

DON'T TELL MY SECRET

CHAPTER ONE

March 1st 2013

“JAMES, I loved your last crime novel it's been a huge success.”

“Thank you; Fire Games took quite a while to write.”

James Buxton sat opposite his publicist, Amanda Daltry, a woman twenty-years his senior. By interviewing other authors, he discovered she was in her early forties. Somehow, she always managed to get what she wanted. In the four years since they met, she talked straight to the point. She saw things in black and white. A writer either liked or loathed her.

James sat on the fence.

He respected Amanda for the business woman she portrayed, and he hated her at the same time. The only place they ever talked happened to be in her office after he'd finished a book. Since their first meeting, he'd seen her out at night only twice. The first time happened by accident when his close friends insisted he go with them to a Melbourne nightclub. He saw Amanda sitting at a table amongst five ladies. She held a wine glass firmly in her hand. The second time they crossed paths he was sitting in his BMW convertible, watching her kissing some bloke in a car at a supermarket car park. He felt surprised she opened the passenger door to the Mercedes sports car and walked off into the night, seeing how the drizzle had changed to rain. What surprised him even more; Amanda didn't look back at the car. He thought she'd retrace her steps the moment the driver started the engine. Then he thought she'd wait for the car to draw level with her. Neither guess happened to be correct. The car completed a slow U-turn and was driven down the road. In seconds the engine noise and the tail lights had vanished.

For several minutes, James sat in the driver's seat of his car thinking about the scene. A crime novel began to unravel in his mind. It was something he'd always been able to do quite easily. He finally made up his mind Amanda must have been ending an affair, though speculation always got him into trouble.

Sitting further back in the office chair, Amanda's mini-skirt shortened. She eyeballed James through brown eyes. He saw her frown and flick a few strands of long blonde hair from her face.

James used an even pace to walk across the thick cream coloured carpet to the window. He stood watching the cars buzzing past in the Melbourne CBD. He loved the city for the rush. When he needed to, he'd sit at his favorite café observing people going about their daily affairs searching their faces for inspiration and plotting new novels. He didn't have the heart to tell Amanda he'd slipped into the vortex of the dreaded writer's block.

James turned from the window to focus on Amanda. “From the first day, we met, you represented someone who never gets nervous about anything. Today you seem on edge over something?”

“You have an insight many authors don't possess. Your ability to sense how people are feeling has seen through me.”

“What are you nervous about?”

“Those who pay my wages have ordered me to find an author to write a romance novel. I told them every one of our writers is busy. They prompted quite firmly I must discover someone. You're the next in line.”

“I don't write romance. I write crime. I've got lots of great ideas on how to expand the Kendal chronicles. Fire Games is just the beginning. In a few short years, there's going to be a shelf full of crime novels. They'll be great.”

“James, you're probably not aware of the fact we receive at least two hundred emails a day from your fans.”

“So, what does that tell you?” he interrupted.

“I know where this conversation is heading,” hinted Amanda.

“It's plain and simple; readers love my crime novels.”

“James, start writing a romance novel. I've booked you into a bed and breakfast hotel in Mt Martha for the next four weeks.”

“I've already explained the fact I can't write romance.”

“Of course, you can. You’re a handsome bloke. Kiss a woman then write a fantasy about her. Better still; go and meet her at a local dance. Chat the woman up for a few hours and go to a cheap hotel somewhere. You know what to do from there.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Do I have to spell it out?”

“I’m not the kind of bloke who jumps into bed with any woman.”

“James, go write me a romance novel.”

“What if I refuse?”

Amanda Daltry stood. Instead of pushing her mini skirt down she left the material sitting high on her thighs. She strolled majestically across the room to the window. Pushing her chest into James’ arm she lifted her hands, placing them on either side of his head. He felt her long fingers and red polished nails buried in his dark hair. He stood an even six feet tall. Amanda leveled her gaze on his eyes. She leaned closer; her long blonde hair brushed his cheek. She swept her lips across the surface of his. On the return trip, she kissed him. For a long time, they stood at the window in the sunshine locked in the seductive French kiss.

Amanda used the tips of her fingers to tap James playfully on the side of his cheek. She turned and slowly walked across the room, sitting cross-legged again at her desk. The provocative grin she threw James faded, replaced by the professional business woman in her.

“James, there’s a love story in all of us. Go, write me a romance novel. I expect to see an almost finished product on my desk no later than the fifth of April.”

“You’ll have it on time,” he grumbled.

James didn’t look back, marching across the office floor. He yanked the door open, glaring at the startled expression of the receptionist. Just for a moment, he wondered if she suspected anything on what transpired between him and Amanda. He also deliberated if she could tell his eyes were ablaze; full of excitement. He’d never been kissed so passionately by any woman. He allowed his mind to drift back to the supermarket car park. Amanda Daltry is indeed a mysterious woman. She certainly didn’t come across as someone who might be afraid to kiss a man; any man. James couldn’t remember the last time he’d been turned on by a woman. He reasoned they only wanted his money, so he avoided women by diving deep into his work.

The young attractive receptionist smiled up at James. She made a move to stand so she could greet him at eye level. He displayed a sociable grin, as he marched across the tiled room and down the stairs to the main entrance.

Outside in the fresh air, the sun felt hot. Summer appeared to be extended for at least a month; so, the weatherman reported. James threw his tie and brown suede jacket onto the rear seat of his BMW convertible then slipped behind the steering wheel. He turned the ignition key then eased the sports car into the flow of traffic.

James was still trying to outline a plot over the kiss Amanda unexpectedly gave him when his two storey mansion overlooking the bay came into view. The quaint room he worked in boasted a floor to ceiling double glazed window which faced the west. He loved to watch the sunset each evening. No matter where he was in a novel when the sun touched the sea he’d stop to raise a glass of wine, sit back and enjoy the view.

James spent most of his time in the room. The fake gas fire looked realistic. It should be. He paid a fortune for the unit. It did a great job keeping him warm in the winter. An air conditioner on the wall kept him cool in the summer. The small galley and bar fridge stocked full of drinks, and quick meals situated near the window helped to sustain his hunger. Five laptops ready to be used sat on his long narrow desk. He certainly didn’t need to travel twenty minutes down the road to the bed and breakfast hotel for inspiration. Before the writer’s block overtook him James rarely left the room. Lately, he didn’t watch the sunset in the place. He wandered the shopping malls and ate out most nights hoping to stumble upon inspiration. Ideas which used to flow easily seemed to have left him high and dry.

“Maybe a change of office space is actually what I need?” mumbled James.

Swinging his car into the driveway, he clicked the remote. The garage door slid up. He depressed the second button on the same remote. In seconds, he heard a bell, indicating the lift had arrived. Opening the small door, he stepped into the lift car.

The small four-foot square plate lifted him silently to his bedroom. James marched across the room, changed into lighter, less formal clothes, packed two suitcases and rode the lift back down to his car.

Inside ten minutes he started driving towards Mt Martha.

The bed and breakfast hotel, situated on the esplanade overlooking Port Phillip Bay was an easy hour's drive from the Melbourne CBD.

In the distance, James could see the skyscrapers. They seemed to tower out of the water. A slight haze covered the sky obscuring the mountains on the other side of the bay.

James parked his car left of the main doors to the hotel. The manicured gardens full of flowering shrubs and tall, thin Japanese maple trees looked a welcoming sight.

The moment James stepped down from the car he could smell the thick sea air. The breeze ruffled his light blue shirt and long white shorts. He swiped two suitcases from off the back seat.

James stared at the hotel as he squared his shoulders. The old-style building looked cold. Quite the opposite of what he was familiar with. Still, he did agree to Amanda's request. Maybe she liked his attitude. If he said, he'd do something she must have figured out he'd do it.

'Maybe it's why she walked away from the car ignoring the rain that night. The driver didn't live up to her expectations,' James thought, walking towards the main entrance. "A good start to a crime novel," he whispered.

The only noise James heard came from an old pale green two door-sedan. It rolled into the drive and was parked next to his vehicle. He watched the car until it came to a complete stop. It was then he entered the hotel, luggage in tow. James walked up to the main desk and waited patiently for the mid twenty-year-old woman to look up.

The moment James placed his suitcases on the red short pile carpet the woman stood to full height. The standard smile and cordial welcome quickly followed.

"Good morning Sir, may I help you?"

"Apparently, I've been booked into a room for a month. I'm James Buxton."

The girl checked the ledger on the computer. "Yes, you've been placed in room one on the first floor overlooking the pool for thirty-one days. An anonymous caller paid for the room."

"Why room 101? Is there something unique about that particular room?"

"None I'm aware of," replied the girl. "I'll call for the porter to take your bags."

"It won't be necessary. I prefer to carry the bags myself. One suitcase has a laptop in it."

"I can guarantee our porter will see to the safety of your bags."

"Thanks for your thoughtfulness. I can manage," insisted James slightly more forceful.

Totally absorbed, he watched the smiling girl's every twitch and move she made, willing his imagination into rejuvenation. At long last, the cogs in his mind seemed to be grinding slowly. James hoped they'd continue to pick up speed. He'd gather then group the fragmented clues to begin a possible new crime novel. Amanda's kiss, the car parked next to his, now this room 101 overlooking the pool and the girl's friendliness.

"Thanks again for your thoughtfulness," repeated James, studying the startled expression on the girl's face. Even though she seemed to be throwing him a strange look, he dismissed any romantic connection she might have been thinking. He displayed a courteous smile, side stepping to collect his luggage.

James watched the driver of the old pale green two door-sedan walk into the hotel. For far too long he watched the woman walk across the lobby to stand at the desk.

When the young lady glanced his way, James turned his back and strolled towards the lift. He pushed the call button. He wouldn't have looked back or even given the woman a second glance if his publicist didn't give him an ultimatum. He needed more ideas for this so-called crime novel forming in his mind and even more ideas if he was to turn it into a romance novel.

James glanced over his shoulder. The woman's long straight black hair just covered her shoulder blades. Her olive skin, the way her brown eyes shone made James quiver. Wearing three-inch heels on her feet, she looked tall. Just like Amanda Daltry, the woman wore a black mini skirt and red shirt. She appeared to be slightly younger than James and resembled a fit athletic woman who played tennis in the sun. At the age of twenty-three, James decided he and the game of tennis should part ways. Dropping his racket into the bin, James plowed head first into writing. In four years, he'd already finished his seventh novel. Amanda Daltry must have seen a natural ability in him. She signed him up the first time they met.

When the bell above his head rang to warn him the lift door was about to open, James could hear the woman's words echoing in his ears. It wasn't the mini skirt she wore or the words she spoke; it happened to be the tone of her voice. The hum sent a shiver down his back. He felt electricity shoot from the top of his head to the heels of his feet.

"I'm Miss. Mia Garnett. I'm led to believe I have a fully paid room for the next four weeks?"

The girl behind the hotel's reservation desk looked up the ledger for the second time in as many minutes.

"Yes, you're in room 102." Lifting her hand, she signaled for the porter to help carry the luggage of their newest arrival.

James tried hard not to watch Mia Garnett's impressive walk while she followed the man carrying her suitcases towards the lift.

James and Mia stepped into the lift at the same time. The young man placed Mia's luggage next to her right foot. In a confident voice, he said.

"I'll meet you when the lift arrives on the first floor. I prefer to take the stairs. They help to keep me fit."

'Interesting,' thought James, filing the man's words in his mind. The moment the lift door shut he spoke. "It seems we're neighbors."

"I hope you don't make any noise," jeered the young lady in an arrogant voice. "I don't like noise when I'm working."

"I don't either," confessed James. "I'm a writer."

"Good for you."

The lift leveled on the first floor. The opening door revealed the smiling face of the male porter. He reached into the lift, swiping up Mia's luggage. Rooms 101 and 102 were at the other end of the corridor. Grabbing his two suitcases, James lagged behind, soaking up Mia's womanly curves.

When the trio reached the end of the corridor, James began the second round of conversation.

"Mia, what do you do for a career?"

The woman squared herself to James. "How did you know my name?"

"I heard you introducing yourself to the girl at the reservation desk."

"You shouldn't have been eavesdropping."

"I apologize," said James, firmly. "It happened to be quiet in the lobby. Your words sounded crystal clear."

The porter opened Mia's door. Using a wooden triangular shaped wedge, he chocked it open. After carrying her luggage across the threshold, he stood waiting to show Mia around the room.

Before stepping through the open doorway into room 102, Mia looked directly into James' eyes. "If it's any of your business and it isn't, I'm an author. I'm here to start a new book."

"What sort of books do you write?" asked James.

"Adventure romance," answered Mia.

"It's a big subject," replied James.

"What about you?"

"I write crime novels. I'm James Buxton." He stepped closer, pushing his hand out.

Mia shook his hand. Stepping into the room, she kicked the polished wooden wedge out from under the door and watched the door close on James' face.