



AFFINITY AND TRUST

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Excerpt of three chapters

CHAPTER ONE

The hard-bitten soldier coughed at the stink of stale air and excrement as he kicked in the door of the stone barn and glared in the gloomy interior.

"Is anyone there?" he called in the local language. He was about to leave when he heard a faint cry.

"Help us, please," a female voice called.

He stepped in, waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness and saw three young women seated by a far wall. He squinted and stared again before uttering an oath of disgust. The three women were chained to the wall.

"Help us, please," repeated the slim brown haired girl who would have been attractive if it wasn't for her filthy dress, long tangled hair and skinny face with protruding cheek bones. On closer inspection he saw she had an ankle clamp joined to the chain that was padlocked to a bolt in the wall. The stink came from a bucket a few meters away that seemed to be the only toilet.

The man swallowed and turned to the private with him. "Get the Captain," he snarled. "Immediately!"

While two women cringed back in terror, the one who had spoken first seemed to realize the soldier could help. She even smiled, staggered to her feet and the chain, about six meters long to permit some movement, rattled.

"I am Sergeant Stefano Gabbo from the Italian unit of IFOR. We are doing a routine inspection of this village. Don't be afraid. We are here to help." Gabbo spoke in a halting Serbo-Croatian.

"Thank God. Thank God," the woman cried. "My name is Zuzana Milenkova. My friends, Kaira, Anya and myself have been held prisoner here for months."

"Don't trust him!" screamed one of the other women who was hardly more than a girl. "They're just like the others." Her screams turned into choking sobs as wide protruding eyes stared at the soldiers and she slunk back as far as the chain would allow.

The sergeant was about to reply when he heard footsteps and turned. The captain had arrived. The officer took one look at the stinking scene and the three women and gave an order. "Cut them loose and to a hospital at once, sergeant." He turned to Zuzana. "Captain Giovanni Ronino at your service, madam," he said in the local language "Do you speak Italian?"

"No," replied Zuzana, "Only our language and English."

"Good," the soldier replied in the later language. "I also speak English so we can communicate in, what shall I say, an easier way." He watched as the sergeant appeared with a massive pair of wire cutters and cut the chains from the three women. "Who did this to you?"

"The local militia," Zuzana replied as she rubbed her ankle where the clamp had come off. "A Jeljiko Wiskova is in charge." Her eyes dropped to the floor. "A brute of a man."

"You've been raped?"

"Repeatedly," Zuzana replied. She held her head up and looked the captain in the eyes. "We've been treated like animals, captain, objects to satisfy their crude desires. There were six of us. Three died and Anya..." She indicated the youngest prisoner, "is ill and needs urgent medical attention." She gave a thin smile. "We could all do with some good food, a bath and clean clothes."

The captain's face was a mask but his eyes showed steel like determination. He turned and spoke in rapid Italian. "Surround the village and bring in every person from this so called militia. If anyone resists, shoot them! I don't care a damn about the protocol."

"Yes sir," Sergeant Gabbo replied and saluted.

"Well, you heard the captain," he snarled to his corporal. "I want the village sealed off

so not even a mouse can get through and I want it done now!"

Within an hour, a dozen semi-track gun carriers had the tiny village completely

sealed. Sixty protesting members of the militia were escorted into the only clear field, an antiquated and partly burned out football stadium.

"I must protest," the leader complained. "We are in our designated territory carrying out lawful protection duties for our people."

"Jeljiko Wiskova?" asked the captain.

"Captain Jeljiko Wiskova, yes," replied the man.

"Wiskova, you are under arrest for kidnapping, violent assault and rape," Giovanni Ronino said in Italian and turned to the man next to him. "Translate lieutenant," he ordered and stared at the militia officer.

The lieutenant saluted and spoke to Wiskova who glowered. His words were too rapid for the Italian officer to understand but the hostility and arrogant manner in which the man spoke told him everything he needed to know.

"He does not recognize your authority, captain," the lieutenant said, "and demands we to be released immediately."

"Does he?" Ronino glowered at Wiskova and turned back to the lieutenant. "Fair enough. Tell him he can go but his men stay." He nodded to an alleyway under the grandstand. "Our men are to have their weapons armed and ready but will allow him through."

Wiskova glowered when he heard the translation, stared at the captain, shrugged and headed towards the grandstand. When he reached the alleyway, four Italian soldiers stood aside with weapons lowered.

He walked into the dim corridor and stopped. "What the hell!" he swore in his own language as three thin woman appeared in front of him, each armed with a military automatic pistol.

Their faces were devoid of emotion but all three pistols were held level and aimed directly at the man.

"You will never rape or torture my friends or myself again, Captain Wiskova," Zuzana stated in an ice-cold voice.

"You wouldn't dare," the man replied. "You haven't the guts to..."

"Oh no!" Kaira hissed. She squeezed the trigger.

The quiet sound of the weapon was supplanted by a scream as the man staggered back. He attempted to clutch at his chest. The other two weapons fired, the man screamed again and his body jerked in different directions as shot after shot pounded into his body. Finally it slumped back in a puddle of blood.

Out in the stadium, Captain Giovanni Ronino stared at the militia members and turned to his assistant. "Tell them there's been an unfortunate accident, lieutenant. Some local girls were playing with weapons and they accidentally went off." His voice turned hard. "Also, tell the second in command here, they have one hour to bring me everyone responsible for the raping and torture of those three girls. If it is not done, they'll all be lined up by the far wall and the girls' families invited into do, what shall we call it, some questioning of their own? I'm sure when they see how these women were treated their methods will not be as civilized as ours."

CHAPTER TWO

Somehow the young woman complemented the natural beauty of Wellington, New Zealand's capital city, as she sat on the concrete wall and tossed half a sandwich out for seagulls to collect. With raucous cackles, the black and white birds landed within a meter of the wall and fought for a moment before the eventual winner flew off to eat the crust in peace. The woman's eyes would

follow them before she'd methodically pull off a second piece of bread from her half eaten sandwich, loop it out on the rocks and watch a repeat performance by the birds.

In the four hot summer weeks since she'd first attracted Frazer Winton's attention, it was her body language, that haunting appearance of being alone, perhaps even lonely that had raised his curiosity. He gave a slight smile as he ate his own lunch. She was attractive with a slim but not anorexic figure many modern women believed was a desirable condition. Her light brown hair usually tied back in a ponytail. It was sometimes made into two plaits that dangled down when she bent forward towards the birds.

Her clothes, too, were different from the hundreds of young women who frequented the area in formal trouser suits or brief shorts and tank tops with exposed arms, shoulders and waists.

This young woman was always dressed in a simple cotton frock with a round top and wore white ankle socks and low-heeled shoes. If the weather was cooler she'd wear a light colored sweater or, in the rain, a black raincoat and cape. She sat at the water front every lunchtime for about forty minutes before she'd stand, take out an apple to munch, shut a plastic lunch box and walk briskly off. After crossing at the nearby traffic lights she would disappear between the high rise buildings beyond. Today was different in that, for the first time, her eyes caught Frazer's as he tried not to gaze directly at her. For a microsecond, the blue eyes stared right into him, the lips twitched into the briefest of smiles before she glanced away.

"Greedy little devils," Frazer said.

"Pardon me," she replied in perfect but accented English.

"The seagulls," Frazer added. "No matter what you give them they always want more."

"Oh yes, I understand," she replied and stared out over the water where the inter-island ferry was turning into the harbor. "It's so peaceful here." She stood up, brushed down her dress and gave him another almost sad smile. "But I must away," she added. "I guess you'll be here tomorrow."

"Yes," muttered Frazer. "I didn't think you had noticed me amongst the hundreds of pedestrians."

"I notice everything," she replied in a sudden cold tone. "Habit, I guess." The shoulders shrugged before her face relaxed but remained serious. Without another word she turned and walked across to the traffic lights.

Frazer rubbed his chin as he watched her disappear. The strange young woman sounded exactly as he had imagined an articulate person who spoke English as a second language. Somehow it fitted. It was as if she was totally alone, thousands of kilometers from her home and family. He gave a snort and chastised himself for an imagination gone wild. She was probably a young professional with a husband and two children who worked in a local law office to help pay off a mortgage and new car.

He headed back to his own office two blocks away and nodded at Jenny, the receptionist, as he headed to the sanctuary of the inner office computer terminal and his current problem. There was a mistake in the program that caused it to crash whenever certain functions were entered.

He would need to check everything and it had to be done that day. The clients had already complained about the two weeks overrun. He sighed, brought the seemingly meaningless symbols and words to the screen and began to search for errors. He hated this part of the work; often one incorrect symbol or dash altered everything.

Two hours later Jenny brought a cup of coffee in and sat it beside him. She smiled. Perhaps he should ask her out. She'd be willing and available he knew but somehow, since his quite acrimonious separation, the idea of another commitment did not enthruse him.

"You need to relax, Frazer," she cooed. "Let the *Tasman Insurance Company* wait a while. They expect almost the impossible and want it in three weeks."

He glanced up, smiled and subconsciously compared her with the girl at the harbor. Both would be a similar age, both quite sensuous but there the similarity halted. Jenny flaunted her gender and knew how to attract men while the other girl appeared the opposite. This, paradoxically made her more attractive to him.

"Going to the *Gentlemen's Arms* after work," Jenny said in a reference to the small tavern a block away that the staff often visited.

"Sorry," Frazer replied. "I'll be here until the early hours unless I have more luck and find the bug quickly."

Jenny placed a hand on his shoulder and he could smell a faint whiff of perfume. "You take life too seriously since your divorce from Claire," she said with genuine concern. "Forget about her. She was just a bitch who bled you dry and is probably doing the same with that sleazy guy she moved in with."

Frazer smiled. "I guess," he replied and felt stirrings deep inside. "Perhaps tomorrow."

"I'll be waiting." Jenny replied.

In the Bowen Building, a multi-story government building less than a block away from Frazer, Zuzana Milenkova sat in her own office on the eighteenth floor. She stared at her computer terminal and frowned at another crude electronic attempt to convert a Serbo-Croatian letter into English. The words were correct but grammar so muddled the document was almost meaningless. It was faster to convert the language herself rather than rely on the computer.

With a few deft movements, she corrected the letter sent to her by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for translation. She placed it in a buff envelope stamped *Classified; Eyes Only* ready for returning to the minister. Her mind drifted back to the man down at the harbor. The thought of males usually sent shudders of dark fear and screaming agony through her body but he seemed different. He'd been at the harbor every day for the last month and she'd seen him gazing discretely at her many times.

At first it had annoyed her; but the man wasn't just another leering creature of the oppose sex goggling at her bosom. He was tall, clean shaven with short cut hair and always dressed in a neat fitting suit. This was quite different from the abhorrent moustached animals of the past that she was trying to forget. His voice, today when he spoke to her for the first time, was in the typical New Zealand accent she was becoming used to and quite enjoyed, but had a cultural slant of someone educated and self-assured. He had been hesitant and, she knew almost spoken to her several times on previous days but had stopped. It was only when she gazed directly into his eyes, something she found difficult, that he responded.

Susan, who'd Anglicized her forename, sighed and reached for the next document. Her position with the New Zealand Government was secure, paid a salary she'd never really dreamed she'd earn but was repetitious and gave her little chance to meet more than the half a dozen fellow employees. Loneliness gripped her like an octopus. She was physically safe in a free and democratic country thousands of kilometers from her violent homeland, the women around her were friendly but, with one exception, were all married or had their own circle of friends. The couple of men on the staff now left her alone after their first attempts at making a pass at her were firmly rebuffed.

What annoyed her was that both men were over forty, over weight and married. Were males the world over the same?

The lunchtime visits to the harbor helped her gather thoughts and absorb the atmosphere; the seagulls squawking and waiting for a few morsels of bread seemed to reflect the freedom of the country. She had to grasp it and move forward in life but how could one forget? Her innermost thoughts were with her wherever she went, like a cloak of darkness only centimeters below the surface.

Susan shook her head and switched her mind back to the present. Outside, the toy like traffic moved below. Across the street, a small green park in front of The Beehive, the circular parliament building looked bright in the afternoon sunlight. It was another scorching summer's February. What a contrast to the minus twenty degrees, ice and snow at home.

But that wasn't home, there was nobody back in Bosnia now. Her entire family had been obliterated, wiped from the face of the earth. New Zealand was her home and she had only

to persuade herself to come to terms with the fact.

She smiled as Heather arrived with the afternoon's coffee and placed it on the table. The younger woman, barely out of high school, was one of the few people around who shook her out of despondency with an ongoing chatter and fresh innocence Susan never had.

"God Susan, relax," the youngster said as she plunked herself down in the armchair and grabbed her own mug of coffee. "What're you trying to do? Replace the Prime Minister?"

Susan grinned.

"Deep in thought again?" Heather laughed. "At your rate you'll suffer burn out by the time you're thirty."

Susan smiled. "Possibly," she replied and lapsed back into silence.

"Susan?" Heather asked a moment with her tone more serious.

"Yes."

"Can I ask you a favor?"

"Go ahead."

"Well, it's just." Heather bit on her lower lip. "I had a row with Cody and he's kicked me out. It was his apartment and ... well you know."

Susan laughed. "You have nowhere to go and would like to stay at my place for a few days."

"You don't mind?"

"There are a few rules," Susan cautioned

"Yeah, I know," Heather responded, gazed at the ceiling and counted off with her thumb and fingers on an upheld hand. "No men over night, no parties and don't slop any beer on the carpet. I accept those conditions."

Susan smiled. "That's more or less it," she replied. "Expenses fifty, fifty. You can get your gear."

Heather grinned. "Your car's already full," she said. "You showed me where the spare key was hidden, remember?"

"I see," replied Susan and tried to look serious. "That was presumptuous of you, wasn't it?"

The younger girl grinned. "Yeah. I'm just a cheeky bloody New Zealander, aren't I?" She jumped up. "Look, I'll cook tonight's meal, if you like." She screwed her nose up. "With Cody out of the picture I've nothing else to do at the moment, anyhow."

"Thanks," retorted Susan.

"I didn't mean it that way," Heather answered as her face turned serious.

"I know," said Susan. "You're always welcome. I told you that only last week."

"Thanks Susan," the girl said, clasped Susan's arms in a brief hug and almost skipped away to continue her own work in the office. In her enthusiasm, Heather never noticed Susan freeze and step back when she was touched.

Susan frowned in annoyance at her automatic reaction at her friend's energy and enthusiasm. She knew it would be good to have company even if it was only until Heather found another boyfriend to shift in with.

Heather awoke in darkness to the sounds of screams and sobs from across the corridor. With her heart racing, she leaped out of bed and ran across to the second bedroom.

In the dull reflected light she saw her friend on the bed, screaming and kicking. Blankets and sheets were gone, Susan's skin was covered in perspiration, and she was clutching her nightgown in a clenched fist around her throat. Her whole body vibrated almost in a convulsion as moans and foreign language cries filled the room.

But nobody else was there! Susan was asleep with her eyes moving rapidly beneath shut eyelids.

"Susan," Heather whispered in an anxious voice as she touched her friend's shoulders. "Wake up. You're having a nightmare. You're okay! Understand!"

Susan's eyes jerked opened and she stared in utter horror at Heather before she broke

into shuddering sobs of relief.

"You were having a nightmare," Heather said. "I know you aren't meant to wake people in the middle of a dream but..." she shuddered. "I was worried."

Susan pulled the blankets over her raised knees, grabbed a handkerchief off the dresser, blew her nose and wiped tears from her cheeks. "Thank you," she whispered. "I don't have them so often now but when the memories return..." She stopped and gave a faint smile. "I'll be okay, now."

"I doubt it." Heather replied. She sat on the bed corner and glanced at the bedside clock. It was almost three a.m. "I'm going to get you a hot drink." Her eyes were full of compassion. "Do you want to talk about it?"

Susan gave a faint smile but shook her head. "Some other time, maybe," she replied, "Not now. I just want to forget. I'm sorry for giving you such a fright."

Heather grimaced. "Well, we're going to have a drink then I'm slipping into the other bed here," she added. "My God, you shouldn't be by yourself if you have these terrible nightmares."

"I've been by myself for years," Susan replied with a touch of sadness in her voice. Suddenly she smiled. "But I'm glad you're here tonight. What say we have something stronger than a coffee?"

Heather laughed. "Why not?" she replied.

The next lunchtime there was a change in the weather but Susan put on her coat and headed out the office door.

"See you later," Heather called. Her own lunch break was an hour later.

"Sure." Susan smiled and headed for the elevator.

With a slight pang of disappointment she realized the waterfront was deserted as she braved the downpour and headed for the small shelter she'd often used in these conditions. She sat down, undid her sandwiches and grinned as the first seagull swooped down to be fed.

"Hello, again," said a voice and the young woman jerked around.

"Sorry to give you a fright," Frazer apologized. "I thought the weather might be a bit rough for you."

"I see," replied Susan, "but why are you here?"

Frazer flushed and shrugged. "I hoped you might be here," he muttered.

"What difference should I make?" she asked. Her eyes caught his and the glances held.

"I'm Frazer Winton," he introduced himself.

"Susan Milenkova," she replied before switching her eyes across to the two seagulls waiting expectantly for more bread.

"And where are you from, Susan?" Frazer asked.

"Here," she replied. "This is my only home, now."

"Sorry," he muttered. "I didn't mean to pry."

"You didn't, Frazer," she replied. "It's just that..." her voice trailed off into silence.

"I love the rain almost as much as the sunshine," the man continued.

There was silence again for a while before they both began to speak about the weather, the view and other neutral topics. All the time though, Susan studied her companion while attempting to remain casual.

Finally the dinner hour was up. She stood and smiled at Frazer. "Do you walk?" she asked.

"Why yes," stuttered Frazer. "I guess."

"Every evening I walk around the waterfront and pass here about six fifteen. If you'd like to come..." Once again her voice trailed off.

"I'll be here," Frazer replied.

That evening, dressed in shorts and floppy shirt, Frazer arrived early at the shelter. He'd only just sat down to put his sneakers on when Susan arrived. Frazer grinned. In a white blouse, brown shorts and backpack, she looked even more attractive than in formal work clothes. She approached and stood in front of him with blue eyes searching his face.

"Where to?" he asked.

"I usually head around the bay towards the airport," she replied in a quiet voice. "Thank you for coming, I hope your wife or family don't object."

"I live alone," Frazer answered.

"I see," replied Susan in the same neutral tone she used earlier in the day and fixed him with another stare. "I'm not interested in any relationships so if that is your desire, perhaps you should leave."

Frazer gave a tiny smile. "You do call a spade a spade don't you?"

Susan frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand," she said. "We aren't going gardening."

"No," Frazer said. "It's just a saying and means you're blunt. Do you know what I mean?"

Susan smiled in return. "I do," she whispered. "I didn't want you to think I'm an easy lay. Is that another local saying?"

"Yes," laughed Frazer. "Let's just take our walk before we get completely confused."

"Sure," Susan replied and strolled along beside her companion.

For over an hour they walked and chattered about the view and anything else that took their eyes. It wasn't until they had circled back and were almost at the shelter when Susan said. "You said you lived alone but you wear a wedding ring. Why?"

Frazer grimaced. "We're separated," he said. "Claire moved in with another guy." He shrugged. "She said I was too boring and I should be married to the bloody computer."

Susan ran a tongue over her top lip and her eyes turned serious. "If she is that sort of woman, I'd say you're better off without her."

"People change." Frazer shrugged and gazed out at the lights of the harbor. "I love these hot evenings," he said.

"Me too," Susan replied and lapsed back into silence.

Somehow, Frazer felt content and at peace with the world. He wanted to reach out and squeeze the tanned hand mere centimeters from his own but hesitated.

The young woman glanced up into Frazer's soft eyes. "I must be going," she murmured, turned and walked away.

The evening walks together became a feature of Frazer's life and though little was said he found himself attracted to the intriguing girl from overseas. Her welcoming smile and tiny laugh when he pointed out things in the harbor made him feel almost tingly inside. The faint whiff of her perfume or hair shampoo, the sight of her running across a stretch of pebbly sand, would, without warning, make him quiver in excitement.

But they never touched. Frazer did not know the reason why but noticed a slight tremble of Susan's hand one evening when he reached out to help her off a rock surrounded by a rouge wave from the incoming tide.

"I'm fine," she'd retorted with a chill in her voice, ignored the outstretched hand and jumped across to the sand. She walked away half a dozen steps before turning and the warmth returned to her voice. "Thank you, Frazer. That wave was unexpected, wasn't it?"

It was almost two weeks before Frazer decided that if he did nothing beyond walking and talking he might as well discretely withdraw and continue his life as before.

"Susan" he said with almost a nervous twitch after their walk. "Would you like to drive home for some supper? I promise you that's all it will be."

Susan hesitated before replying but nodded slowly. "I'd like that Frazer," she finally said. "Perhaps we could stop at my apartment first and I'll tell Heather I'll be a bit late."

"Good idea," he answered, escorted his companion and opened the car door for her.

Susan smiled and bent her legs to sit in. For the first time, Frazer noticed several long purple scars up the inside of the tanned legs. He diverted his eyes and hoped she hadn't noticed his gaze.

Susan, though, had seen his eyes fix onto her legs and also the quick glance away. Doubt rushed through her mind and her hands shook as she clipped on the seat belt and watched the man walk around to the driver's seat and slide in. After all he was almost a complete stranger.

Frazer, however, did not start the car. Instead he turned to look at her with compassion in his eyes. "If you'd rather, I'll just drop you home?" he said.

Susan smiled and physically relaxed. "I'd like a cup of coffee, Frazer," she whispered. "I feel I can trust you."

She gazed out at the traffic as they drove off and reflected back over the last few moments. He'd made no mention of her scars and she was pleased. If he only knew there were others...

Frazer's home was in one of the hill suburbs above the city. Susan became completely lost and once more a surge of apprehension gripped her. The car turned into a long shared driveway then left into a modern home with an attached garage. Exterior lights flashed on as Frazer clicked a remote and the garage door slid up to reveal a neat array of tools and workshop equipment inside. He drove in and switched off while the door slid back down on its rollers.

Frazer held an adjacent door open and Susan stepped into an open living area. The room was warm and comfortable with low furniture, several paintings of country scenes and a breakfast nook at the far end. Outside the windows, city lights twinkled below.

Everything smelt of polish and cleanliness and Susan's earlier fear evaporated. Somehow, the room reflected Frazer's kindness and compassion, the pale colors, a long bookshelf filled with paperbacks and a few large reference books. The only untidy area was a far corner where a computer sat on a large polished desk piled high with folders, papers, boxes and other paraphernalia.

"My home office," Frazer apologized. "It gets a bit messy at times."

"It's lovely," whispered Susan and walked around the area to large patio windows that lead onto a narrow balcony. "What a view."

"Yes, I like it," the man replied. "I'm going to have one great fight over the property with my ex-wife. She wants the place but I refuse to move." He walked over to the kitchen, took out some coffee mugs and plugged in the kettle. "There's only instant, I'm afraid."

"That's all I ever have," Susan replied and gave a tiny cough. "Can I freshen up, please."

"Of course," Frazer replied. "Sorry, I should have thought. I'll get your backpack from the car. The bathroom is downstairs to the left." He indicated to a narrow but well lit stairwell leading down under the garage.

Five minutes later Frazer had just poured the coffee when she returned, dressed a clean pale blue blouse, denim skirt and with a touch of make up.

"I like your blouse," he stammered and flushed as if he regretted making the comment. Susan, though, smiled and sat at the table.

"Thank you," she said. Warmth radiated from her as she sipped the coffee and began to chat.

Frazer found himself telling Susan everything about himself; his job and his break-up and separation from Claire's after discovering she was having an affair.

"Women can be as disloyal as men, it seems" was Susan's only comment but Frazer noticed she seemed genuinely interested and not merely being polite.

It was almost midnight when Susan stood and almost reluctantly suggested she'd better be going and Frazer drove her home. At her apartment, Susan turned and whispered.

"Thank you, Frazer. You don't know how much I enjoyed your company. I'll see you at the harbor tomorrow."

Suddenly the car door was shut and she was gone. Frazer frowned as he drove off and wondered about her. Not once did she mention anything about her own life beyond her job and Heather who had recently shifted in with her. Secondly, they never physically touch; there was not even a handshake or brush against each other.

He also realized his intense feelings about this young woman were growing stronger every day. He wanted to hold her close and tell her no matter what tragedy she'd had in her life it didn't matter, but there were still barriers there he could not penetrate.

"My God, she's one great person," he sighed to Inky, the cat who appeared at his door when he arrived home. "Where were you when Susan was here? You'd better get to know her, old son," he added and rubbed the cat's ears. "I've a feeling she'll be around a lot," then added with a chuckle, "Even if it isn't for the night."

The cat just purred and waited for his meat. That was priority number one.

CHAPTER THREE

"How do I look?" Heather said as she stepped into the kitchen and swung around.

Susan glanced up and smiled. In build, Heather was slightly shorter and chubbier than herself but was, by no means overweight. Tonight she was dressed in a long black evening gown with a low cut front below tanned bare shoulders. Her blonde hair was combed high and with light make up, dangling earrings and modern black shoes, she was an attractive young woman.

"You look simply gorgeous," Susan complimented. "I hope Brad Finlayson appreciates all the effort you put into making yourself so enticing."

"Oh, he will," said Heather and glanced at the wall clock. "Look at that, I'm even early."

"Better go and have another shower." Susan laughed. Heather's enthusiasm was infectious and she almost wished she was attending the charity ball, too.

Heather was about to sit down at the kitchen table when she knocked her handbag over and the contents spilled onto the floor.

"I'll help," Susan offered and bent down to pick up the bits and pieces lying around. One small article, though, caught her eye. She picked it up to place back in the purse when Heather, her face a sudden scarlet, snatched it off her. It was a packet on condoms.

"Oh Heather," Susan sighed.

Heather immediately jumped on the defensive. "Well, why not?" she retorted.

"No reason." Susan replied but her expression was strange, not disapproving but obviously not enthusiastic about the discovery, either.

"You aren't my mother, Susan," the girl continued with her voice slightly raised. "It's better than getting pregnant or catching Aids, now isn't it?"

"I guess," Susan replied, "but what's the rush? You hardly know Brad."

"Oh my God, Susan," Heather continued. "You're only half a dozen years older than me, I like you very much, but you act like an old maid at times. If you weren't such a prude and went and had a roll with Frazer, you'd enjoy life more, you know."

Susan just stood and gazed in a hurt fashion at her young companion. "I'm sorry Heather. You are right. Go and enjoy yourself. Perhaps I do need to do more in life."

Their conversation was interrupted by a knock on the door that Heather answered "Hi

Brad," she called, "...Won't be a moment." She gave Susan a smile, slipped away to the bathroom then returned, gathered up her purse and a cardigan and waved a silent good-bye.

Later in the evening, Susan went to have a shower and noticed something placed on the vanity unit so she could not miss it. The packet of condoms was there with a tiny note stuck to it. *Perhaps you might need them. Love Heather*, it said.

Sunday was a beautiful autumn morning when Susan, Frazer, Heather and Brad arrived for lunch beside the Rangitikei River, two hours drive north of Wellington, to meet up with four other car loads of Susan's work mates and their spouses.

Before she met Frazer, the *Beehive Walking Group*, as they called themselves, had been one of Susan's few social outlets. They had regular weekend outings and periodically planned a trip further afield. This was the first longer trip Frazer had participated in.

Susan scrambled out of the car and gazed, enthralled at the view. From the sandy beach where the cars had parked, the Rangitikei River, though only a dozen meters wide, was a thundering mass of white water that frothed over, through and between rocks. This was white water rafting territory and the spray filtered sunshine into a rainbow above. Beyond the river, a massive white cliff towered above them, so high it seemed to move as clouds floated by.

"Wow! What a spectacular view," she gasped and her eyes twinkled at the sheer delight of being out in the New Zealand countryside.

"Look!" Heather exclaimed and pointed up stream to where a yellow rubber raft appeared around the corner of the river. While the spectators watched, six people aboard, all dressed in orange life jackets and bright yellow helmets entered the rapids and hurtled towards them. It shot into the air and slapped down under a wave only to appear again with water pouring off the passengers who were all on one side frantically paddling to maintain control.

Before the next corner was reached there was a minor drop of a meter of pounding spray that the raft had to navigate. One raft passenger, it was hard to tell the gender, found time to wave before the raft hit the drop, careered straight into the cliff, bounced back and swung left to disappear out of sight behind a grove of native trees.

"They'll be overseas tourists," Frazer commented. "I'll take you white water rafting sometime, if you like."

Susan stared at the pounding water before beaming back at her friend. "It looks scary," she said.

"I'll go with you," Heather interrupted. "Poor Susan's getting a bit old for this sort of fun. Come on Brad, let's go around the bend and see where the raft went. "

Brad grinned at Susan and Frazer and watched his partner run away. "How long are we here?" he asked.

"The walk takes about two hours," Frazer replied. "I guess we can stay here half an hour. Okay?"

"Sure," said Brad and tore after Heather.

The actual trip planned was a hike up the old Mangaweka Railway Deviation adjacent to the Rangitikei River. Over a decade earlier, three high level bridges had been built across the river and a tributary to divert the railway away from a windy hilly northern section of line. Tracks had been removed and the original land sold to local farmers. However, the cuttings were still there along with five rail tunnels through the hills. It was a perfect but largely unused trail with magnificent views of the new viaducts, the river and scenic Rangitikei hinterland.

Three cars, including Frazer's, turned off onto a narrow gravel road barely wider than the cars and wound up a long hillside to the road's end by an abandoned farmhouse.

Instead of following them the remaining two cars continued along Highway One north of the walk. The plan was that the two groups would walk in different directions, meet in the middle, swap car keys and continue to the opposite end where cars were waiting. Afterwards

everyone would meet back at the picnic site. If everything went as planned they'd be home by nine in the evening.

After parking on a grass verge, the dozen hikers climbed a fence and made their way down a steep grass covered embankment to the walking track at the bottom.

"The last time I came through here," Frazer said, "I was on the limited express in the middle of the night when I was about ten. My mother used to put my brother and myself on the train and we'd travel up to Auckland to spend a few days of the holidays with my grandparents."

"You never told me you had a brother."

"Didn't I? Dan's a couple of years younger than I am." He smiled at Susan. "Have you any brothers or sisters?"

"I used to," Susan's replied in a hushed voice, "but they're all gone. Everyone's gone."

Frazer noticed her eyes, regretted his question and mentally kicked himself for bringing Susan's past up. "I'm sorry," he muttered.

Susan smiled. "No," she answered. "It's a perfectly sensible question, Frazer. I had a sister but my parents and her were killed in our civil war. I guess I was the lucky one to escape."

"No," Frazer answered. "I am to have you here with me."

Susan looked at him and smiled. "You say the nicest things," she said and changed the topic. "I love the rolling green hills and the smell of fresh air," she whispered. "I doubt if anywhere on Earth has such beautiful untainted countryside."

"Yes but the number of people who never leave the city limits is amazing."

They were half way through the first tunnel when Susan felt a pang of fear grip her. It was as if she'd been in the tunnel before, but that was impossible. She was at the rear with Frazer and could see the onion shaped exit with green hills and a square of blue sky beyond. Silhouetted against the incoming light were the silhouettes of Heather and Brad. Heather's distinct laughter rolled back at them. The flashlight beam barely lit the gravel beneath their feet so she ran her fingers along the rough concrete walls to orientate herself.

"Are you there, Frazer?" she asked with a faint quiver in her voice.

"Right behind you," he said. "Careful, it looks as if the exit will be as muddy as the entrance was."

Susan shook her head and swallowed. That brief moment of apprehension passed, she stepped out into the sunshine and brushed through the slightly damp grass. They were in a valley between hills with shrub growing up the bank on each side.

"Hurry up, you two," she heard Heather's voice call back. "We haven't got all day, you know!"

"She's a bit of a character, isn't she?" Frazer commented.

"Yes," said Susan.

The former railway bed curved left into another cutting where, behind a wooden gate stood the second tunnel, a circle of darkness in the hillside.

Susan glanced at her fingers and saw they were black with soot. "The tunnel walls must be ingrained with it from the old steam trains," she said as she showed her hand to Frazer.

"Yes," laughed her companion. "Come on. We've been left behind again."

He opened the gate and let Susan through.

Tunnel 10C had a slight curve so the far end couldn't be seen, only pitch blackness and one tiny light as Heather and Brad disappeared out of sight. Susan once again ran her fingers along the wall while Frazer shone the flashlight in front so she could see where to tread.

Half way through the tunnel Susan felt a sharp pain through her head and everything around began to spin. Her ears throbbed, the air turned freezing and she found herself shivering even though she had a heavy coat on. Heavy coat! She wasn't wearing a heavy coat. She glanced back and gasped.

In the entranced with light shining behind him was a soldier, grim, bearded, dressed in camouflage and holding an automatic weapon. He had a massive flashlight in his other hand and the beam played along the tunnel wall and lit them up, two trembling sisters huddled against the sooty concrete wall.

Susan's mouth let out a stifled scream and a hand grabbed hers. It was a soft hand, no bigger than her own. She turned and looked into the terrified eyes of her sister, Senada.

"Come on." hissed Senada. She wasn't speaking English but Serbo-Croatian.

Susan knew where she was. Her sister and herself were in a railway tunnel under the hills behind Sarajevo. She could see the shiny iron tracks and sleepers beneath her feet and the enemy was at the entrance. She wasn't Susan in New Zealand but Zuzana, the refugee in Bosnia at the height of the ethnic war.

"Run!" hissed Senada and with Zuzana's hand firmly gripped in hers, tore forward into the darkness. They had reached a curve in the tunnel when Zuzana stumbled and crashed to her knees. The graze stung but there was no time to worry about such a small inconvenience. The terrified eighteen-year-old stood up and continued after her older sister who was a few meters ahead by now.

She could hear pounding footsteps behind and a gruff voice screaming. "Get the sluts!"

"Come on!" screamed Senada. There was no need to keep quiet now that they'd been seen. The two Milenkova sisters stumbled over the sleepers towards the pentagon of light ahead. Outside it was white with snow but anything was better than being caught in the tunnel.

Zuzana's heart pounded and cramp cut through her side like a knife but she still ran on. Senada's hand found hers again and the exit was only meters away when a voice called out "Stop!"

They almost made it!

Snow was beneath Zuzana's feet when a rifle shot rang out, the volume so loud, the girl's ears hurt with the high level report. Senada screamed and crashed into the snow over the railway line. Zuzana stared in frozen horror as blood squirted from her sister's throat.

"Senada!" she screamed and bent down beside her sister. "Senada! Senada! Speak to me!"

The elder Milenkova girl jerked up, there was a gurgle and the body flopped back, lifeless on the gravel. Zuzana cuddled Senada in her arms, looked down at vacant eyes and realized her sister was dead.

"No! No! It can't be," she screamed hysterically. The distraught teenager was oblivious to the footsteps behind as she rocked her elder sister back and forth, back and forth. Tears poured down her cheeks and plopped onto the bloody stones.

"Susan," said a kind voice as if through a fog. A hand held hers but it wasn't a soft female hand or the rough callused ones of the soldiers grabbing her off her sister. It was Frazer! There was no snow outside but warm autumn sunlight and soft green grass. She was in New Zealand and safe.

"It's all right, Susan," Frazer said in almost a whisper. "You had some sort of turn but are okay now. Heather, your friends and myself are here with you."

Susan stared around and found she was sitting on the warm embankment with Frazer kneeling beside her. His hand was holding hers. He'd ever touched her before but she did not mind. For the first time in years, she did not shrink back at physical contact with another person.

"It was just like your nightmares, wasn't it?" came a soft female voice. Heather crouched down and clasped her other hand.

"Nightmares?" queried Frazer and glanced over to Heather.

"Yes," Heather replied. "It used to be every night when I first shifted in with Susan but lately it's once a week or so. I sleep in her room and think it helps." She pursed her lips and stared at Frazer. "I'm sure you have helped, too."

Susan shook her head to clear it and was about to thank her two friends when her body suddenly erupted into violent trembles. Tears streamed down her cheeks and heart-rending sobs filled the air. Her two friends sat and held her hands before Frazer reached across, placed an arm around her shoulders and squeezed her trembling, perspiring body in a gentle hug.

Susan did not pull away but tucked her head in the nape of Frazer's neck as her sobs slowly subsided and she became coherent again. She accepted Frazer's handkerchief, wiped her eyes and even managed a faint smile.

"I remember now," she said. "We were chased in a railway tunnel like this one. My sister, Senada was shot and killed."

Her eyes, wide with the circular pupils fixed onto Frazer. "Three soldiers pulled me off Senada body, dragged me back into the tunnel and they..." her voice broke and anguished sobs replaced her words.

"Forget about it," said Heather who was now on the verge of tears.

"No, I think she needs to talk," Frazer corrected and turned back to his friend. "What happened Susan?"

Susan blinked and cried again before she could get the words out. "There were three of them. They took me into the tunnel, held me down and took turns to rape me. Over and over!" The distraught young woman burst into tears again and dropped her head into Frazer's chest. "I was a virgin."

Heather turned white and stared at Frazer. "Oh my God," she cried. "It was only Friday when we had a bit of a row and I told her she was just a prude." She turned to Susan. "I'm so sorry," she sobbed. "I didn't know."

"How could you?" Susan replied and turned to her other friend. "I'm tainted, Frazer. I remember every detail now, the pain, the blood, and their horrible laughter. All the time Senada was lying dead on the railway tracks a few meters away." She bent forward as tears continued to stream down her cheeks onto the grass. "You won't want anything to do with me now, will you?"

Frazer squeezed his arm closer around her then used two fingers to twist her head. He reached forward and kissed her on the lips, so gently it was only a tickle of skin against skin. "That's what I think of you, Susan," he stuttered as he tried to control his own emotions.

Once again she did not pull back but stared into his eyes. She reached forward and kissed him back before standing up and brushing herself down. "I had forgotten everything," she whispered. "Oh, I remembered what happened in later weeks but not that first time, not my sister being shot. My mind had blanked it all out. There was just a numbness there..."

She grabbed Heather's hands. "Thank you for being..." she hesitated. "... Just you." Susan was still in Frazer's arms so she leaned back and rubbed her hair into his chin, "and Frazer, what can I say?"

"Nothing," he replied huskily. "You need say no more. We both understand." He turned to Heather. "Look," he said. "You catch up to Brad and the others. Tell them Susan feels ill and we're going to return to my car. We'll meet you all back at the picnic site. Okay?"

"Are you sure?" Heather replied doubtfully.

"I'm fine now," sniffed Susan. "Go ahead. I don't want to spoil your afternoon."

Heather bent forward, kissed her friend's cheek and glanced at Frazer who nodded. "See you later," she said and walked away.

After she left, Susan walked across to a grassy mound and stared out at the view. The sun was still shining and way below, the Rangitikei River cut through a canyon of white cliffs while, on the plateau above, huge oblongs of green and ploughed paddocks stretched away into the distance.

"I couldn't bare anyone touching me," she whispered, "but will you hold me again, Frazer?"

Frazer stood and tucked his arms around her waist then reached down and kissed the back of her neck. "Anytime you want me," he said. "I'll be here for you."

Susan stood and gazed into the distance. "Even though I'm a harlot?" She shivered again.

"You are not," Frazer replied in a firm, almost cross voice. "You're a victim, Susan."

Don't you ever degrade yourself again. Never!"

"No Frazer," Susan replied and gave a tiny laugh. "Look at that view," she added. "Feel that sunshine! Somehow I feel better now." She turned and her eyes fixed once again onto Frazer's, "but I can't go back into that tunnel."

"There's no need," Frazer replied. "The hill is not large. We'll walk back over the top. There's a sheep track zigzagging around."

The two turned and made their way above the tunnel and Susan's hand remained in Frazer's; for the whole hike back it remained in his. Every so often she'd give a tiny squeeze and glance into his eyes before walking on. Back at the car she turned and the pair hugged close, her head went up and they kissed, firmly on the lips and her tears once again began to flow.

But these tears were cleansing ones. Her mind had opened a fraction and let the grief pour out but with someone to love her it was not quite so difficult. She was not completely alone any more.

On Monday at lunchtime Susan met Frazer along the waterfront as usual. It was another calm day and they stood together watching an orange helicopter shifting building frames from a wharf onto a site half way up the nearby hillside.

They chattered about neutral things, almost as if the event of the previous day never happened. However when it was time to go, instead of a brief farewell and a hasty departure to the traffic lights, Susan gazed at Frazer and ran a tongue over her top lip.

"Well, aren't you going to give me a kiss," she whispered.

"Oh Susan!" Frazer gasped. He gathered her in his arms and their lips met, long and passionate. He could taste the wax of her lipstick, feel her tongue lashing his and her tight breasts against his chest as she clung to him. Somehow, the harbor seemed more colorful and beautiful than ever at that moment. His whole body flooded with adrenaline.

"See you this evening," she whispered with sparkling eyes. "There's one other thing Frazer."

"What's that?" he asked.

"Wipe the lipstick off your face. It could be embarrassing." She smiled and walked away.

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