

## Geek

Sunday

Saying *no* to the Boss wasn't an option, even at three in the morning.

His mother would be unconscious until after sunrise. She'd taken one of her migraine tablets before going to bed. Geek's father was another matter. He'd gone out to some sports awards dinner. At least, that's where he said he'd gone. Geek hadn't heard him return, but that didn't mean anything. Geek's father could creep up on a ghost.

The phone vibrated in his hand for the third time.

parked at playground. move yourself!

Geek turned the front door latch. The bolt snuck through the mechanism. Geek slowed his turn. He'd had plenty of midnight experiences with this lock. It was the last eighth of a turn that had to be treated with respect. Any fast move and the bolt would snarl.

He'd weighed up the risk. Waking his father, if he was at home, could have unpredictable consequences. However, if it was a choice between getting on the wrong side of his father or pissing off the Boss: well, there wasn't any choice. Geek didn't think his father had any understanding of people like the Boss.

Geek eased out into the stairwell. He inserted his key into the lock and held back the bolt while he shut the door. All too often he'd put effort into a soundless exit only to ruin everything by leaving the bolt free to snap on its spring like a cannon shot.

The door was shut. Another successful escape!

'What took you so long?' the Boss hissed. 'Get in.'

The van's side door was open. Geek failed to dodge the meaty hand lunging out at him. Air rushed out of his lungs as thick fingers clamped around his upper arm, crushing the bicep and tricep against the bone. Geek's feet left the ground and an instant later his bum slammed into a seat. The vehicle was in motion before the door was shut.

'Give it to him,' the Boss sighed.

Fat Beard slapped a chunky envelope onto Geek's lap. He biopsied the envelope. Hundred dollar notes!

'It's a grand.' The Boss kept his wraparound shades pointed at Geek. 'We need you to drive a vehicle.'

'For a grand! Where to?' Some quick calculations had Geek's heart racing. 'What am I delivering?'

'Just a driving job,' the Boss hissed. 'One-way trip. We need you to dispose of the car.'

An invisible hammer tapped at Geek's throat. 'How?'

The Boss nodded again. Fat Beard reached behind his seat and swung over a jerry can. Its contents heaved against the sides.

'Splash over the floor. On the dashboard.' Fat Beard rattled a box of matches and pushed pink wet lips through his beard. 'Whoosh, Geeky Boy!'

'What about the engine and boot?' Geek asked.

'Pop. Lift. Splash.' Fat Beard rattled the matches again. 'Whumph!' He scratched at the fold of exposed fat where his belly button could've been. The first two knuckles of a finger vanished completely.

'You need to be quick,' the Boss rasped. 'Park the car where we tell you, splash the petrol, drop the match and vanish.'

They turned an industrial corner.

'This will do,' the Boss said to the silhouette driving the van.

They coasted up to a dark curb.

'You walk down there.' The Boss pointed towards a self-storage complex at the end of the road. Geek judged it to be about fifty metres away. 'There's a keypad at the gate. Ignore the sign telling you admission is only between seven a.m. and seven p.m.' The Boss stretched his lips horizontally. 'That only applies to civilians who don't have the master code. Now, listen carefully.'

Geek repeated the sequence of numbers once and it was lodged in his memory.

'Number twenty-three.' The Boss held out two keys. 'This one is for the lock-up. The other for a green Toyota parked inside. We'll meet you near Longburn, at the Rongotea turnoff for final instructions.'

Geek slid from his seat to the footpath.

'Don't get distracted,' the Boss hissed. 'The place isn't staffed at night but there is video surveillance! Sometimes, random checks are

made by a security firm.'

'Random checks,' Fat Beard echoed.

Geek waited until the van was out of sight before moving.

Houses lined one side of the street. They were all in darkness apart from one. The light from a flat-screen television flashed around the living room. The window had no drapes and the sound was turned up loud. Geek recognised the movie: *Psycho III*. Norman Bates was carving a girl up in the motel telephone booth.

Geek reached a T-junction. The front gate of the storage complex was on the opposite side of the junction. He scanned the tall fence, taking note of the electrified strands running along the top, about two metres high. He shifted his focus past the fence to the rows of storage units. A security camera, mounted on the roof of the nearest storage lock-up, pointed its snout towards a post, supporting the keypad controlling access to the front gate – the only entrance and exit. Geek pulled on his old blue beanie and tucked every strand of red hair under it. He ensured his eyebrows were covered. There was something about eyebrows on a website he'd visited; the eyebrow line is a critical factor in the creation of facial recognition software.

The metal recycling yard to the left of the storage complex was in total darkness. The inky outlines of sheds made against the night sky seemed friendlier than the sharp concentration camp yellow glare bathing the storage complex.

Geek approached the keypad. He kept his neck bent, making sure his face was turned away from the camera. As his finger was about to touch the first key he realised his mistake. Fingerprints! He wasn't stealing the car. Geek assumed it belonged to the Boss or someone in the Skull Busters gang. All the same, he had a feeling about this job. If the Boss was paying him a grand there had to be a lot at stake.

Geek didn't have any gloves. He'd have to improvise.

Enough of the yellow light splashed onto the scrap metal yard to show plastic bags caught in the fence. Geek walked over and plucked at one of them. It disintegrated between his fingers.

A metallic clink sounded from the darkness. Geek's stomach muscles clenched. He waited. Nothing.

The next bag was in better shape, but he had to work it loose from the wire. The last stubborn tag of plastic stretched as he pulled. The

clinking came to life again, this time accompanied by a deep and rapidly approaching growl.

Geek snapped the bag free and stood back as a dark bulk launched itself at him from the other side of the fence. The growl became a choked bark cut short as the clinking chain tensioned, snapping the Rottweiler's body around. It sprang back onto its paws and continued to growl as Geek backed away.

With the plastic wrapped around his finger and still keeping his head down, Geek tapped the code into the keypad. A magnetic bolt clunked and the gate rumbled aside, grinding its iron castors along the metal rail set into the concrete beneath. One of the castors needed oil. Its shrieks cut open the night.

Geek looked over his shoulder, hoping the late night TV watcher had his sound up full. The Rottweiler next door padded up and down, dragging its chain and coughing. Another dog, further away, yapped out a protest. No new lights came on in the street.

The moment the gate provided a big enough gap, Geek stepped through. He hit the *close* button on the inside keypad and the gate changed direction. Geek darted between the two nearest rows of lock-ups.

'Fifty-one, fifty-two . . .' He sprinted to the end and turned left. 'Seventy . . . for God's sake . . .' Geek spun on his heel and raced in the opposite direction. He passed the forties, the thirties. 'Twenty, twenty-one.'

He had it. Unlike the front gate, the roller door to locker twenty-three slid up with hardly a sound.

The green Toyota Corolla was an old model with all of the manufacturer's original trim. 'Sucks,' Geek muttered, kicking at the stovepipe exhaust. If it had a rotary engine that would've been different. Geek would've offered to buy the car if it was a rotary. With a flared exhaust, chrome trim and lowered suspension he could've made something of it. But it wasn't a rotary. 'It deserves to burn!'

A shriek of steel cut into his eardrums. Geek killed the torch and stepped towards the door. The front gate was opening. He could hear an engine running. Geek reached up and pulled the roller door down.

The vehicle at the gate revved. Geek shut his eyes and tried to trace its movements. The echoes made it difficult. He lost the sound

altogether and wondered if the security guards had gone. No! He'd have heard the gate shriek. Geek thanked the unknown maintenance person who'd neglected to oil the wheel.

While he waited, Geek's eyes started to run. And his nose. A sweet chemical smell lingered in the air. He'd missed it at first, but now it had him. Geek needed to cough. Dare he? He was about to risk a good throat clear when the engine sound roared to life.

They were in his row! He shut his eyes and swallowed. It didn't stop the fireworks display playing out at the back of his throat. Every nerve in that area was dancing and screaming out for a good cough.

The vehicle stopped. Geek saw light seep through the space beneath the door.

'Do you think it's open?' A voice said from outside.

The light washed up and down the gap between the roller door and concrete floor. A car door slammed and heavy footsteps crunched towards the door.

Geek hesitated. Where could he go?

The light under the door grew in intensity.

'The lock's okay,' a new voice said. 'Nothing forced.'

Geek backed away from the door, rolling one foot slowly from his toes down onto the heel before lifting the next.

'It doesn't look engaged. Try lifting the door,' the first voice commanded.

Geek quickened his pace. His hand brushed against cold steel.

The strip of light between the door and floor broadened. 'It's open!' the second voice called. 'The lock wasn't engaged.'

'Check it out!'

Geek took a larger pace back. The steel vanished from under his hand. There was nothing. Then the steel was back. A gap! Geek wedged between two steel panels just as the roller door was flung open.

A spotlight illuminated the Toyota. The beam went through the windscreen and reflected off rows of grey steel cupboards lining the walls. That's what he was wedged between, two banks of steel lockers.

He needed to cough more than ever. The chemical fumes were stronger in his hideaway. Geek held his beanie over his mouth and nose and swallowed as hard as he could in rapid fire.

The light played across the lockers along the wall opposite him and then switched to his side. He pressed himself as deep as he could into the space he'd found. As the beam passed over the gap, he saw its edge light up grey steel just millimetres from his body.

'Check under the car,' the first voice called.

The beam moved away and bounced about under the Toyota.

Geek didn't dare breathe. It was too risky to have air rushing through his over-sensitised throat.

'There's nothing here,' the second voice called. The beam sliced away and the roller door was pulled down firmly until the lock engaged. That didn't worry Geek. It could be opened from the inside. He needed to cough!

A car door slammed outside and the vehicle crept away.

Geek gulped retching breaths through his beanie, unable to control the rasping in his tormented throat. He managed to hold himself together until he thought the security guards were in the next row and then coughed until his beanie was soaked with mucous and tears.

He turned on his torch and scanned the lockers. Geek tried opening one. Locked! He lowered his nose to the seam in the door and jerked his head back as strong acetone fumes punched him in the face. He moved to the lock-up entrance where the air was fresher.

The security vehicle faded in and out of hearing and then revved up only to sink back into a low idle.

'Yes!' The squeaky castor on the front gate came to life. Geek waited for ten minutes before easing open the door of lock-up twenty-three.

It was burning time.

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Sheep browsing on the grassy slopes were the only sounds other than the thudding of Geek's heart. He stood a metre away from the car holding the jerry can, waiting. Waiting for what? He didn't know. Somebody to tell him not to do it!

He'd emptied all his pockets when collecting the petrol at the Rongotea intersection.

'Don't want to leave your chewing gum lying around,' Fat Beard had barked. 'Evidence.' He'd held up the jerry can. 'Bring back the empty! Petrol isn't marked with serial numbers. Cans are. So are cellphones!

Give.'

Geek twisted off the cap. The sweet fumes kneaded the back of his already sensitised throat. He choked down a fresh attack of fireworks.

Time was haemorrhaging. It would be light soon and he had to get home. The Boss was waiting for him five hundred metres away. He wouldn't wait all night. A thirty-kilometre hike home was the only alternative.

Geek picked up the can and was about to start splashing. He paused. He'd checked the glovebox, under the seats . . . everywhere for papers or objects. There was nothing. But he hadn't checked the boot. He couldn't check the boot.

The hood had popped open without any trouble. The boot was a different matter. When he'd pulled the release lever next to the driver's seat, instead of a firm click, the lever had come away freely from its mounting, trailing a cable behind it.

Geek placed the jerry can on the ground and moved to the rear of the car. He banged on the boot. It sounded like an empty car boot should. He inserted the key into the lock. It didn't turn. The boot lock and the ignition were not the same! He only had one key. He wanted to call the Boss and ask about the boot, but Fat Beard had his phone.

Shrugging, Geek picked up the jerry can and splashed. Fortunately, the lid was secured to the can by a chain so he didn't have to worry about it getting lost.

Geek sealed the can and placed it ten metres from the car. Empty fuel cans, he knew, were the most dangerous kinds of fuel cans.

He returned to the car. Just to be sure, he inserted his fingers under the lip of the boot lid and tried to lift it. It didn't move. 'Must be empty,' he muttered to himself.

Geek stood back. The full moon draped the green Toyota in cold light. The car sucked. Geek saw nothing worth saving. In his opinion, it wasn't even worth the thousand dollars he was getting for the job.

He scratched the match along the side of the box. A glow on the head bloomed, transferring its energy to the wood. He held his breath and tossed the flame onto the front seat.

The fireball erupting from the Toyota roasted the air around it. Geek was knocked off his feet. He rolled several times to get away from the searing heat. There was no chance of this fire dying. He'd opened all

the doors to feed it plenty of oxygen and it was greedy.

Finding the jerry can was easy in the flare light playing up the sides of the surrounding hills. White bleating wool puffs scurried up and over the slopes. Geek saw why the Boss had picked this spot. 'It's sheltered,' he'd hissed. 'The track finishes in an isolated dead end. And the farmer's away for the weekend. Do it quick and get out of there.'

It was time to go. Geek trotted briskly along the edge of the track, keeping close to the gully just in case he needed it. His work was done and the ride home was waiting.

He stopped at a bend in the road to have a last look at his handiwork. A mass of yellow and blue flames engulfed the vehicle. Sulphurous burning rubber fumes wafted down towards him. 'Cool,' he mouthed.

Geek jumped as the car emitted a loud pop and a white fireball rolled up into the night sky. A dark flapping rectangle was silhouetted against the blue core of the furnace and then blended in with the flames. The boot had popped open. Geek tried to penetrate the inferno with his gaze.

'It's empty,' he muttered. 'Has to be.'

## CHAPTER 2

# *Rochelle*

'Boooooooooo!'

'We've come to watch hockey. Not boxing!'

'Show some sportsmanship or go home!'

I don't know how it started. The umpire blew his whistle for the start of the game, dropped the puck and I won it. Before I could pass, though, an Aussie player barged me onto my bum. I looked up in time to see Maddie bury her shoulder into my attacker's side. After that it all went to hell in a hurry.

How my helmet came off, who knows or cares? I was on my skates just in time to take a hit to the side of my head, leaving me pirouetting. 'Bitch,' I hissed.

'Suck it up, Kiwi loser.' Another punch to the back of my head!

So long as it was an Aussie face I was aiming at, I didn't care. I lashed out at whoever came into view and tried to ignore the hits landing all over my body. It's just as well hockey gloves are padded or we'd all have been stretcher cases. Thank God we'd thrown our sticks aside.

For an instant the bodies around me cleared and I got a view of the rest of our team and the Australian line-up pouring through the gates onto the rink and throwing themselves into battle. This encouraged Maddie. She arched her back and headbutted the Aussie goalie. Even though they both had helmets on, I winced at the sound. The goalie went sprawling onto her back.

Some of the stuff being yelled by the spectators can't be repeated. Lunch was being served and knuckles were the only item on the menu. It'd been coming since the opening ceremony last night when all the teams lined up on the rink holding flags and singing the national anthems. The Australian and New Zealand junior women's teams ended up in the front row of each line-up so we were facing each other. Taunts were exchanged and promises made. Those promises were now being delivered.