



PART TWO
THE TREASURE HUNT



CHAPTER 16

DESPERATE MEETING

It's here, it's here, it's here somewhere! Somewhere, gotta be somewhere!" I stammered loudly while frantically going through my shoulder-bag.

"Keep it down," said Gupta. "It's two in the morning."

He and Techo stood at the door to my tiny room at the hostel. The examined and rejected receipts, notes, brochures, stubs, and cards were in a pile on the floor. I shook the bag upside down. Nothing more. Next I dumped my dirty laundry and started going through it.

"Got it," I said, picking a business card out of a shirt pocket. "Sam Collins. Ah good—he wrote his home number on it."

We didn't know what the heck to do. Gupta and I did not want to call the cops, not yet. If there was any chance of us getting Mindy back before Rudy found out, then we might live to see our native land again. I wanted to get Samo's take on

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it. He didn't object to a two a.m. call and an immediate rendezvous when I started off by saying Mindy had just been kidnapped.

Samo drove up to the hostel and parked his Tercel behind Techo's dark blue fifty-five Chevy—leaving plenty of room because Techo was also behind it—getting a jacket out of his trunk. 'Bout time. Even in the midst of a dilemma, it made me cold to look at him in a damp tee shirt in this chilly night air. He'd given me my jacket back long before. I stood up from a sidewalk bench, shook hands with Samo, thanked him for coming, and said a quick, "Techo, Samo." I dialed the evening's code on the front door. We went inside and up stairs to the communal kitchen. Gupta had coffee ready. He thanked Samo for coming. Samo didn't drink coffee. There were tea bags and hot water. Milk, sugar. A couple of hostel guests were making a wee hours snack. Not much talk. Kitchen sounds mainly—clinking and clacking. Cups filled. Ready. We went into the empty computer room. Door closed.

Then Gupta and I were talking on top of each other excitedly about what happened and how we have no idea what happened and what could have happened to Mindy and how Rudy would kill us and if we don't tell him maybe he'd kill us for that. Samo suggested we drink our coffee and just be quiet for a moment. Techo was already quiet. Samo had us tell everything we knew one at a time. Gupta went first, then Techo had some minimal comments, and then I went through the events of the evening. We described the guy who had been following Mindy—Aborigine, not fat, not thin, maybe in his mid twenties, short hair, dressed in jeans, a brown flannel shirt, tennis shoes.

"What about the fact that there wasn't a scream?" I asked.

"Could mean she knew 'em," said Samo.

"We know who did it—the Aborigine," said Gupta.

"We don't know that for sure," said Samo.

"Okay—but he's the only suspect, right?" I asked.

"Not really."

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“What do you mean?”

“Just hang on. We’ll see.”

“He could have put his hand over her mouth before she had a chance to yell,” I said.

“She’s not the screaming type,” said Gupta. “I think even if it was strangers kidnapping her she’d not be afraid. If she had time to scream she’d be likely to use it to ask the guy if he wants to smoke a cone.”

“Now Gupta,” I said.

“You know her,” he said. “She’s outrageous. Do you remember what she was singing at the time?”

“I’m a slut,” I said. “Sorry Samo, left that part out. Nice tune too.”

Samo asked if we noticed anything more about the car.

“It was big and black and went by in a flash,” I said. “It slid up to her—on our side so we couldn’t see her—and sped off—all in a few seconds.”

“Like a big old car,” said Gupta.

“It was like from gangster movies,” I said.

“It had some brown wide trim down the side,” said Gupta.

“Memories change details,” said Samo. “You might think it looks like an old car from a gangster movie when it was just a big black Mercedes touring car.”

“It happened so fast,” said Gupta, “it could have been anything.”

“It was a La Salle Hearse—carved panel—I’d guess about 1937.”

We all turned to look at Techo.

“Good morning. Good morning. Time to get up.” It was Samo.

I got up from the couch in the TV room and greeted him in a blur. Rubbing my eyes I trudged out to the hall. Checked on Techo—still asleep in my bed. When I returned, bladder empty, face splashed, Samo was sitting at the kitchen table. Soon Gupta was pouring coffee and hot water for

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tea again—and buttering toast. I looked at the clock on the wall above the sink. I'd slept about three hours. We'd talked till five. Samo had told us to get some sleep then so we could function. Now other guests of the hostel were crowding around us making breakfast, coffee, tea.

"Samo's been working on this all night," said Gupta.

"You haven't slept?" I asked.

"Nope."

"And you got up early," I said to Gupta.

"I got something on my mind," he said.

"Where can we meet?" Samo asked.

People online in the computer room. No one in the TV room yet.

"You guys slept in here?" Samo asked.

"Yep," Gupta said.

"No covers?"

"Nope. We were drunk and beat and it wasn't that cold," I said.

"You didn't seem drunk," said Samo. "Adrenalin."

"Yeah, I'm fine, but I can still feel what we drank," said Gupta.

"I'm ready to do whatever," I said.

"What about Techo?" Samo asked.

"Let him sleep," I said. "This isn't really his problem. And if he takes it on he can still sleep now."

"Here's what's happening as I see it," said Samo. "You guys have gotten yourselves in the middle of a gang war."

"Oh, great. Love the opening," said Gupta.

"There have been so many gang killings in Melbourne. Two new ones this week. Mindy's Uncle Rudy is the head of one of the gangs. Bobby Fenster is the head of the other gang. Fenster collects vintage cars. I don't see a La Salle registered to him or to any of his businesses but that might show up with further digging. There's enough for the police to question him on this."

"But if the police go to him then Rudy will know," I said.

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“Look,” Gupta said. “I think we should be clear about this. We don’t want Rudy to know, but Mindy’s more important than us. You’re in charge, Samo.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Anytime you think it’s to her definite advantage to bring the cops in, then of course, do it. But we want to try to get her back without Rudy knowing if possible.”

“Sure. And this might not be foul play.”

“Right,” I said. “We’re not positive of that.”

“Do they attack each other’s families?” asked Gupta. “I didn’t think they did that.”

“No, you’re right. They don’t,” said Samo. “But there are three reasons why Fenster might have made an exception here.” He paused to pick up a piece of toast. He chewed for a moment. “First, Fenster’s favorite Lieutenant was killed a few months ago. The guy was like a son to him. That might have broken the family rule as far as Fenster was concerned. *If* he’s behind it, he *might* have kidnapped Mindy as payback, but maybe to help negotiate an end to killing, maybe to trade her for someone or something.”

“A trade followed by a double murder of two insignificant tourists,” said Gupta.

“Rudy probably doesn’t know anything yet. We still have time,” said Samo.

“Second?” I asked.

“Second—Fenster’s got no family other than his wife. She’s almost always at home and when she goes out she’s well-guarded. So there’s not the usual conditions for fear of retaliation.”

“Where is this son of a bitch?” asked Gupta. “I’ll go get Mindy from him. It’s my fault she was taken and my life’s not worth anything with her kidnapped anyway.”

“Hold on there,” said Samo.

“It doesn’t make sense to me,” I said. “It’s something that could get him in a lot of trouble with Rudy or the law—or both. Why would he do it? What’s to gain?”

“Leverage over Rudy you idiot,” said Gupta.

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“Yes,” Samo said, “but it would be like having a tiger by the tail. If Rudy knew Fenster had Mindy then at some point Fenster would pay. He might have it on Rudy at first, but either she’d come back alive in which case Rudy would get revenge, or she’d not, in which case Rudy would be unstoppable. But anyway, we’re just going in circles because it doesn’t really make good strategic sense. But,” he added looking at me, “it doesn’t have to make sense for him to do it. That brings us to number three.”

“Oh—third?” I said.

“Third,” said Samo. “Yeah—third and most important. Fenster is nuts. Let’s say highly eccentric. And unpredictable. I know guys who’ve been following him for years. They say nothing would surprise them. He’s done some brazen things in the past.”

“Like what?” Gupta asked.

“Well, nobody could prove it but we all know he engineered the theft of Phar Lap out of the Museum Victoria in Melbourne some years back.”

“Phar Lap?” I asked.

“A whole stuffed horse,” Samo nodded. “It wasn’t just any stuffed horse either but Phar Lap.”

“And who’s Phar Lap?” I asked again.

“How can you not know? Don’t they teach you anything in America?”

“Sorry.”

“Phar Lap was a racehorse, a national hero. Phar Lap won every important race in Australia back in the early thirties and then the Agua Caliente Handicap, the prize of American horse racing back then. There was nothing in any museum in Australia as important as Phar Lap in Melbourne. One day they went to work and Phar Lap was gone. The museum managed to keep it out of the papers. They just put up a notice that said Phar Lap was temporarily undergoing remedial taxidermy. Refused to bring the police into it because the culprits said there would be no trace of the body left to recover if the museum didn’t do exactly as it was told.

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The museum could not afford to lose Phar Lap. They paid the ransom. *That's* the type of crazy thing that guy's capable of. And it's also why I think, if it was Fenster who took Mindy, that she hasn't been harmed—just used."

"If she's being used," I said, "then Rudy will know soon—because what else could she be used for other than... than something having to do with him? We've got to act fast."

"What about the Aborigine?" Gupta asked.

"I don't know," said Samo. "Maybe he's working for them. Maybe he did it. But I think Fenster at least should be checked out."

"How do we do that?" asked Gupta.

"Fenster's at his place southwest of Dunsborough now. He's down there with his wife and some of his crew. I know this sounds crazy and dangerous but maybe somebody should go talk to him, ask him if he knows anything. Just confront him or appeal to him."

Gupta jumped up. "I'm going. I'm going down there and I'm gonna tell..."

"Maybe I should go," Techo said. We all turned to the door. "But could I have some coffee first?"

"I'll get it," I said.

"Would a third party, a neutral party like me be better?" said Techo when I returned.

"Maybe so," said Samo looking at Techo, "but he's sort of conservative in his tastes—if you know what I mean."

"Or what about you and me going?" Techo asked Samo. "Surely he wouldn't mess with you."

"I can't do that," said Samo. "I still consult with the police. They'd have to know if I went. And they can't know officially, not yet."

"I want to go," said Gupta. "I'm not afraid."

"I don't know. You gotta calm down."

"Gupta and me," I said.

"Hmm," Samo groaned and rubbed his head.

"Let us go," I said, "Gupta and me."

"Please, please," said Gupta. "I'll be cool."

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“That may just be the best,” Samo admitted. “She’s your friend. You’re outsiders. He likely won’t hurt you... probably. And he likes to meet people. He reads a lot. He’s a real talker that Fenster, otherwise known as Waxo for wax prolific. Rhymes with Max as in Mad Max. Remember that mad part—anything can happen.”

“How do we find him?” I asked.

“I’ve got that,” said Samo.

“I could drive and wait outside,” said Techo.

“No need,” said Gupta throwing a set of keys up in the air and jangling them upon their return to his hand. “We’ve got Mindy’s Porsche. You can give us a ride to it though.”

“Take showers first and put on clean clothes.” Samo said. “Look as presentable as you can. Fenster’s a stickler for form.”

“Everything of mine is back at Mindy’s,” said Gupta.

“Well go there.”

“It all needs to be cleaned.”

“You can wear something of David’s,” said Samo.

“Thanks a lot,” said Gupta.

“The baggy look is in,” I said.

“Or buy something on the way,” Samo suggested.

Before long we were getting into Techo’s Chevy. He gunned the engine.

“You’ve got my mobile number,” said Samo. “Call anytime.”

“Right here,” I said patting my shirt pocket, “and here,” tapping my head. “We’ll be in touch.”

“Good luck,” he said, “and be careful what you say. He’s not only crazy, he’s sensitive—can take offense—and he’s brutal. They’re all brutal.” He paused, looking down. “I hope I’m not making a mistake—letting you go like this.”