

PROLOGUE

The glare of headlights in the drizzling rain distracted Professor John Raymond as he pulled out into the traffic. A delivery van screeched to a halt, narrowly avoiding impact with the rear of the professor's small sedan.

Normally he would have berated himself for such a lack of concentration while driving, especially in such hazardous conditions. But this was no normal night. What should have been the culmination of many years hard work had turned into a disaster even greater than that he had experienced fifteen years ago. And he had made it happen.

Now he hoped that what he had set in motion could be stopped. His one chance to salvage his reputation depended on it. He patted the tiny computer pen drive in his pocket. The scientific world would have to believe this. And he'd made sure that the irrefutable proof was now safe.

With that thought, he tried to subdue the demon in his gut. The detached, analytical part of his mind could visualise the acid chewing into his stomach lining, the pressure in his veins pounding faster with each beat of his heart. He'd known the risk he'd been running for the past few years, hadn't needed his doctor to tell him, but it was impossible for him to ease off. He was already past normal retirement age. No, he didn't have enough time left to take it easy.

The rain lessened as he turned left into South Road, one of the main streets in Melbourne's North Hampton. The traffic, while heavier, was also faster, and he accelerated to keep pace.

The first symptom was so mild he didn't notice it. A slight tremor and weakness in his left hand. A moment later he realised he was having trouble holding onto the steering wheel. His right hand was also losing its gripping power. He willed his hands to work, but it was as though his body was refusing to obey the instructions.

Realisation dawned.

'Noooo ...' the word oozed from his slackening mouth.

His hands fell from the steering wheel and he slumped forward, horribly aware he'd forgotten to secure his seat belt.

With disbelieving eyes he watched as his car veered into the path of an oncoming truck.

He heard the sound of impact like an explosion, felt a brief searing pain, then nothing.

As the professor's body flew from the mangled wreck and rolled across the road, the pen drive fell from his coat pocket and slid into the gutter.

CHAPTER ONE

It wafted on the night air.

A sound, so soft she could have imagined it, but so out of place in the leafy suburban Melbourne street, made Breeanna Montgomery's neck stiffen with tension.

She realised, then, that the security light on her front patio had not lit her vehicle's approach as it normally did. No insects buzzed in the crisp spring air. No breeze ruffled the shrubs in her small front yard. The stillness suddenly seemed oppressive. Her stomach clenched. Perhaps her instincts about the professor *had* been accurate. She hadn't wanted to believe him, didn't need that kind of suspicion in her life. But the worry now spiralling up to her throat and restricting her breathing couldn't be suppressed. Too many odd things had happened. Things she'd been trying to ignore so she wouldn't have to confront that part of her that she'd always managed to conceal.

Shaking her head against her fears, Breeanna took a deep breath, rolled up the car window, and opened the door. Her footsteps echoed softly between the overgrown bordering hedge and the house as she walked swiftly up the path and across the concrete patio to the front door.

Clouds covered the sliver of moon and she used her fingertips to sort through the keyring. It jangled as she inserted the correct key into the slot. Familiar though the noise was, it grated on her already tight nerves. She stepped into the living room and reached for the light switch. As her fingers connected and light flooded the room, a rustling noise made her turn.

A black-clad figure rushed through the front doorway and grabbed her around the throat, slamming her back against the wall.

Cold metal jabbed into her cheek, and she realised the sound she had heard as she'd sat in her car was that of a gun being cocked.

A sawn-off, pump-action shotgun.

Keeping a cool head had helped Breeanna extricate herself from some dicey situations in the past, but the wild glitter in the eyes revealed in the man's ski-mask caused almost paralysing fear to shiver up her spine.

He was high on something. Something that jerked his body and twitched the arm that held the shotgun. His black denim jacket smelled of stale sweat, nicotine and too many joints.

'Where is it?' Staccato, high-pitched, the words spat at her.

Speed freak. A very dangerous speed freak. Breeanna fought to stay calm, but heard the tremble in her voice. 'Where is what?'

'The book. You know. He told you.'

'Who told me?'

The barrel pressed harder. 'The professor. Now hand it over. Or I'll pull the trigger.' A sharp giggle escaped his thin lips.

Breeanna's heart thumped hard and fast. Whatever he was after, she didn't have it. But with the state he was in he probably wouldn't believe her. *And he would possibly carry out his threat.*

'I'll give it to you,' she lied. 'It's in my bag.' She half-lifted her shoulder-bag with her left hand, the right tightening on her keyring. 'But I feel so dizzy, so ...' She let her voice fade, eyelids quivering almost closed, slumping her body so that her weight rested against the hand clamped around her throat.

"Shit!" The gunman released his grip and reached for the bag, the gun easing away from Breeanna's cheek. She kicked up, crunching her knee into his groin, and punched the keys into his face.

He screamed in pain, folding forwards, clutching at his crotch with one hand, the other still holding the shotgun.

Breeanna ran.

The short distance to her car seemed impossibly long, the remote control too slow in unlocking the doors. Terror pounded through her veins as she scrambled into the driver's seat and locked the door.

A shriek of rage tore through the night. Her attacker hobbled off the patio, shotgun aimed at her car window.

Breeanna turned the key in the ignition. The engine purred.

A shot sounded.

She expected the glass to shatter, to feel pain as pellets tore into her flesh, but instead saw the intruder's face explode before he toppled backwards.

Shocked beyond movement, Breeanna sat, staring at the body.

A man, gun held two-fisted in front of him, stepped out from the hedge and walked past her car. When he reached the body he bent over, slipped his gun into a holster under his suit coat, and efficiently frisked the corpse. He straightened, and walked back to the car. He tried to open the driver's door, then realising it was locked, knocked on the window.

The sound shook Breeanna out of her daze. She slid the window down. The engine hummed quietly, a normal sound in a far from normal night.

'You're safe now, Miss.' The words were innocuous, the tone neutral, but Breeanna sensed something in the man that ... Unease gnawed into her stomach. She made no move to open the door. The man bent towards the window. With the light coming through the front doorway behind him, his features were in shadow, but the glow of the dash lights revealed deep-set eyes above a straight nose and wide lips pulled thin as though trying to hide his impatience. An irrelevant thought struck Breeanna that in his younger days he must have been quite good-looking.

He held out his hand, open-palmed. 'You can give it to me now.'

It.

The man now lying dead on her front path wanted *it*. Was prepared to kill her for *it*. Whatever *it* was. She forced herself to remember. A book. From the professor, he'd said. She didn't have it, didn't know what it was supposed to be. But one man was dead, and the professor was lying in a hospital bed, so terrified that it was a wonder he hadn't had another stroke.

'I'll take care of it. See it gets to the right people.' Impatience now tinged his voice. Breeanna felt waves of greed and excitement emanating from him. Like a dog that has the scent of blood and wants to kill again, she thought, and realised that his hand was moving closer to his gun.

'Right,' she breathed, surprised she sounded so calm. Pretending to reach for her bag, which she'd flung onto the passenger seat, she slipped the automatic gear into reverse and pushed hard on the accelerator.

Tyres screeching, the car shot backwards up the short driveway, throwing the man off balance, then slammed out into the street. Breeanna hit the brakes, pulled the gearstick into Drive, and scorched rubber on the bitumen as she sped away.