officer at my door straightened, alert. "Someone's attacking her! 11 Rosewood—send someone now!"

He barked coordinates into his radio while I pressed the phone to my ear, hearing only shallow breathing.

"Seka," came the faintest whisper. "Help—"

The line clicked dead.

I turned to Robert, who stood frozen in the doorway. "Go. Please."

As he disappeared down the hall, I twisted the sheet between my fingers. Had I just listened to my friend die?

Robert returned, looking beaten. "She's gone," he said. "There are signs of a struggle. Blood all over the floor. No body. Her boyfriend, Tony Gallo, has a record—violent offences, drug distribution. The police think he might have killed her and taken the body."

I clutched my stomach as if someone had punched me. "No, no, no..."

I had done this. I had gotten too close and poked too hard. To her, I was a hairstylist barely getting by, not a reporter chasing a money-laundering operation that penetrated the city's underbelly. And now she was gone. I held the paper tight as the early morning wind tugged at the corners, my name sharp beneath the headline. It should've felt like a victory. But all I felt was guilt.

"You need to go into hiding," Robert said. "We can't keep you safe from the underworld."

Tears streamed down my face, but my voice hardened with resolve. "I need to go undercover at St. Augustine."

Robert's eyebrows shot up. "The private school? What does that have to do with—"

"Remember that invoice I mentioned? It's connected. There's something happening there that nobody's seeing." I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. "Call Alyssa. She has the connections to get me in."

He studied me for a moment, then gave a single, determined nod.

I dialed Haseda's number with shaking fingers. Mama answered on the third ring, her voice a balm I didn't deserve. "We saw the paper," Emir said when she passed him the phone. "Seka."

"I know, I know. But you're both safe?"

"For now. Until your gangster friends decide to pay us a visit."

The accusation stung because it was fair. "I need you to watch over her. I'm disappearing for a while."

"Disappearing?" His voice cracked. "What does that even mean?"

"It means I can't tell you where. Just... tell her I love her, okay?" I cut the connection before he could argue.

Robert steadied my elbow as I eased out of the hospital bed. "They deserve a proper goodbye."

I swallowed hard. "If I see her face, I'll never leave."

"The hotel's ready," he said. "A week there while Alyssa builds your cover story."

2-Spin Doctor



2000

My hand slid across the page jotting notes, avoiding my new colleagues around the table as their frustration bubbled in the air around me like a pot on simmer, as one voice dominated the meeting. The room was windowless, with beige walls and fluorescent lighting that cast a harsh glow over everyone's faces. The notepad in front of me was filled with neat, organised lines of writing as I jotted down each point being discussed.

I could still taste the coffee I had hastily gulped down before the meeting, the bitter flavour lingering on my tongue. It would be my job to produce this free flowing, passive aggressive posturing into minutes after the meeting. Not to mention it was my very first day on the job and I needed to impress with my communication skills, but not too much, after all I was supposed to be a uni graduate.

“That’s a great suggestion to add a new slide with instructions, Gemma,” Principal Karen Kunsley said, her smile stretched thin, the corners of her mouth not quite reaching her eyes.

I noted the frowns from Nathan Gallo, the head of the Maths department, and Maddie Chandra, head of the English department. Their frowns were like dark clouds hovering over the meeting, their eyes full of frustration and disappointment as they were constantly overshadowed by Gemma's ideas. It was a game of power and politics, and the principal's approval only seemed to fuel Gemma's dominance. Nathan and Maddie's voices were barely heard; their words met with a dismissive nod or shake, causing their spirits to sink deeper into defeat.

I could feel my brow forming a frown too as I speculated about the reason behind this. Finally, the meeting was over and everyone quickly pushed their chairs away from the table and stood. I did the same, but as I was at the bottom of the table, furthest from the door, I got the short straw and watched as everyone trotted out before me.

I had reached the door when Karen stood behind me. "Is there anything you need clarified before you type up the minutes?" she asked, her head tilted and her short, angled bob with layers in the back and a longer, asymmetrical front, chunky platinum highlights mingling with her darker blonde tresses.

"No," I forced a smile. "I think I got it," holding back my frustration. It was a communications meeting to review the schools profile, and even though as the Communications Officer my title was supposed to be about taking the lead, I had found out the hard way that at St Augustine, a prestigious private school, I was nothing more than a pawn to be moved around the chessboard by those who were higher in her hier-

archy than me. “I’ll get these to you by the end of the day.” I held up my notepad and left quickly.

“Cecilia, Cecilia,” someone called behind me.

I heard footsteps stomping behind me, and an arm on my shoulder stopped me in my tracks.

“Cecilia, didn’t you hear me calling you?” Gemma Illiev, Assistant Principal, demanded, her auburn bob swaying from running to catch up with me.

Shit, I reminded myself. I’m Cecilia.

“Sorry was caught up thinking through my to do list,” I bluffed. “How can I help you, Gemma?”

“Can you email me the minutes to proofread before they go out?” she demanded.

“Oh, I was going to send them to Karen?”

“No, I’ll proofread them first.” Gemma stared down at me, the way an alpha stares down an insubordinate to the pack. When I nodded, her lip quirked up into a little smile, and I could almost hear the endearment, good girl.

“Before lunch, thanks,” she said, and turned on her heel, sashaying away in her cream high-waisted, wide-leg trousers and black turtleneck that emphasised her ruthlessness.

I turned away and headed to my office, feeling like a ten-pin bowling pin that kept being knocked down. I closed the door and sat behind my desk, taking deep breaths to calm myself.

All I wanted to do was escape this elitist prep school with its fancy Latin motto plastered on every wall. *Veritas et Virtus*, Truth and Virtue. But I had no other option but to stay.

I was here as Cecilia Kunsley, Karen’s wayward niece who was benefiting from nepotism as she needed a rung on her CV after traveling through Europe for two years. A perk due to

Alyssa' connections as a former alumnus. Seka Torlak was in hiding after my last investigation into gangland murders that had left a target on my back.

It was day one, and I was already day-dreaming about breaking my undercover identity and going back to my life. The only thing stopping me was my real motivation for being at St Augustine.

There was a brief knock on my door and Laura Williams appeared, her long brown hair swinging as she burst in. "You want to go for a walk and debrief?" she asked, holding up a cigarette between her pink acrylic nails.

I nodded. Even though I wasn't a smoker, I'd become slightly addicted while undercover on my last assignment. I'd vowed to give up as soon as it finished, but now it was a necessary evil, allowing me to hang out with the smokers and get the school gossip.

I'd met Laura three hours earlier when she had inducted me into the organisation, dropping little tidbits of gossip along the way. She'd struck me as very bright, very competent, and very ambitious. I didn't think I'd get much out of her, but it was worth a try.

We walked out of the main office building, across the courtyard that led to the impressive library, which was constructed from stately limestone. Its façade featured intricate carvings and reliefs of literary figures and symbols, celebrating the pursuit of knowledge. Towering arched windows with leaded glass panes reflect the surrounding landscape, offering a glimpse of the warm, golden light spilling from within. Laura had given me a brief peek inside during our induction and I'd caught a quick glimpse of vaulted ceilings featur-

ing intricate mouldings and plush leather armchairs and velvet-tufted sofas arranged in cozy reading nooks, surrounded by floor-to-ceiling mahogany bookshelves.

Laura walked down the stairs built into the lawn and toward the copse of silver wattle trees near the lake where the students did rowing. The choice of smoking spot—hidden beneath the silvery-grey leaves, fragrant yellow flowers, and smooth grey-green bark—we were virtually invisible from sight impressed me.

I gratefully took the cigarette that Laura offered, feeling my muscles unclench for the first time since I'd officially started the job this morning.

"So, first communications meeting?" Laura asked as she handed me her lighter, her perfectly manicured dark eyebrow arched.

"Yeah," I said, inhaling deeply and returning the lighter back to her.

"I'd tell you it will get better," she lit her cigarette. "But I don't bullshit."

I looked at her curiously. She was wearing a baby-pink silk shirt that matched her nails, tucked into a fitted white skirt, her dark brown tresses spilling silkily halfway down her back. I'd pegged her as a corporate try-hard, eager to suck up, and someone to be wary of. But now I was seeing something more sparkling in her dark brown eyes, a curiosity as she weighed me up.

"I heard you're staying on the grounds, in one of the old teacher cottages?" She tapped the ash from her cigarette on the ground.

“Yeah, the benefits of nepotism,” I said, getting ahead of the elephant in the room. I’d noticed staff were wary of me once I’d been introduced as Karen’s niece.

When Alyssa had arranged for my undercover identity, Karen had offered one of the empty cottages for me to stay in. They’d originally been built when the school first began in 1851 as a small boys’ school serving the children of early settlers and the local gentry, allowing the teachers privacy from the dorms where students slept. The cottage was small, with a built-in bathroom and tiny kitchenette added on in the 20th century, making in the equivalent of a studio apartment. Thankfully, I was able to eat with the students in the school cafeteria and would get the benefit of fully cooked gourmet meals and had no need of a functional kitchen.

I heard a rhythmic splash of oars cutting through the water and peered down at the lake. The sound got louder and was accompanied by the faint creak of wood until two slender rowing shells came into view, slicing effortlessly through the glassy surface. The students wore short-sleeved polos in green with gold accents and the school crest, their backs arching and straightening in perfect unison, arm muscles taut.

My mouth went dry as I caught sight of the coxswain sitting in the boat’s stern, facing the rowers, his tight white singlet emphasising his large biceps, golden stubble on his square jaw. As if he felt me staring at him, he turned his head and I caught sight of his bright blue eyes, a spark of lust thrumming through me.

I automatically thrust my chest out and stood straighter, noticing how the blue floral dress’s fitted waist and square neckline emphasised my cleavage. I’d been nervous about

wearing it this morning because it had seemed just a tad too tight for office wear, but it was the closest thing I had that fit the brief. Now I was glad that I'd left my hair loose, so that the brown tendrils drifted around my shoulders and settled in a curl against my right breast.

The students kept rowing; the oars catching the water with precision, creating small whirlpools that trailed behind like a delicate wake, as they vanished from view.

"I see Mr Wilson has a new conquest lined up," Laura said dryly.

"What?" I shook myself, trying to cool down the flush that heated my burning cheeks. "I'm not— I don't want—" I stopped speaking as Laura laughed heartily, realising I was just drawing more attention to my leering ways. I hadn't been with anyone since I'd broken up with Ninu six months before, and thought that part of me was dormant, but I guess it was waiting for the right pheromones.

I quickly took another drag of my cigarette, reproaching my wayward hormones. This was not the time to be thinking with my lady parts. I needed to stay on guard, to maintain my cover as Cecilia, and more importantly, to make sure I achieved my secret mission.

"I thought you'd be staying with Karen," Laura said.

"Fuck no," I burst out instinctively, realising with horror that I'd broken cover as the loving niece, and clapped my hand over my unruly mouth. As I did so, the smoke went down the wrong way, and I bent over, coughing and spluttering.

Laura approached, patting my back as she quietly chuckled. I breathed in and out, calming myself until I could finally stand upright.

“You’re not a fan of Kaz the Cunt, then?” Laura asked gently. I glanced at her in shock and sputtered with laughter, bending over again. Laura joined me, the two of us laughing like loons as we fought to keep upright.

When we stopped laughing, I realised I might as well use this camaraderie to my advantage. “What the hell is going on with Gemma and Karen? Could Karen lick her buttohole any harder?”

Laura laughed. “Well, we have our theories.”

I glanced at Laura and waited.

“We think Gemma’s sleeping her way to the top.” She wagged her eyebrows.

I knitted my brow, thinking about the energy between them that hadn’t struck me as a lover’s vibe from the two of them. I made a mental note to look at them closer when they were interacting. Alyssa had mentioned Karen’s past girlfriend, so I knew Karen was a lesbian.

“You don’t agree?” Laura asked, glancing at me.

“Don’t know.” I butted out my cigarette. “But I’ll be looking more closely, that’s for sure.”

Laura took one more drag and dropped her cigarette too, carefully stepping on it. “You know, we have a regular get-together at my local pub every Friday night. Some of the office workers, and my mates. You should come with.”

“Sounds great,” I said. “Any of the teachers come?”

Laura wagged her eyebrows. “Mr Wilson has dropped in now and then. I’ll drop word to him.”

I sighed in exasperation, as that wasn’t what I was hinting at. “No, I was just wondering if other staff also show up,” I clarified.

“Oh, no, darling. They are a bit too posh to be mixing with the likes of us lowly support staff,” Laura said, in a high pitch, tilting her head the way Karen does when she speaks.

I chuckled again. “Then, count me in.”

Laura hooked her arm in mine. “You know, I have a feeling that the two of us are going to be good friends.”

I nodded, a slight feeling of discomfort settling in my stomach. It was hard to be friends with someone while undercover. I constantly had to watch what I said and how I behaved, and it was exhausting.

I returned to my office and typed up my minutes, sending them to Gemma, before turning to a media release about the new student art exhibition. Five minutes later, Gemma emailed me back with the document attached. I clicked on it and breathed in a frustrated hiss, seeing all the tracked changes she'd made. “Don't you have anything better to do,” I muttered as I read them, feeling a delighted glee when I saw her incorrect use of the possessive ‘its.’ “I guess someone should have paid more attention to their grammar,” I chuckled delightedly. A little devil prodded me, and I updated all the changes, and then added a comment about the incorrect grammar and sent it back. I included an open receipt nonfiction in my email. Twenty minutes later, I saw that she'd read my email. I waited with bated breath for a reply.

After fifteen minutes I realised there would not be one. I sent the draft media release to Karen and Gemma. I received another reply from Gemma with tracked changes. This time there were two typos. I went even pettier and replied to both her and Karen with a note clarifying the typos.

Karen replied before the end of the day. “Thank you, Cecilia. Trust your judgement for communications, so please take the lead in finalising all drafts.”

“Yes,” I did a fist pump, chuckling with glee. “Take that, Gemma!” I also realised that Gemma and Karen were definitely not lovers. Karen wouldn’t get any loving for a month of Sundays after taking my side against her lover.

I exited my office at 5 pm and headed out the back. Laura was packing up and waved as she hitched her handbag on her shoulder. Gemma exited her office, shooting me a murderous look as she passed. I smiled sweetly at her. I knew I’d suffer her wrath for my insubordination, but fuck it, I would never let a bully win.

I waved back and headed down the corridor, cutting through the cafeteria and passing the pigeonholes for staff and students where mail and communications were distributed. I looked for my name, a frown of confusion as I didn’t find Seka Torlak. “Dammit,” I muttered. “I’m Cecilia Kunsley.” As I re-checked, I found an envelope with Cecilia’s name written in large feminine letters. I opened it, quickly glancing inside. “Rowing shed. 9 pm.” The note read.

I put it in my pocket, a surge of adrenaline lifting my spirits. This was the real reason I was enduring this hellish gig. I had a real-life mystery to solve.

The cafeteria bustled, trays clattering as the students made their way down the line. I entered and stood in line with the other students, getting a tray and following. The bright lights above illuminated the food stations; each one filled with silver trays and warm steam rising from them. My eyes scanned the options, expecting the usual bland and unappealing fare. But

to my surprise, I saw platters of colourful dishes, meticulously arranged and garnished with herbs and spices.

The main meal was a herb-crusted lamb rack: perfectly roasted and served with a mint-infused jus, creamy parsnip puree, and sauteed broccolini, with a vegetarian option of stuffed portobello mushrooms: filled with a mixture of quinoa, sun-dried tomatoes, and feta cheese, drizzled with a lemon-tahini sauce.

I piled my plate high, suddenly feeling more optimistic about this job. Maybe it wasn't as bad as I thought. I sat at the designated teacher table, which was on a slightly raised platform, choosing to sit at the end by myself. As I took my first bite, the flavours exploded in my mouth. The tender lamb was perfectly seasoned and melted in my mouth. I closed my eyes and sighed with pleasure.

A loud thumping sound made me jump, causing me to open my eyes. I saw I was no longer alone; sitting across from me was Jacob Wilson, his piercing blue eyes fixed on me. My heart skipped a beat as I realised why my pheromones had reacted so strongly around him. He could have been Ramo's older brother. A pang of sadness hit me as I looked at Jacob's weathered face and thought about how Ramo never got the chance to age and develop wrinkles around his eyes or reach his full adult body and strength. He was taken too soon, at only 18 years old.

As I snapped back to reality, I noticed Wilson was patiently waiting for me to acknowledge him. He seemed completely unfazed by my distraction, as if he were used to receiving adoring looks and more.

"Jacob," he introduced himself, extending his hand towards me.

"Se-Cecilia," I corrected myself, feeling heat rising in my cheeks as I realised I was about to reveal my true identity again.

"Nice to meet you, Ce-Ce," he gave me a nickname with a friendly smile.

I arched an eyebrow and didn't respond.

"You're the new Spin Doctor," he said wryly, cutting into his lamb, his bright white teeth beaming against his tanned face.

"And you're the cock in the crew," I shot back, unable to resist the pun, though his smirk told me he was used to it.

"Maybe you want to take me for a spin sometime, Spin Doctor." He reached over and used his thumb to clean the jus dripping down my chin and licked his finger.

My breath caught in lust.

"I'll let you know if I have need of a steady hand on my rudder," I replied, my voice deliberately light, though the heat between us was anything but.

A smirk formed on his lips, and I suppressed the urge to squeeze my thighs together. 'Calm down,' I reminded myself silently, irritated with myself. I was doing it again. Thinking with my hormones instead of my head. Thankfully, another teacher joined us, a school advisor who clearly had a crush on Jacob. She practically sat on his lap and played with her hair, completely ignoring my presence. I was content to watch him flirt, even though his eyes kept returning to mine. As I finished eating, I stood up to leave. "See you around." I nodded.

"Definitely," he replied, his voice laced with promise. My legs felt like jelly as I walked away. Jacob was a tempting distraction that I couldn't afford now.

I was relieved when I returned to my little cottage, leaning against the door. Before my meeting in the rowing shed, I had a few hours to kill. I gratefully lay on the couch, staring at the arched wooden beams above.

I closed my eyes, drifting into a deep sleep, and found myself back in Srebrenica with Ramo. In my dream, I floated above the familiar town and over to our three-storey house that my father had built for us. Ramo was waiting for me in the backyard, dressed in a crisp white tank top and tight jeans, his blonde hair shining in the sunlight. He looked strong and healthy, just like he did before the war and starvation took their toll.

"Let's go," he said with a warm smile, offering his hand to me.

"Where?" I asked, taking his hand and feeling a sense of comfort wash over me.

"To Ćelo," he replied, taking me to the old tree where Zora and I used to play for hours on end.

The air was crisp and cool, carrying a hint of pine and earth. The smell of grass and wildflowers surrounded us as we walked deeper into the woods.

As we climbed up the steep hill, I couldn't catch my breath, and Ramo turned to look at me. "It's time for you to go back," he said softly before letting go of my hand.

In an instant, I was transported to St Augustine.

The St Augustine campus was deserted, the buildings looming in the darkness like shadows. In front of the library

stood a figure, cloaked in the shadows of the surrounding trees. Its features were indistinguishable, but I could sense a male presence.

Goosebumps prickled along my skin as I stood in front of the library, the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end. It felt like an icy hand had wrapped itself around my heart, squeezing tight and refusing to let go.

"Ramo?" I called out, even though I knew the figure didn't resemble him at all.

The snap of the branch echoed like a gunshot in the cottage's stillness, ripping me out of my dream and back to reality. As I gasped for air, the memories of my past flooded my mind, intertwining with my present and leaving me feeling both lost and grounded at the same time. I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to untangle myself from the emotional chaos that my dream had created.

I was suddenly chilled and rubbed the goosepimples on my skin as I tried to warm up. The cottage, constructed of sandstone, grew chilly at night, and I had not activated the heating. My fingers were numb and stiff, and as I walked to the radiator heater, the hard wooden floor felt like ice beneath my bare feet.

I had just enough time before my meeting to take a hot shower. I hurried to the bathroom and undressed, turning on the faucet and adjusting the water until it was steaming hot, filling the small space with steam.

I stepped in quickly, gasping with pleasure as the hot needles hit my skin and warmed me. As I stood in the shower, a wave of sadness welled over me. I remembered the feeling of comfort and joy with Ramo, and started sobbing, holding

myself up by leaning against the tiles. Sometimes the waves of grief just overcome me, like a tide on a beach dragging me under. When I was busy and occupied, I could submerge my longing and grief. But still I thought of him every moment of every day, remembering everything I had lost. I stepped out of the shower and stumbled to the mirror. I knew Jacob's resemblance; the moment of heat and attraction I'd felt with him triggered my memory, awakening my frozen heart. As I wiped the condensation off the glass, I could barely make out my distraught face. My hair was wet and tangled, droplets of water running down my face. Wiping the fog off the glass, I saw my distraught face, the ring he had made me as an infinity shape a pendant around my neck. I gripped it tight.

"I'll always carry you with me," I whispered fiercely, holding it tight.

I calmed, drying myself and dressing all in black, ready for my clandestine meeting.

3-Whistleblower



In the dim moonlight, I could see the outline of the rowing shed coming into view as I made my way down the hilly slope. Its wooden planks and shingled roof gave it an eerie appearance in the dark. The moon glowed in the sky, casting a silver reflection on the still lake below. Remembering my dream, goosepimples rose on my skin as I quickly glanced around, checking if anyone was watching me. The full moon cast a bright glow over the lake, its reflection appearing to rise from the water's surface. The woods to my left were dark and foreboding; their branches reaching out like twisted fingers. In the distance, the St Augustine library was lit up on the hill, its roof looming over the surroundings.

I put my hand in my pocket, clutching the pocketknife in hand, just in case my deep throat turned out to be a villain in the dark. It never hurt a girl to be extra careful.

I opened the door to the shed; the squeak of the hinges startled me. There was no light on and darkness enveloped me. "Hello," I called out. "Tom, are you here?" I asked, making my voice strong and sure as I called out. I'd emailed Tom at his email address while in hiding when my covert identity was being put in place. I needed to ensure he didn't break my

cover, and I also wanted to check in what he wanted help with. He'd replied, suggesting a meeting time.

A shadow moved to my left, and I turned, putting my hand in my pocket. A torch came on, and I frowned as I saw the teenage girl standing before me, her blonde hair gleaming in the torchlight.

"Is that really you, Seka?" she asked hesitantly.

I nodded and stepped closer.

"You're not Tom?" I said, still clutching the knife.

She took a step back. "No, I'm not. And you're not Celeste Kunsley?"

"I'm undercover. You remember my last article about the hit man?"

The girl nodded, understanding dawning on her face.

"Well, it turns out he might have put a hit out on me. I'm here to hide out," I told her, hiding the second part of my reason which was to find out how St Augustine's and the underworld were connected.

The girl studied me carefully, trying to decide if she could trust me.

I scanned the empty shed. "Tom isn't here?"

"No one's seen him in weeks," the girl whispered, her voice catching. "Right after his work experience ended, he told me he'd uncovered something big. Said he needed to gather more evidence before contacting you." She wrapped her arms around herself. "Then he vanished."

A chill crawled across my skin like ice water. The knife in my pocket suddenly felt heavier. He'd reached out, and I'd ignored him, chasing my story... What if he'd discovered the

criminal connection I was hunting and someone had silenced him permanently?

Now as I stood in the shed with this girl, waiting to see whether she would trust me, I knew I needed to convince her. "I let Tom down once," I admitted, my heart heavy. "I'm here to make it right and help find him."

She must have seen something in my face that reassured her. "I'm Summer Abbott," she said, offering her hand.

"Nice to meet you. Seka Torlak."

We hesitated, overwhelmed with emotion for a moment. Summer opened the shed doors, which led to the dock where people launched boats. The moon streamed into the shed, outlining the shells stacked in rows on the wall.

I came to stand by her, struck again by the beauty of the moon. "How do you know Tom?" I asked her as the silence settled around us.

"He's the love of my life," she said, her voice breaking. "You probably think that's silly." She wiped a tear from her cheek. "After all, how can a fifteen-year-old think they've found their soul mate."

My stomach twisted in pain, a sharp cut of agony. "I believe you," I reassured her. "I met the love of my life when I was fifteen."

She looked at me, studying my face. "Are you two still together?" she asked.

I shook my head sadly. "No, he passed away," I admitted, my voice breaking as the familiar wave of loss washed over me once again. I thought I'd cried myself out during the shower, that the tears were gone for a while, but something about Summer's vulnerability reminded me of me.

I stared at the moon, blinking back tears. I felt Summer take hold of my hand and gripped it tightly. After a few moments of quiet reflection, we gathered ourselves. I straightened my back, taking my hand back to wipe my face. "Let's talk about Tom. What did he tell you about his investigation?"

"He didn't share much with me," Summer frowned. "In the months leading up to his disappearance, he seemed troubled and distant, like he was carrying a heavy burden. I asked him about it, but he didn't want to talk. I didn't want to push him and ruin our time together."

"What do you mean by 'our time'?" I inquired.

"Our relationship was a secret. We couldn't let anyone know," she replied bitterly. "The Augustine Princess with the Povo Scholarship student? My father wouldn't approve. He has my whole life planned out for me: St. Augustine, then the University of Melbourne for a law degree, followed by working at his firm." She attempted to laugh but instead broke into sobs.

I reached out and wrapped my arm around her shoulders, feeling her pain. I'd had the same experience with Ramo during the war. My family didn't want us together because they feared what my life would become if I ended up with him. I was supposed to be a veterinarian, while he was supposed to be a farmer.

"But that wasn't the life I wanted," she whispered, locking eyes with me. "Tom and I were going to run away and be together. Start a new life together."

My heart ached as she spoke. Ramo and I were supposed to come to Australia together, leave Bosnia behind and the

wounds of the war, and start a new life together. Instead, our love story had ended before it even began.

Summer placed a hand over her heart. "But something happened to him. Something—" She couldn't finish her sentence. "He wouldn't leave me behind. He promised," she said, trying to convince herself as much as me.

"I believe you," I said, turning away so she wouldn't see the tears in my eyes. I knew Ramo wouldn't have left me either, that only death could have parted us, and it did. Before continuing the conversation, I needed a moment to gather myself. "So you were keeping your relationship hidden?"

She nodded, leaning against the shed wall and sliding down until she rested her head on her knees. I sat next to her. "This was our spot. We would meet here after lights out," she said with a sad tilt of her head. "We only had a few stolen moments each week, but it's what kept me going." She let out a sigh. "And now every day feels empty and meaningless."

Ramo and I had a secret spot too; we had to meet in the ruins of a house far away from my family to have a few moments of privacy and dream of the life we could have together. "We'll find him," I reassured her, gripping her hand tightly. "He must have gotten scared and run away."

"He would have told me," she murmured.

"Maybe he couldn't reach out because he was afraid of putting you in danger," I suggested.

I saw a glimmer of hope in her eyes. "Do you think he's still alive?"

I nodded, feeling a shiver run down my spine as I remembered my dream, a warning of impending danger. "I'll find him," I declared, avoiding the question. "But first, we need to

figure out what he was investigating. Do you have any ideas about some scandals at the school?"

Summer bit her lip, thinking for a moment, then her gaze narrowed. "I mean, there is one thing. There are rumours that students can buy maths tests."

"A rumour?" I asked, working it through in my mind. It was something that could tank a school's reputation, but was it something that was worth disappearing for? *'It depends on how deep the rot goes,'* my inner voice piped up.

"Well, I've never had need of that service. Maths is my jam," the soft glow illuminated Summer's face as she nodded and smiled proudly.

I nodded, my eyes drifting across the rowing shed's shadowed interior. "Could you ask around? See if there's any substance to this test-selling business?"

Summer's chin dipped in agreement.

"What about other whispers?" I pressed. "Anything else that doesn't quite add up at St. Augustine?"

"I'll keep my ears open," Summer said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "The boarding house is a rumour mill after lights out."

"Perfect. I'll work my angle with the staff."

Summer's brow furrowed. "Won't they clam up around you though? Everyone knows you're related to Principal Kunsley."

"I'm working on it," I said, thinking about my friendship with Laura. I was going to have to lean into it, go to Friday drinks, and chip away at my reputation. It just made me feel sleazy and cheap after Carla. Did the end really justify the means?

I caught sight of Summer's profile. She was looking away at the moon, looking hopeful, and I wished with all my heart

that I could give her a happy ending to her love story. My determination hardened. Yes, the end definitely justified the means.

"We need to do some background research. We can only meet if we have something to report, and when we're in public—"

"We're strangers." Summer smiled wryly. "I know the game. I've had plenty of practice."

I nodded, remembering my time in Srebrenica, when Ramo and I too were forced to pretend to be strangers in public. "Okay, we'd better get some sleep. We have a big day tomorrow." As I stood and helped Summer up, I could see the bags under her eyes and the slump of her shoulders, signs of exhaustion and emotional strain. In the dim light of our small room, her face was pale and drawn, but her eyes were bright and grateful.

"Thank you," Summer squeezed my hand. "You're the only person who knows about me and Tom. I feel a little less lonely."

"Good. I'm glad," I said, the burden of my promise weighing me down.

Summer closed the shed door, and we walked to the front door of the shed. "I'll leave first. You wait ten minutes and then you can leave," she said and slipped out the door.

As I listened to the sound of her footsteps, I realised this was a practiced routine that she and Tom had enacted many times before. God, I hoped I hadn't fucked up by giving her false hope. The musty scent of the shed and the stale smell of the air inside filled my nostrils as I took a deep, calming breath, pushing away my trepidation.

The campus was deserted as I made my way to the administration building. Perfect timing to access Tom's records. I punched in the alarm code with steady fingers and slipped into the records room—a space explicitly marked as restricted during business hours.

Tom Nguyen's file revealed the portrait of a scholarship student with stellar test scores and a documented IQ that had impressed the admissions committee. The margins of the file noted his home situation: single mother, restaurant waitress, income barely at subsistence level.

Page after page showed glowing teacher comments until the final entry jarred the narrative: "Contraband discovered in dormitory. Disciplinary hearing scheduled." A handwritten note beneath recorded: "Mother called inquiring about the student's whereabouts. Return call made. Mother informed of expulsion circumstances. Case closed."

The contradiction gnawed at me as I returned to my cottage. The exemplary student had supposedly committed an expulsion-worthy offense, then vanished?

Online news archives told a different story. The initial report dated February 15, 2000: "Local student Thomas Nguyen, 17, missing since February 13. Mother expresses grave concern." A follow-up piece mentioned a school representative claiming Tom had run away, with his mother apparently confirming this account.

Summer was certain of one version, and his mother accepted another. One of them had misunderstood what happened to Tom—but which? I needed to speak with Mrs. Nguyen in person.

First, I called the restaurant where she worked to confirm her shift that evening. After my shift at St. Augustine's, I changed into casual clothes, skipped the campus cafeteria, and drove twenty minutes into Willowford. The town's main street was lined with small shops—a pub, a library—and only one Chinese restaurant that also served fish and chips.

I stepped inside and asked the host if Cherry Nguyen was on duty. A moment later she appeared: dark hair pulled into a ponytail, her skin luminous and nearly ageless for the mother of a fifteen-year-old.

“Drink?” she asked, her Vietnamese accent thick and gentle.

“Juice, please.” I settled into a corner table.

She returned with a glass of orange juice. As she poured, I said, “I work at St. Augustine's. I'm here to ask about Tom.”

Cherry stiffened and turned her back. “Tom's not a student anymore,” she whispered.

“I know he's missing,” I replied. “I want to find out what happened.”

“My son is in Vietnam,” she said without looking at me.

“In Vietnam?” I echoed. “What's he doing there?”

“He's working. He sends me money so I can get by.”

I nodded; I knew how tight money was for her. “Why isn't he at school? He's only fifteen.”

Cherry lifted her chin. “Tom made some bad choices—drugs, stayed with the wrong crowd. He felt ashamed, left home. Now he works in Saigon to atone and helps me with what he can.”

She slipped away and soon reappeared with a steaming bowl of chicken noodles. I ate slowly, trying to fit her story

into the larger picture. If Tom was alive and sending money, he was clearly reachable—so why hadn't he written to Summer? Was this simply a runaway's guilt, or was something more troubling going on?

I called her over again. "When did you last see him?"

Cherry shook her head. "He left a note saying he couldn't face me after what he'd done. He'd go overseas, work hard, and make it right."

She moved off to serve other customers, and I stared at the space where she'd been. Cherry was getting regular support from Tom, proof he was alive—but was he really stuck in Vietnam, or was his disappearance something more sinister?

I thought back to the summer work experience I'd arranged at the school. Tom had seemed both precocious and burdened—so driven, so careful. What could he have done to warrant expulsion? I resolved to verify Cherry's claims: check passport records, track money transfers, and find out whether Tom was truly abroad or hiding closer to home. Either Summer or Mrs. Nguyen had the wrong story—and I intended to uncover the truth.

The next day I buried myself in spreadsheets. My eyes burned as I toggled between the annual financial report and the school's accounting software, cross-referencing invoices against expenditures. Each discrepancy might lead to Tom—some unexplained cash flow connecting to his disappearance.

Laura's knock came just as my neck had locked into a painful spasm. I nearly lunged for the door. Outside, we lit up and watched students stream between buildings.

"What's the student body like here?" I asked, exhaling slowly.

"Trust fund babies with entitlement issues," Laura said.

"If they get caught with drugs?" I asked, thinking about Tom's file.

She snorted. "Slap on the wrist. Maybe counselling."

"And scholarship kids?" Tom was different to the other students; he was of working-class background who had only entered these hallowed halls based on his intellect.

"Instant expulsion. Different rules entirely." Laura's voice had an edge like broken glass.

I leaned against the wall. "Heard any rumours about dealing on campus?"

"The usual stuff. Nothing special." Laura flicked her cigarette, sending a spray of embers to the ground. "We had a kid—Rocco—selling weed behind the gym at my old school. What about your high school?"

My mind flashed to makeshift rakija that scorched my oesophagus, teenagers huddled in bombed-out buildings. "Not really."

"Seriously? Northbridge is practically drug central, Celeste." She studied my face with sudden curiosity.

My pulse quickened. Celeste was from an Australian private school. Not Seka from Bosnia. "I was too busy being the perfect daughter," I blurted. "All extension classes and extracurriculars. Boring."

Laura's eyebrow lifted slightly.

Had I slipped?

"I did enough rebellion for both of us," she said with a laugh. "Now look at me—the picture of professionalism."

I joined her laughter, relief washing over me as my cover held.

I put in a request for a personal day later in the week, claiming a doctor's appointment, and arrived at Melton Police station by midday. I walked into reception. "Senior Constable Liam Martin, please," I asked.

A few minutes later Liam came through, wearing his police issued light blue short-sleeved shirt, and navy pants, his auburn hair glinting under the office lights. "Seka," he said with delight when he saw me. He came through the revolving door and hugged me.

It was so good to see him. We'd met during my stint in Riverwood when I'd investigated a cold case and had kept in touch ever since. Liam had moved out Riverwood as soon as the case was wrapped up, putting in a transfer to a metropolitan station, leaving his hometown and its sad history in search of a better future.

"Liam," I hugged him back tightly, feeling instantly comforted.

"Let's go in here," he let go, and led me to an interview room in the back. "Do you want a coffee or water?" he asked.

I shook my head. I'd gotten a takeaway coffee from McDonald's on the way from Willowford and was eager to launch into my spiel.

"You said on the phone you were looking into a missing person's case?" Liam asked.

I nodded, telling him about Tom, his disappearance, the money being sent from Vietnam that his mother thought was from Tom.

“I need to know if he left the country using his passport. And if he’s the one sending the money. I feel that something has happened to him, something isn’t right at the school.”

Liam scrutinized my face. “Like in Riverwood?” he asked. He’d been with me when I’d had my intuition before and helped me solve a cold case that no one else knew had existed.

I nodded.

“I’ll get it done,” he said. “It will take a few weeks.”

I was filled with relief. “You can call me here,” I gave him the school card. “I’m working there undercover as Cecilia Kunsley.” I wrote the name on the card.

“What’s new at your end?” I asked, now that our official business was finished, wanting to check in on him. We hadn’t spoken in a few months and I’d thought about him.

“Work and the usual.”

“Anyone on the horizon?” I asked. Liam was gay and had been in the closet while in Riverwood. I was wondering if he had come out while in Melton as the Victoria Police wasn’t very gay-friendly. It was still within living memory that homosexual activity was a criminal offence and police were responsible for enforcing it, and stigma and discrimination toward LGBTI officers was rife.

“Only on the down low,” he said, letting me know he was still firmly in the closet and only dating secretly.

“I thought things were changing. Isn’t there a Gay and Lesbian Employee Network?” I asked. There had been a group of brave police officers who had banded together to create a network to visibly support their members. There had been a push back from Victoria Police, but in the past few years

GALPEN had appeared at the Midsumma Carnival and gotten some visibility in the media positively.

“Only in an off-duty capacity and could not wear any signs or badges promoting GALPEN,” Liam sneered.

I squeezed his hand. “How’s your dad?” I asked, following up on another painful topic.

Liam shrugged. “Do you see him?”

“Only once.” Liam’s gaze dropped. “Haven’t exactly been lining up to go back.” He let out a breath. “I’m a shit son.”

“I can’t comment. I’ve been avoiding my family like the plague.”

Liam made eye contact, and we both burst out laughing. We were both struggling with our biological connections.

“I’ll look into this and get back to you.” He nodded at the notebook.

I nodded, glad that we’d have a reason to catch up again.

Despite his being in Melbourne for a few months and my being back at the Argus, our careers had consumed our attention. I was determined to connect with him. He was one of the people who knew and understood the reality of me. And I got the sense he was just as lonely as I was.

5-Tip off



Later that evening, I met up with Summer in the rowing shed to relay Nathan and Karen's startling revelations regarding Tom's disappearance.

"Tom would never be involved with drugs," Summer declared firmly, anxiety evident as she nervously chewed on her nail. Her nail was red and raw from where she had been biting it out of nerves. "He was a genuinely good person. Besides, there's already a known drug dealer on campus—Leanne Marinos. She peddles Razor Dust either to students chasing a buzz or to the overachieving nerds desperate for an all-night study session."

"What's Razor Dust?" I asked. I'd never heard of it.

"No one knows," Summer said. "It's either party pills mixed with herbal tea that's a powder, or something created by a bored chemistry nerd in Perth. Leanne claims she's perfected *her own* recipe in the school's science lab — and she's not telling anyone what's in it."

I wanted to ask the obvious question about the risks associated with teenagers taking a drug that they didn't know was in it, but Summer must have seen my face.

“It’s not dangerous,” Summer added hurriedly. “Those who have used it say you just have a sudden, sharp rush of energy—like chugging six coffees at once but your brain’s wearing rollerblades, and you get heightened focus for about 90 minutes.”

I now understood the appeal of the drug to students. If they needed an edge for a cram session, then this was the way to do it.

“The worst side effects are the faint metallic taste in the mouth and grinding your teeth so hard you chip them. That’s why they call it Razor Dust.” Summer tapped her fingernail on her tooth.

Trust teenagers to come up with a name that emphasised the worst side effects.

“And headaches and nosebleeds too,” Summer added hurriedly.

“I’m not loving the sound of those,” I said. “How do you know what it’s doing to your brain?”

“I mean, you can’t. Most of these kids weren’t geniuses to begin with,” Summer said with disdain.

I snorted, not being able to control my involuntary reaction. “Could Tom have accidentally gotten mixed up with something happening at school?” I asked when my humour had subsided.

Summer shook her head. “I can’t see it. Leanne sits on the Student Representative Council and is one of the Year 11 Captains. All the adults rave about her as the ideal go-getter with a bright future. Even if something went wrong, the worst-case scenario would be that she’d get expelled.”

“And what about her supplier?” I pressed further. “I mean, how is she getting the ingredients to make this drug?”

Summer offered, “I could ask around,” but I immediately cut her off.

“No way. I don’t want you dragged into this mess. We don’t know what Tom got involved with, and I can’t risk you ending up in the same situation.”

She hesitated, “What about you? You’re also at risk if you keep poking around for answers.”

I reasoned, “I’ve dealt with situations like this before—it’s part of my job.”

Summer still appeared doubtful.

“And I have to be the one to dig into this if I’m going to report it,” I added, conveniently omitting the fact that a confidentiality agreement barred me from reporting on school scandals. Still, if I uncovered any illegal actions that warranted police attention, then it’d be open season.

“Did you get the local newspaper to run that article about Tom?” I asked.

Summer nodded. “I created a fake communications email and sent them a media release. Tom was quite adept with computers and even showed me how to hack into the server to pull that off. The newspaper published one article before the school traced it, deleted the email account, and changed the server password, so I couldn’t log in again.”

I wrestled with whether to mention Nathan’s tip about the International Student Coordinator to Summer, but ultimately kept it to myself; I couldn’t risk her inadvertently getting involved.

Before long, we went our separate ways, Summer leaving first. I waited five minutes before following.

As I stepped out of the shed, I heard footsteps running toward me, and ducked back in, peering through the door. Two boys ran past the shed. "Dude, be quiet," one of them hissed in a too-loud whisper.

"There's no one around," the other one said in a regular voice. They ran around the back of the shed and into the forest.

I waited a few more moments, making sure there were no other rebellious students breaking curfew, and slithered back to my cottage.

I'd been following Leanne Marinos for six days, seventeen hours, and maybe a handful of minutes depending on your definition of 'tailing.' I'd found her schedule and learnt to duck out of the office whenever she had a spare period and follow her, to see her routine.

The Marinos girl wore her hair high in a ponytail, no-nonsense, but still created a static charge around herself so each loose brown wisp hovered, antennae-like, to sense for threats or attention. She kept her hands in her jacket, even when it was balmy. I had a whole theory about that: you keep secrets in your palms, and after a while, the rest of you follows.

The Friday night run was the only one that counted. I'd watched her slip a canister to some Neanderthals on the footy team on Monday, trade a pair of tubes for a wad of five-dollar bills in the cafeteria on Tuesday, and, most audacious of all, exchange hugs and handshakes during assembly on Thursday, while passing out vials.

Tonight's location: the dock next to the boathouse, the moon hanging over the lake a wise, benevolent aunt. I crouched behind a tree and watched Leanne stride past a girl who was overdressed for the weather, black turtleneck, long coat, face sharp and pale as a new moon. The girl intercepted Leanne halfway to the boardwalk. Their meeting looked accidental, but the choreography was too precise. Like they'd practiced it in rehearsal, with marks taped to the stage.

Leanne's voice, even at a hush, had this precise diction, like she'd grown up reciting court transcripts for fun. "—you remember the ratio?" she was saying.

Turtleneck Girl nodded. "I wrote it on my arm this time."

"Don't write it. Not even in code. Don't be an idiot." Leanne's tone wasn't angry, just disappointed.

Turtleneck pulled her sleeve over the offending forearm and nodded again.

"It has to go in the blue first," Leanne said. "Add the white after, or it crystallises. You don't want it to crystallise."

This seemed important, so I made a mental note. Add the white after. Blue first.

Turtleneck handed over something small, a key, or USB drive, or scrap of paper, then walked off with her hands jammed in her coat. Leanne watched her go, then double-backed toward the school, feet hitting the sidewalk at a crisp, mechanical pace.

I stalked Leanne at the front doors, punching a code into the keypad, slipping inside as if she belonged there at ten p.m. on a Friday.

I waited thirty seconds, then followed, using my staff key to enter. The hallways at night are a different country—shiny,

echoey, and haunted by the afterimage of day. My sneakers stuck to the floor with every step. I found Leanne at the science lab, third door on the left. She didn't bother with the lights, just used the beam of her phone to scan the cabinets.

I edged closer. Leanne was rooting through a drawer, extracting a plastic bag with a handful of blue flowers, already wilting. She pinched a few into a beaker, poured in water from a labelled squeeze bottle ("Distilled Only—NO Exceptions!"), then uncapped a vial of something clear and poured it over the petals. She swirled the beaker, waited, checked her phone, then shook a small pill bottle into the mix.

The whole process was methodical, brisk, but not rushed. If she was nervous, it didn't show. When she was satisfied, she decanted the mixture into three or four tiny tubes, capped them, and wiped her fingerprints with a napkin. I'd seen enough. I stepped forward and cleared my throat.

Leanne didn't jump. Instead, she finished capping the last tube, set it down, and said, "What are you doing here? Don't you work in the office?"

I cleared my throat. "Communications Officer, actually." My voice came out higher than intended. I'd rehearsed catching her red-handed, not defending my presence. I straightened my shoulders and lowered my voice an octave. "But we're not discussing my job description. Why are you in the science lab at ten p.m. on a Friday?"

"I'm performing some school experiments. My science teacher gave me permission to use the lab after hours." Leanne smiled sweetly at me, and I wondered how often she had gotten away with bamboozling adults.

"And if I ask your teacher, that's what they'll tell me?"

Leanne shrugged. “My parents are the biggest school donors. Miss Kaur will say whatever I want her to say.”

“She’ll say that she gave you permission to make Razor Dust and sell it on campus?” I demanded.

Leanne’s face showed momentary surprise, but she quickly rallied. She inspected the beaker as if searching for a poetic answer. “Technically, it’s just a nootropic. All legal. Unless you count the hydroponic flowers, but those aren’t even classified.”

“Hydroponic flowers,” I repeated.

She glanced at me, quick. “They’re natural, in a way. It’s not like I’m cooking meth.”

“What about the headaches and nosebleeds that are side effects? You’re telling me there’s nothing illegal here,” I sneered.

“Yes, that’s exactly what I’m saying.” Leanne met my gaze and blinked. “Anyway, why are you interested in my little operation?”

“I’m interested in Tom Nguyen?”

Leanne looked at me blankly.

“Ritalin was found in his desk after he went missing.”

“What’s that got to do with me?” Leanne asked.

“You’re a known drug dealer on campus. Maybe he found out about your operation and was going to report you,” I snapped.

She laughed—a quick, derisive snort. “Jesus, you really think I’m that sloppy. What, you think he overdosed on vitamin pills and organic caffeine?”

Leanne’s gaze sharpened, picking at the weak spots in my armour. “Why do you care so much? Tom left before you started working here.”

“Tom told me he was working on uncovering something in the school. He asked for my help to get it published,” I thought on my feet, giving her a sanitised version of the truth while hiding my identity.

“What? He met you through his aunt?” Leanne’s gaze narrowed.

I nodded quickly.

“Whatever your theory is,” Leanne said, “you’re wasting your time. I had nothing to do with him being missing, or the Ritalin being found in his desk.”

She moved to leave the classroom, but I stepped in front of it, blocking her path. “You don’t even care what happened to him?” I asked.

She hesitated. For a moment, the mask slipped, and I saw an actual human reaction—a flicker of regret, maybe, or something heavier. “You think because I’m selling study drugs, I’m some kind of monster?”

“People like Tom don’t disappear by accident,” I said.

“People like Tom disappear because no one notices they’re already gone,” she said. “You want someone to blame? Start with the counsellors. Or yourself. It’s all the same.”

She must have seen something in my face, because the jab hit home. I felt responsible for him going missing. I wasn’t there for him when he said he found a story. Leanne used my distraction to sidestep me and disappear down the hallway. I sighed, turning off the lights and locking the classroom behind her. As I walked back to my cottage under the cover of darkness, I debated my next move. I thought Leanne was peddling an illegal drug and as soon as I confronted her, she’d crumble. Instead, I’d underestimated her mettle.

After Nathan's cheating scandal, I now knew that St Augustine protected its own, and if I notified Karen as the Principal about yet another scandal I'd uncovered, I might blow my cover once and for all. I needed to see if I could get leverage over Leanne, find out if what she was doing was truly illegal or if she was a shady prodigy who was scamming her peers with a natural supplement to help them study.

I'd spent the entire weekend with the beaker and my laptop, trawling the worst corners of the internet for anything remotely like the powder I'd seen Leanne make. There were forums for "biohackers" and "smart drug" fanatics, but nothing matched the blue colour, let alone the floral aftertaste. Most of them were just caffeine with a thesaurus.

I returned to investigating Leanne and realised that she was a founding member of the school gardening club. I pitched a story about the club for the next issue of the school magazine and created an excuse to attend the next meeting.

There were only six of students, not counting the faculty sponsor. Leanne showed up in dirt-stained leggings, hair up in a bun, face perfectly unbothered by her growing infamy. She acted like she hadn't met me before.

For the next hour, I shadowed her around the greenhouse. She moved from station to station with surgical precision, pinching off cuttings, transferring them to seed trays, watering with a spray bottle that smelled faintly of bleach. She didn't say another word to me, but the glances she threw over her shoulder were sharper than a trowel.

The blue-flowering plant lived on the third bench from the back. The label said "Clitoria ternatea," which was the kind of joke a sophomore boy would make, and probably why Leanne

loved it. She'd crossbred the variety, coaxing out a new shade of turquoise that looked radioactive under the grow lights.

When I tried to take a photo, she blocked my view with her hand. "Trade secret," she said.

"What do you do with it?"

She shrugged. "Tea, mostly. It's a natural pH indicator. Turns pink if you add lemon."

I didn't buy it, not for a second.

After club, I lingered outside the greenhouse until Leanne came out. "What's in the stuff, really?" I asked. "The study blend."

She set her backpack on the ground, then gave me a side-long look. "It's not illegal, if that's what you're hoping."

"Caffeine isn't illegal, either. But you don't see people snorting it out of centrifuge tubes."

She considered, then said, "It's just caffeine, guarana, some adaptogens, and flower extract. The secret is the base. I use a citrus solvent. Makes it absorb faster."

I made a face. "You're selling orange-scented speed."

"Not even close," she said. "It's gentler than Panadol. Safer, too. No one's gone to the ER."

"Yet," I muttered.

Finally, I said, "You still haven't explained the blue. Or what happened to Tom?"

Her face tightened. "The blue is marketing. People love a gimmick. And Tom—" she paused, then looked away. "I had nothing to do with Tom."

"But you know who sells Ritalin on campus?"

"No one sells Ritalin. I'm only providing a study aide, and it's perfectly legal."

“How did the Ritalin get in his desk?” I demanded.

She exhaled sharply. “I’m guessing that someone planted it there. Someone who didn’t want anyone looking any further into his disappearance.” Her eyes locked with mine. “And that someone is not me.”

I felt the urge to press her, to ask again. But something in her voice made me hold back. Instead, I asked, “Do you ever take it yourself?”

The corner of her mouth lifted. “Wouldn’t you?”

She picked up her backpack and strode off, leaving me confused.

Back home, I dissected a petal from the beaker on the kitchen sink. The blue bled into the water instantly, staining everything. I licked my finger, dabbed the juice on my tongue. It tasted sweet, then sharp. The aftertaste was lemon, but there was something else—metallic, almost electric.

I waited for an hour, half-expecting to feel my heart race, my vision to sharpen, something. But all that happened was a burst of ideas for my next few articles, and a kind of floaty clarity, like I’d finally slept eight hours in a row.

It wasn’t Panadol. But it wasn’t nothing, either.

The next day I made an appointment with Karen, telling her that while I’d been researching the gardening story, I’d discovered Leanne’s side hustle. She was giving out powdered study aides she’d manufactured to her peers.

She called Leanne into the office and repeated what I’d said in front of her. Leanne sat in the second chair, legs crossed, looking like she was prepping for an interview with Harvard.

Karen’s eyes narrowed as she studied Leanne across the desk. “Would you care to explain yourself?” Leanne sat

straighter; fingers laced together like a CEO at a board meeting. "Everything I've distributed is completely legal. I've never charged a cent. This is a documented scientific inquiry with proper controls and variables."

I almost laughed. "Then why label it 'zinc powder'?"

"Because it looks like zinc," she said, deadpan. "I didn't want anyone to think it was something else."

Karen turned to me. "Seka, have you witnessed an exchange of money?"

I hesitated. "No. But I've seen the drops, the tubes, everything."

Leanne smiled at the principal. "I'd be happy to explain my project if you'd like. I have documentation."

Karen considered, then nodded. "Leanne, you'll stay here. Seka, you're excused for now."

I left the office, closing the door just as Leanne flashed me a lazy wink. Back in the hall, my stomach dropped. Had I just ruined my chances of finding out what happened to Tom? Or would the principal see through the smokescreen?

Karen called me back in. Her office was filled with potted succulents and a glass paperweight shaped like a shark. She gestured for me to sit.

Karen folded her hands on the desk. "Your concern is noted, Seka," she said, her voice a perfect administrative monotone. "We investigate all potential infractions. However, the evidence doesn't support further action."

"She's walking free?" The words escaped before I could stop them.

"I've had a productive conversation with the Marinos family. They share our commitment to student welfare. We'll be keeping a close eye on the situation."

The unspoken message hung in the air: wealthy parents, potential lawsuit, case closed. I swallowed my retort and nodded.

Karen's chair creaked as she leaned forward. "Should you observe anything concerning, I expect to be your first point of contact. Are we clear?"

Crystal clear. Another cover-up in progress.

In the hallway, Leanne slouched against the metal lockers, thumbs dancing across her phone screen. She glanced up, caught my gaze, and silently formed two words with exaggerated precision: "Told you."

Seven days later, everything changed.

First came the morning announcements: "Congratulations to Leanne Marinos for her award-winning research in plant-based cognitive enhancement." The word "award" was repeated seven times in three sentences. By lunch, the local paper ran a photo of Leanne shaking hands with a pharmaceutical CEO, her smile the same half-smirk I'd seen in the greenhouse.

The scandal didn't just evaporate; it was reverse-engineered into a press release. The principal hosted a "Student Innovators Assembly" where Leanne got a plaque and a standing ovation. They even gave her a lab coat with her name stitched in royal blue.

The coup de grâce was a glossy email blast sent to every parent: "District Student Wins Scholarship, Patents 'Natural' Study Aid."

Leanne's product—now dubbed "PureView"—was suddenly everywhere, sold over the counter at a dozen supplement shops. The tubes were identical to the ones I'd seen in the supply room, except now the labels said "Patent Pending" and had a little logo of a blue flower.

I watched it all unfold with the horror you reserve for slow-motion car wrecks. I felt like Cassandra in the old stories—cursed to predict disaster and ignored until the bodies started piling up.

I found Summer waiting in the boathouse, perched on an overturned canoe with her knees pulled to her chest. "So your whistleblowing turned her into a celebrity entrepreneur," she said, picking at a splinter in the wooden hull. "Classic St. Augustine," I said, leaning against the doorframe. "The machine just absorbs the shock and spits out a press release." Summer's fingers stilled. "Tom never stood a chance, did he?" I slid down to sit beside her, the concrete floor cold through my jeans. "We're starting over. Day one. Who saw him last, who entered his room, everything." Her shoulders hunched forward as she nodded, her gaze fixed on the dark water visible through the slats in the wall.

The next day my fingers hovered above the keyboard as I logged into the school's security archive, treating the bold red "IT Admin Only" warning as more of a suggestion than a rule. Beneath St. Augustine's grand rituals and polished reputation lurked a bloated, misconfigured SharePoint system that nobody really understood. In my first few days on the job, I'd mapped every backdoor, uncovered every forgotten permissions group, and catalogued every outdated admin account that should have been retired years ago.

When my credentials sailed past the firewall without so much as a hiccup, I felt a fleeting, vicious thrill of vindication. Then the adrenaline ebbed away. The folder for the day Tom disappeared was completely empty—no corruption, no partial archive, just nothing. I clicked back and forth through the calendar. May 27th was intact: hours of grainy footage showing students idling by lockers, teachers sipping coffee in the staff room, the groundskeeper feeding ravenous magpies behind the quad. May 29th was there, too. But May 28th? Wiped clean.

This was no accidental deletion. The system's retention policy was ruthless: twelve months of data locked in place. You couldn't erase a full day with a stray keystroke—you needed a plan, precision, inside knowledge. I ran a script to hunt for deleted files in shadow copies and recycle bins. Nothing turned up. The recycle bin looked as if nobody had ever opened it. Whoever did this had moved deliberately, surgically, leaving no obvious trail. They knew this system better than the contractor who built it.

Suddenly the Ritalin found in Tom's locker didn't seem like some isolated prank. It felt like part of a larger design. Tom's digital trail ended the same evening: attendance recorded, lunch purchase at 6:17 PM—then a total blackout. Someone had methodically erased his final hours. Someone with admin privileges. Someone with power.

I still had no clue how those pills got into Tom's bag or who was distributing them. Leanne and Summer both insisted there was no Ritalin operation on campus—the worst drug rumour around was a Year 12 who sometimes smuggled his brother's Adderall. Nothing systematic. So why those pills?

The bottle, the dose count, the neat placement—it was too perfect. Like dropping a single drop of ink on white paper to leave an undeniable stain.

Kids would have talked if there'd been a dealer. Rumours spread like wildfire. No one had mentioned a supplier. This stank of a set-up. A frame job. I drummed my fingers on the desk as I reviewed my notes. The ugly question hovered: who on campus could legally access Ritalin? And how could I prove Tom had taken none before that night? There had to be records—every student diagnosed, every dose logged. If not in the main office, then in the nurse's files.

I clipped on my staff lanyard, grabbed a manila folder, and headed for the health office. The room was cramped and flickered under fluorescent lights painted the colour of boiled egg yolks. Nurse Evans sat behind a stack of files, crunching corn chips. She gave me a narrow-eyed nod when I entered.

“Morning,” I said, striving for a mix of cheer and fatigue. “Quick question about Tom Nguyen—any record of him getting ADHD meds? Ritalin, dexamphetamine, anything?”

Evans wiped her fingers on a napkin and opened her database. “Let me check.” She scrolled, then shook her head. “No script for Nguyen. He's never been on controlled substances—I'd have noted it.”

My heart rate climbed. “If someone else in his class had a prescription, would that show up?”

She raised an eyebrow. “Privacy rules, but off the record? Three students school-wide are on Ritalin or Dexamph. None are in Nguyen's year.”

A cold certainty settled in my chest. The pills arrived the day before Tom vanished. No student script matched. So the

source was external—or someone inside with access to controlled meds, someone who wanted to ruin him.

Back in my office, I circled the room. If no student source existed, it had to be a parent, a local GP, or an administrator bold enough to bypass protocols. Gemma? Karen? Both had plenty to lose from a scandal—but would they frame a kid?

It was time to follow up Nathan's clue about the international coordinator.



BONUS CONTENT

SHORT STORY
HISTORICAL RESEARCH ESSAYS
TEACHING RESOURCES

SCAN HERE



<https://www.amrapajalic.com/seka-torlak-series.html>

Seka Torlak Series

Forged on the war-torn streets of Srebrenica, Seka Torlak fights for justice, retribution and truth.



0.5: The Tree That Stood Still

Srebrenica 1992, in a town shattered by prejudice, Seka and her best friend Zora forge a friendship that defies the ravages of war. Amidst the chaos, they must navigate a world where friends can become enemies overnight. Will their friendship endure the storm of war and prejudice, or will it be shattered by the forces tearing their town apart?

Book 1: Time Kneels Between Mountains

Srebrenica, 1992, in a town besieged by the enemy, and torn apart by corruption, Seka fights for survival and seeks justice for those who are at the mercy of unscrupulous profiteers. Yet, amidst the devastation, she finds a glimmer of hope as her relationship with Ramo blossoms from friendship to love. But as she fights for justice and love, will Seka triumph, or will the brutal war tear everything she holds dear apart?

Bonus Short Story: Belma's Liberation

In a village shadowed by abuse, there are those with courage who fight for liberation...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Belma's Liberation* to find out how Seka saved her friend from her abusive father

Book 2: Ghosts Among the Gumtrees

Melbourne, 1997, in a city that is a refuge to those escaping war and destruction, as well as a hiding place for war criminals seeking safe harbour, Seka exacts her retribution against the man responsible for genocide. Haunted by memories of war and loss, Seka grapples with the raging conflict within her: the pursuit of justice versus the thirst for retribution. Will Seka find her salvation, or will she lose her soul in the process?

Bonus Short Story: Zora's Story

In the ruins of war, there are those who cling to memories of friendship...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Zora's Story* to find out her story in escaping the war

Book 3: Mad Dawn Winter

Riverwood, 1998, in a small Australian country town that is close-knit and peaceful, Seka discovers a cold case of a former Vietnam Vet and unearths the layers of secrets hiding the truth behind his murder. As Seka digs deeper, she finds herself entangled in a dangerous game of deceit and loyalty, facing ghosts of the past and present. Will she unravel the truth and deliver justice before it's too late, or will the town's dark secrets consume her?

Bonus Short Story: Art's War

In a time of loss and grief, there are those who pursue the truth...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Art's Fall* to find out about his investigation first-hand

Bonus Short Story: The Regrets of Ben Hayes

In a war where fear reigns, love remains unspoken...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *The Regrets of Ben Hayes* to find out about his first love during his service as a National Serviceman.

Book 4: Echoes Among Wattle Pines

Willowford, 2000, when a student disappears from the elite St Augustine's private school, Seka goes undercover to uncover the truth—because she knows he didn't run. But in a school where power protects its own, asking the wrong questions can be just as dangerous as knowing the answers. Will she find Tom before it's too late, or will Willowford's secrets claim another victim?

Bonus Short Story: Sheila's Silence

In a time when men are believed and women are buried, the truth fights to be heard...

Sign up to my newsletter and read *Sheila's Silence* to find out about her death and Seka's search for justice.

About the author

Amra Pajalic is an award-winning Australian author, educator, and indie publisher known for crafting compelling stories that blend heart, humour, and heritage. Her work explores themes of identity, belonging, and resilience, often drawing from her Bosnian background.

She won the 2009 Melbourne Prize for Literature's Civic Choice Award for her debut novel *The Good Daughter*, re-released as *Sabiha's Dilemma* (Pishukin Press, 2022). The anthology she co-edited, *Growing up Muslim in Australia* (Allen and Unwin, 2014), was shortlisted for the 2015 Children's Book Council of the year awards and her memoir *Things Nobody Knows But Me* (Transit Lounge, 2019) was shortlisted for the 2020 National Biography Award. Her short story collection *The Cuckoo's Song* (Pishukin Press) features previously published and prize-winning stories.


Amra is the author of the Sassy Saints series, a young adult contemporary trilogy set in Melbourne's western suburbs. These stories feature smart-mouthed teens, love triangles, fake friends, and fierce girl power, offering a refreshing take on multicultural Australian life.


She is also the creator of the gripping Seka Torlak crime mystery series. Forged on the war-torn streets of Srebrenica, Seka Torlak fights for justice, retribution and truth.


Amra is committed to accessibility and inclusion in publishing. Through her micro-press, PishukinPress, she releases her titles in a wide range of formats—including audio-book, large print, dyslexic font, paperback, ebook, and hard-back—to ensure all readers can experience her stories.

When she's not writing, Amra is podcasting on *Amra's Armchair Anecdotes*, mentoring emerging writers, and delivering workshops across Australia on self-publishing, writing craft, and creative resilience.


Amra Pajalić publishes her dark fiction using pen name A. P. Pajalic. She also publishes romance novels under pen name Mae Archer.


 [goodreads.com/author/show/3310015.Amra_Pajalic](https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/3310015.Amra_Pajalic)

 [facebook.com/AmraPajalicAuthor/](https://www.facebook.com/AmraPajalicAuthor/)

 [instagram.com/amrapajalicauthor/](https://www.instagram.com/amrapajalicauthor/)

 <https://twitter.com/AmraPajalic>

 [tiktok.com/@amrapajalic](https://www.tiktok.com/@amrapajalic)

 [youtube.com/c/AmraPajalicAuthor](https://www.youtube.com/c/AmraPajalicAuthor)

SIGN UP FOR AMRA'S AUTHOR NEWSLETTER

For news, giveaways, bonus material, and sneak peeks, please sign up to her newsletter below.

www.amrapajalic.com



SCAN HERE

<https://www.amrapajalic.com/my-newsletter.html>

Help This Story Be Seen — Leave a Review

If *Echoes Among Wattle Pines* stayed with you, even a little, I'd really value your help.

A short review — even a sentence or two — makes a real difference. It helps other readers find the book and keeps this series alive.

You can leave a rating or review wherever you bought it.

Thank you for being part of Seka's journey.

Hvala lijepo,

Amra Pajalić

Also by

Seka Torlak Series

The Tree That Stood Still
Time Kneels Between Mountains
Ghosts Among the Gumtrees
Mad Dawn Winter
Echoes Among Wattle Pines

Memoir

Things Nobody Knows But Me
Growing up Muslim in Australia

Sassy Saints Series

Sabiha's Dilemma
Alma's Loyalty
Jesse's Triumph

Young Adult

The Cuckoo's Song
The Climb

Romance as Mae Archer

Return to Me

Hollywood Dreams

Vintage Dreams

Dark Fiction/Horror as A.P. Pajalic

Woman on the Edge