

# Custody Combat

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## Chapter 1

Micah touched a hand to his forehead to shield his eyes from the glare. A whirl wind picked up loose soil, forcing him to turn his head from the grit. Lifting his sunglasses to the top of his head, he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. Wind, that was why he was here.

“Can I see the study results again?”

Silverton Councilor, George Kune, handed over a bound document with a clear plastic cover. Micah flicked to the appendices. There were a decade of wind speed and bearing readings, care of Warren in the local weather station. On the north side of the township the wind naturally funnelled over the hills.

“Promising.” He flipped a couple more pages, sighed and scanned the paddock again.

“The council thinks Silverton will be the ideal location for the proposed wind farm.”

George shifted from foot to foot, expectant grin willing Micah to authorise the project.

“It’s a big outlay.”

“Ambitious, yes—it will be the largest wind farm in Australia with six-hundred turbines—but think of the returns.”

Every detail of the project had been examined, assessed and evaluated long before Micah had decided to give the site a final inspection. He hadn’t made his billions without painstaking research to ensure sound financial decisions, but the real thrill for him came from

investing in sustainable energy sources, and boosting the local economy. The benefits that would accompany construction of the wind farm would be further reaching than the pockets of investors: facilities built for the influx of workers; wealth spread across retail and industrial businesses; and long term employment opportunities.

George Kune interrupted Micah's contemplation. "If you'd like to discuss it further, I can organise a lovely meal at the hotel."

Micah balked at the idea. His accommodation was in Broken Hill, nearly thirty kilometres away, and he didn't fancy negotiating the single-lane main road after dark. It would be like playing 'frogger' dodging the wildlife. He'd driven through the tiny town of Silverton earlier —and he used the term town loosely. Dirt roads branched from the main road, supporting a handful of homes and a couple of essential businesses, of which a pub was definitely one in any self-respecting Australian town.

It was time to put George out of his misery. The councillor had been panting after Micah like an expectant puppy since his arrival. Falling over himself offering cups of coffee and free tickets to the local football. Micah hated being treated like royalty. He put his pants on one leg at a time, just like everyone else. Wealth might equate to a certain amount of power, but George had it wrong if he thought expanding his multi-billion dollar empire was what motivated Micah. All he had originally wanted was the power to right a wrong against him and he didn't enjoy the celebrity that came with it.

There was a vibration in his jacket pocket, followed by a polyphonic ring tone. "Excuse me." He held up a finger.

George took a few steps away, feigning interest in the panorama as Micah put the phone to his ear.

"Micah Kincaid."

"It's Shannon. I think I've found Chelsea."

The breath caught in his throat.

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Neve clung with her hands and feet under a fallen log, suspended over the Onkaparinga River. Bark scratched her palms as she moved hand over hand, boot after boot, and she slit her eyes against falling debris. A long, tight braid tamed her frizzy hair and kept it off her for practicality. A gentle breeze cooled the sheen of sweat on her bare arms and legs.

Where the log was wedged into the river bank, she clenched her stomach muscles to control the lowering of her body, and then swung into the opening of a tiny cave. Her feet landed with a muted thud.

The cave would be underwater during floods, but was dry in autumn. She couldn't stand upright, so knelt on the soft soil and retrieved her Fox combat knife, which was tucked into a hole she'd dug into the soft stone wall.

Rocks jutted from the river bank, which made for an easy climb to the top of the bank. Like she did every week, she hurried to sharpen thin sticks to use in the bow slung across her back, and carved a notch in the back end of each one.

For a moment she stood and listened. The river rushed over moss-covered stones, birds twittered in the scrub, bees hummed. No sign of Toni. Of course not, she'd be dead before she saw him and that wasn't going to happen. The bastard would be barefoot and silent, but *she* wasn't that enthusiastic during their training sessions. The last thing she needed was a cut foot or snake bite.

She crept between a fallen gum and a granite boulder and stooped to study the ground. Trip wire. Rather than step over it—rooky mistake—she backed away and took another route. The hillside curved back and forth alongside the Onkaparinga River, but it was a thicket at the top she aimed for. Spiky blackboy grasses tore at her arms as she bent to crawl through the undergrowth.

In the centre of the thicket there was just enough room to squat. Grey fur was visible through the trees about a hundred metres away. With deliberate slowness she nocked an arrow into her bow, lifted it to her cheek and pulled the bowstring taught. The roo didn't move—of course it didn't, it was just a pelt draped over a bough. She took aim on an inward breath and held it, then...

“You're dead.” A deep voice whispered as a finger was drawn across her throat.

Neve squealed and wrenched her chin from her father's iron grasp. Antonio Botticelli hung upside down, legs curled around a tree branch, stupid grin on his stubbled face.

“Damn, Toni, I nearly had Skippy that time.” She ruffled the dark curls that hid his deep widow's peak.

He swung from the tree and landed lightly on grubby bare feet. “That's because you're too focused on the prize and not your surroundings,” he told her.

“We can't all be Vietnam Vets.” In all the years they'd been playing this game, Neve had only bettered him a couple of times. “Okay, I'm outta here.”

“Hang on. You haven't done drills yet.”

“I've got things to prepare for the kindy group tomorrow, so fun's over.”

“It's not fun, love. One day it might just save your life.”

“Yeah, sure, Toni. There's a big call for guerrilla warfare in Clarendon.” She kissed his cheek and tossed the makeshift arrows on the ground. “Skippy lives to see another day.”

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Micah's arms flailed with the sensation of falling. A leg slipped off the side of the bed. He braced a hand in front and opened one eye. Not a bed. He was on the back seat of his car and his mouth felt as claggy as the bottom of a cockie's cage. Using the front seat for leverage he pulled himself into a sitting position and rubbed his neck. The few clothes he'd had in his overnight bag slid off him—they'd been an inadequate substitute for a blanket.

Driving through the night from New South Wales hadn't been his brightest move. Adelaide's urban sprawl was extensive and it had been after midnight when he'd arrived in the fog-cloaked valley of Clarendon. The place had been shut up tighter than a preserving jar. Not a shop, hotel or service station open. It didn't matter, it wasn't the first time he'd slept in a car.

The memory of his PI's phone call made his heart race. Chelsea had recently made a large cash withdrawal from a bank branch in Reynella. After a little digging, Shannon had discovered her registered address was a post office box in Clarendon. No matter how slim the chance to find her—and his son—he had to take it.

With renewed zeal he heaved himself onto the footpath and stretched cramped muscles. Regardless of how comfortable the back seat of a Bentley was, a one-hundred-and-eighty-three-centimetres man didn't fit horizontally.

He was parked on the main road of the peaceful township, beside a low dry-stone wall. A mix of period cottages and modern homes nestled amongst prolific gardens, which rose steeply to his left and fell away on the right. Mist lingered above rooves. Honeyeaters flitted through nearby grevillea bushes, raising a cacophony of excited chirps as they feasted on the spidery blooms. It was eight o'clock and a steady stream of work Utes and dusty four-wheel-drives passed in both directions. Surely even this tiny township had a place to grab breakfast.

First he needed to make a quick call. He hit the fast dial number and it was answered on the third ring.

“Good morning, Emma.” No need to apologise for the early hour; his personal assistant was used to it. “Well, my drive home wasn't as straight forward as I'd hoped. ... No, no, everything's fine, but I won't be coming into the office today. ... I'm in South Australia. Something personal came up and Silverton was so close to the border that I decided to drive straight here. Yes, I realise you will have to reschedule some appointments. I'm sorry for the

inconvenience.” Emma didn’t kick up a fuss, she just got the job done and remained professional at all times. She’d been on his staff for seven years and he trusted her to keep the corporate wheels turning smoothly in his absence. “Can you clear a couple of days. You can contact me any time if there’s a problem and I’ll touch base again tomorrow. Thanks, bye.”

*Right, that’s business taken care of. Now let’s get this show on the road.*

He wriggled his toes and rubbed his palms up and down his arms in an effort to return circulation. A pat down of his crumpled clothes wasn’t much improvement, but he couldn’t change until he found a place to stay and that would have to wait. Past experience told him he needed to get on Chelsea’s trail right away.

After a glance up and down the road, he slid into the driver’s seat and started the engine. It took a few minutes for the heater to kick in while he wiggled blue-nailed fingers in front of the vents. He pulled a U-turn and cruised down the hill behind a horse float. There wasn’t a lot to Clarendon—the obligatory hotel and church aside—but he was pleased to round a bend and see a fuel bowser and food signs ahead.

He pulled to the curb behind a classic Holden EH sedan—one of General Motors’ most enduring masterpieces. This one was Portsea blue with a bone white roof and the chrome trim sparkled like it had been driven off the showroom floor yesterday. A withered specimen in a floral dress eyed him over the roof with pursed pink lips.

He smiled and got out of the car. “Good morning.”

The woman’s gaze roved from his patent leather shoes, up his wrinkled slacks and shirt, and rested on his face. Micah rubbed the stubble on his cheek. She raised one pencilled eyebrow in censure and shuffled into the general store.

“You look lost.”

Micah turned towards a rumbling bass voice. “Pardon?”

A middle-aged bloke wearing a battered leather Akubra, blue work shirt and stubbies

eyed him suspiciously. As though sensing his masters mistrust, a liver-coloured kelpie yapped on the tray of his Ute.

“Don’t get too many Bentley Flying Spurs around here,” the man clarified.

Micah relaxed. “You know your cars.”

The farmer nodded, stepped closer and leant to one side as though trying to see through the tinted windows.

“Would you like to look inside?”

A smile split the craggy face. “Hell yeah.”

Micah opened the passenger door and pointed out the finer features of the interior. They talked cylinders, horsepower and fuel economy. The Kelpie now wagged its tail and strained against the rope securing it to the Ute.

The farmer finally thrust a calloused hand at Micah. “Ben,” he said by way of an introduction. “So, what are you doing in Clarendon? Not much call for suits here.” He waved a hand at Micah’s attire.

“I’m visiting a friend. You might know her, Chelsea Matten?” His PI had said his wife was using this surname now.

“Yeah, I’ve heard the name, but haven’t met her. I don’t come into town that often.”

Micah smiled at the reference of the one-store one-pub street as ‘town’.

Ben went on. “There’ve been that many townies building here over the past few years that I can’t keep up.”

“You wouldn’t happen to know where she lives, would you?”

Ben chewed the inside of his cheek as he assessed Micah.

“Don’t suppose I would.”

“She’s got a four-year-old son. Is there a kindergarten nearby?”

“You’re in luck, mate. The kindy’s just down the road.” Ben pointed. “If the kid’s in

Clarendon the director, Neve, will know him.”

“Thanks. It was nice to meet you.”

Ben touched the rim of his hat, nodded and turned on the heels of his dusty boots. Micah stared in the direction Ben had indicated.

*Rowan might be there today. I could see him. Hold him.*

Micah decided to head into the general store and grab some breakfast, meet the locals, see if anyone else knew Chelsea. It was still early, so he might walk by the kindy before it opened and get the lay of the land. This wasn't the first town he'd followed her to and he had a strategy.

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Neve watched Rowan crouch in the kindergarten sandpit. His pink lips vibrated with engine sounds as he pushed a yellow truck over miniature sand hills. Shaggy brown hair fell across his eyes and she ached to push it back. Her throat closed and chest heaved with a familiar emptiness. He was so much like her little brother.

No, she couldn't dwell on her losses while she was at work. She'd coped with the grief of losing Carlos—mostly—until Rowan had been enrolled at Clarendon Kindergarten four-months ago. Their physical likeness was uncanny—painfully so. The same brown hair, chubby cheeks and innocent eyes.

“Neve! Neve!” Rowan raced towards her, toy truck held high and face distorted with distress. “The tipper won't work, it's broken and *I* didn't do it. It's 'posed to tip.”

She could see him fast dissolving into tears, as he often did when something didn't work just right. A typical sign of a little boy whose life was out of his control. He turned moist eyes, the colour of burnt sugar, towards her.

She squatted to get on his level. “Okay, slow down Ro. Let me take a look. I know how to fix engines, but I don't think that's the problem here.”

“Is it busted?”

His bottom lip quivered and her heart wrenched. He leant against her for a better view of the repairs. The small, warm body was soft against her arm, smelling of Vegemite and the eucalyptus leaves he had played in earlier. He trusted her to solve his problems, at least while he was in her care. When he went home with his mother... well, that was another story.

A raised voice inside the kindy caught her attention, but she couldn't see what was going on from the yard.

She turned back to the truck and held a piece of wood up for Rowan to inspect. “Look, there was a twig stuck under the tray. Now you can tip it up and down.”

“Yay! Thanks, Neve.” He raced back to the sandpit, engine sounds once again spluttering from upturned lips.

The voice inside the building got louder. “I demand to see my son right now.”

Definitely male. Adrenalin sprinted through Neve's veins as she recognised a potential threat. The children and staff were her responsibility. She dashed across the yard and wide verandah, bursting through the back door. A quick assessment of the situation revealed a tall man she hadn't seen before towering over her second-in-charge, Annemarie. His hair stood up in erratic spikes, there was a couple of days growth on his face and his shirt was crumpled as though he'd just rolled out of bed. Fury hung in a cloud around him, vaporising from the angry heat of his skin.

“Annemarie, would you mind taking the children outside to play while I speak to Mister...”

His head snapped in her direction and haunted hazel eyes glared. Eyes so similar to the small ones she'd just been looking into that her breath caught. She smiled tightly and offered her hand to shake. Even in the grips of hostility, people generally felt compelled to abide by social graces. Treat them with respect and show sympathy and even the most aggressive

person usually calmed.

“Good morning, I’m Miss Botticelli, the Kindergarten Director.”

He ignored her hand and turned to watch Annemarie hustle the children out the back door. In her mind she ran through the key points of her ‘managing aggressive behaviour’ training: listen, empathise and problem solve. First she needed to determine if he was a physical threat. She took the phone handset from the wall in case she needed to dial help.

Up close she could see his dishevelled appearance was only on the surface. He was clean and the crumpled shirt looked to be silk. Diamond chips encircled the face of his watch and there was a tiny LV embroidered on the pocket of his slacks.

*Christ, this guy’s wearing Louis Vuitton. Great, a Richie Rich who thinks he can throw his weight around.* She clenched her teeth.

As he watched the children, his posture visibly relaxed. He scrubbed a large hand back and forth across his face and blew out an exasperated-sounding breath. She waited until his gaze returned to her, and this time it looked fatigued.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten the children.”

“They’re not the only ones. My staff don’t appreciate being yelled at.” She straightened to make herself as tall as she could, but still didn’t even come to his shoulder.

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Micah saw stubborn determination in the olive-skinned beauty before him. She had raised herself to full height in a show of strength, but her clenched fists gave her away. The last thing he wanted to do was frighten women and children. He just wanted to find his son. Twelve months of searching and he’d always been a step behind, but he felt it in his bones, this time he was close.

Through the wall of glass at the back of the room he could see the kindergarten staff organising games for the children, and wondered which one was his. Reflexively he stepped

towards them. The pint-sized woman moved in front of him again. Despite the fact he could rest his chin on top of her head, her attitude was gargantuan.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

“Mr Kincaid.” This time he offered his hand and she tentatively wrapped long, thin fingers around it. Her handshake was surprisingly firm and the soft heat from it sent a strange thrill up his arm. She snatched her hand back as though she’d felt it too.

“What is it you want, Mr Kincaid?”

“I’m here to see my son, Rowan.” He took another step towards the back door and she moved with him, blocking his path.

“I can’t permit you to access any of the children without written consent from a parent, and if you continue to disregard my directions I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

She was so close he could smell vanilla cupcakes and crayon. There was something soft and nurturing about her, and yet bold at the same time. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight braid, with a soft fringe over watchful eyes. He took a deep breath and braced himself for the conversation he’d had many times before.

“I don’t have written permission, because he was taken from me, but I have it on good authority he’s here and I’m not leaving without him.”