

# Protect

First Response #4

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## DEDICATION

To all police personnel. Thank you.

## Chapter 1

Constable Adam Marshall's shoulders tensed as he pushed open the door to the Blackbridge pub. Light, music and the scent of beer poured out, but he wasn't here for a night out. He scanned the crowd, looking for the person causing a disturbance.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" The outraged shout rose above the noise and drew Adam's attention to the bar, where an older man shook his fist at the bartender, Dee.

Adam moved towards them, raising his hand to catch Dee's attention and pointing to the man. Relief filled her face and she nodded at his implied question. He checked to make sure his partner, Senior Constable Ryan Kilpatrick, was behind him and then approached the drunken man in time to hear him shout, "I have a right to buy a bloody drink!"

This wouldn't be pleasant. "Mate, calm down." Adam knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as the words had fallen from his lips.

The man whirled around and the jolt of recognition made Adam flinch.

Derision crossed Stuart Demidenko's face and his eyes sharpened with hatred. "Well, look who's here," he

slurred, “the pig who let my boy die.”

Pain choked Adam. Stuart’s son, Ian, had been shot in a drug-related altercation a few months ago—the same altercation where Adam had killed Foley, farmer, firefighter, and friend to probably half the people in the pub tonight. The crowd around them grew silent and wary, turning towards Adam, intrigue and accusation in their eyes, waiting for his reaction.

Ryan stepped forward, but before he could intercede, Adam responded. “The police did what they could to save Ian.” Guilt raked her claws against his skin. “How about you come outside and we can talk?”

“No, I bloody well won’t. My boy, my only child, is dead because you were too useless to catch the bastard in time. And now I hear you almost let Kim On and Elijah Johnson die too. You blokes aren’t doing your jobs very well.”

Adam gritted his teeth. There wasn’t anything he could say. The man was right.

Ryan stepped in. “We’ve caught the men responsible, Mr Demidenko,” he said. “Can I call someone to give you a lift home? Your wife maybe?”

Stuart spewed a litany of curses at him. “I’ll get myself home. Don’t want to be near any of you pigs.” He stumbled towards the door and the regulars made way for him, some with pity on their faces. One bloke patted Stuart on the shoulder. “She’ll be ’right, mate.” Stuart ignored him.

Adam followed him at a safe distance, out of striking range, to make sure he wasn’t planning to drive.

At the door, he glanced back to see Ryan having a word with Dee, probably making sure she was OK. Adam breathed deeply as he stepped into the bitterly cold night, the rain falling in sheets just outside the verandah of the corner pub. Stuart weaved through the

car park, his wet hair glistening in the streetlights. The lights of a nearby car flashed as he approached.

Shit. Stuart couldn't drive in his state.

Adam raced towards him. "Mr Demidenko, stop!"

The man's hand slipped on the door handle and he stumbled back. He regained his balance and lunged for the handle again as Adam reached him, water dripping down the back of his collar. Adam shoved himself against the door. "Mr Demidenko, I can't let you drive."

"Get out of my way!" the man roared, his breath so alcoholic that Adam's eyes watered.

"No. Ryan and I will give you a lift home."

"I'm not going anywhere with you." He shoved Adam, his push remarkably strong despite the amount of alcohol he had in him. Adam stumbled back and Stuart wrenched his car door open.

Ryan hadn't come outside yet. Damn it.

Adam lunged for the car keys. He couldn't let Mrs Demidenko or her niece, Olivia, suffer another death. Olivia's face flashed into his mind clear as if she was standing beside him, her shoulder-length curly blonde hair framing her face and her blue eyes demanding to know what had happened to her cousin.

"Let go," Mr Demidenko yelled, bringing Adam's attention back to the present.

He wrestled the keys from the man's hands.

"Bastard." Stuart swung his fist and Adam stepped back, slipping on a greasy patch of wet bitumen. The fist connected with Adam's chin. He grunted as pain bloomed along his jawline.

Ryan ran up. "Mr Demidenko, you're under arrest for assaulting a police officer." He turned Stuart to face his car. "Put your hands behind your back."

Stuart slumped against the car, staring at the ground. "I'm sorry," he sobbed.

Adam rubbed his chin and moved closer. “No need to arrest him, Ryan. It’s fine. Let’s just get him home.”

Stuart was silent, but as Ryan turned him to walk towards the police car, the light reflected off the tears on his face.

Adam’s heart squeezed. He hurried to open the back door for the man.

Ryan shut Stuart in and glanced at Adam. “We can’t let this behaviour go unpunished.”

Adam shifted. “You know there are extenuating circumstances.”

“We can’t let people think it’s fine to assault officers.”

“Please, Ryan. He’s grieving.”

“For something that wasn’t your fault,” Ryan said, his voice stern.

Adam nodded, though he didn’t believe it. If he’d arrived sooner, he could have prevented Ian’s death. “Let’s just take him home.” He got into the passenger side, his pants soaking the seat instantly.

Ryan drove the short distance to the Demidenko house and took Stuart inside. Adam stayed in the car, watching as Mrs Demidenko came to the door. Her face paled and she swayed, just like she had when he’d had to deliver the news her son was dead. His throat closed over making it hard to breathe. He swallowed hard and inhaled, counting to five—waves washing onto the shore—and then exhaled, counting to ten—waves receding. He visualised the ocean, trying to find his calm.

Ryan helped the man inside and when he returned five minutes later, Adam had his breathing under control again.

“You all right?” Ryan asked as he shut the door.

Adam nodded. “Could do with a change of clothes.”

“I’ll second that.” Ryan started the car and drove them back to the station.

After Adam had changed into a dry uniform, he made them both a cup of coffee. It was another hour before the shift ended and he could go home and try to sleep, though some nights he didn't know why he even bothered. He sat at his desk and wiggled his mouse to wake up his screen.

Ryan perched on the edge of the table. "You want to talk?"

Adam barely glanced at him, his chest squeezing. "No."

"You know Lincoln has to hear about this."

Adam cringed inwardly. His sergeant wasn't going to like that Adam had been hit and let the culprit off without a charge. "Yeah. I'll talk to him." And then Lincoln would probably try and convince him to have more counselling. Not that the first batch had helped. There was nothing anyone could say to change the fact Adam had taken a man's life.

"You can talk to either of us if you need to."

Adam nodded, staring at the screen, the words a blur. The whole team at Blackbridge had been incredibly supportive about the death and had mentored him during his first year on the force. He appreciated everything they had done for him, but they couldn't help him with this.

Ryan sighed and stood. "I'll write the report for the DUI tonight." He headed over to his desk.

Adam stared at his computer screen, the flashing cursor mocking him. He wanted to scrap the whole document. The family had been through enough. If only he could make it better.

He closed the report window and brought up Mark Patton's case file. Evidence found last week had linked Mark to the original drug ring busted earlier in the year

when Ian had been killed, suggesting he might have been the person who had supplied the chemicals needed to make the drugs.

Would all the violence stop now he was behind bars?

Adam flicked through the file and paused at Craig's name. Mark's brother had been implicated as well, and arrested for breaking and entering, but how much was he involved in his brother's business? The Albany detectives who'd taken over the case were monitoring him while he was on bail and keeping the information close to their chests. Or maybe they just didn't think Adam needed to know.

Adam had a vested interest in stopping any more of his friends from being hurt, but Lincoln had told him to leave it to the detectives. His sergeant probably didn't think he was capable. Still there was nothing stopping him from doing his own research. He brought up other narcotic cases, reading into how the culprits were caught and what was used to smuggle the drugs. Was Mark just the tip of the iceberg, or the whole damned thing?

"You ready to go?" Ryan's voice made him jump. Quickly he clicked the X to shut down the window and checked the time. He'd been reviewing the files for the past hour.

"Yeah. Give me a second."

He packed up while Ryan locked the front of the station and they headed out back to the parking lot. The rain had stopped but it was still cold.

"See you tomorrow," Adam said, the words loud in the dark as he climbed into his car.

"Yeah." Ryan waved.

It took little time to drive the short distance to the weatherboard shack he shared with Elijah. Two cars were parked out the front which meant Jamie was spending the night. Good. Elijah would be busy with his

boyfriend and less inclined to try and get Adam to talk about what was bothering him.

Elijah had left the kitchen light on as he always did when Adam worked late. Adam smiled and carried his wet uniform through to the laundry, throwing it straight into the washing machine. He'd turn it on in the morning. Then he had a warm shower, hoping it would help him sleep, but tonight as he lay in bed, staring at the dark ceiling, all he could think of was Stuart's anguish. Losing a child was hard enough but Ian had been murdered and the police had witnessed it. The gunshots haunted Adam's dreams, making his pulse race and his skin tighten. He should have been faster, should have stopped Lincoln from going to Foley's. Should have realised what was happening rather than being two steps behind.

He'd been so stupid.

The memory played over and over in his head. Approaching the shed, hearing Foley call out to him, knowing he was there, but not knowing what was happening inside. Then he'd pulled his gun and summoned the courage to look, but his gaze had focused on the two dead bodies on the ground. That's when Foley had reached for his gun.

Adam sat up and retched, grabbing the bucket he kept by the side of the bed, but as always, nothing came out. He heaved until his throat hurt and he finally wrenched back control of his body. Tears soaked his face as he lay back down.

And continued staring at the ceiling.

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Olivia Demidenko stared at her aunt and uncle's house when she pulled into the driveway. Then she rubbed her hands over her face, pressing into her eyes trying to

revitalise them after the long five-hour drive, but when she looked again, the lawn was still full of weeds and hadn't been mowed since before she'd last been here, and the windows which were normally so clean they almost disappeared, were covered in grime.

It looked like it had given up.

Concern filled her and she struggled to open the car door, the fatigue making her clumsy. She'd stayed here only two weeks ago, but Hayley and Stuart had been away for the weekend. Hayley had apologised about the state of the house and garden, saying it had been a busy couple of weeks and Olivia had let it pass, but the truth was staring her in the face.

After the death of their son, they had given up too.

She retrieved her overnight bag from the boot and locked the car, the sound echoing in the early morning air. Her breath puffed as she hurried to the front door and knocked, pushing forward, but the door was locked.

She frowned, waiting for sounds of someone coming to answer. It was earlyish, but they were both normally up and about by seven. She found the house key on her keyring and unlocked the door, pushing it open and calling, "Hayley? Stuart? I'm here."

She wandered into the living area. Dirty dishes covered the coffee table and kitchen bench, the pot belly fire was unlit and a layer of dust covered everything. Unease tensed her muscles as she placed her bag by the couch.

"Olivia, I wasn't expecting you so early." Hayley hurried into the room, tying the belt on her navy blue dressing gown, slippers on her feet and her short dark hair dull and shapeless, sticking up all over the place. But it was her gaunt appearance that shocked Olivia to her core. This wasn't the warm, bubbly, slightly plump Hayley she was used to.

Olivia forced a smile. "After your call, I couldn't sleep so I figured I might as well drive down straight away." She hugged her aunt, feeling her bones underneath the thick fabric of the dressing gown. She hadn't seen her aunt or uncle since Ian's funeral three months ago, but she'd called regularly and at no stage before last night had Hayley indicated anything was wrong.

Hayley's eyes glistened with tears. "I'm so happy to see you."

Olivia led her to the kitchen table and sat her down. "Let me make you a cuppa." She switched on the kettle, this house more familiar than her own unit in Perth. "Would you like some porridge for breakfast?"

Hayley waved the offer away. "Maybe a slice of toast."

This was the woman whose motto was, 'A good day starts with a great breakfast'.

Olivia's concern grew as she made her aunt tea and toast and then sat next to her at the table. "Is Stuart still sleeping?"

She nodded. "I messaged his boss last night and told them he was ill and wouldn't be in."

Olivia had only seen Stuart drunk once and it was the day of Ian's funeral, but it sounded as if he had barely stopped drinking since. She placed her hand over her aunt's. "Tell me what's been happening."

Hayley's hand trembled and she sniffed. Taking a deep breath she said, "Losing Ian has been hard on us both. I thought Stuart's drinking and mood swings were normal and that he would move past this stage, but he hasn't." She sighed. "He's had a written warning from human resources. I think he's close to losing his job."

Shock filled her. Stuart had always had a good work ethic. She'd modelled her own behaviour on his. "And what about you?"

"I'm fine." She sipped her tea.

Olivia raised her eyebrows and waited for Hayley to look at her. “You haven’t been eating,” Olivia said. “It doesn’t look like you’ve been to the hairdresser’s in months and the house is a mess.”

“How dare you!” Hayley pushed back her chair and stood.

Olivia grabbed her hand. “I love you and I’m worried. You used to tell us off for leaving any dishes on the table. Where’s my vivacious, curvy, house-proud aunt gone?”

Hayley crumpled and the pain in her words tore at Olivia’s heart. “She died when her son did.”

Olivia pulled her aunt into her arms and held her as she wept.

When Stuart stumbled out of the bedroom some hours later, Olivia almost didn’t recognise him. Deep wrinkles covered his face, culminating in heavy bags under his eyes, and his new beer gut strained under his shirt.

“Olivia, what are you doing here?” He filled the kettle and switched it on.

Surprise robbed Olivia of words. No big bear hug, no bellowing welcome and no joyous smile. Stuart’s over-the-top welcomes were something she’d always looked forward to when she came to Blackbridge. She cleared her throat. “Hayley called, told me you assaulted a police officer last night.”

Stuart scowled. “Those bastards had it coming. They’re useless. All this major crime happening right under their noses and they didn’t notice.”

Olivia exchanged a glance with Hayley as sadness filled her. This was not the joyful man she knew. “Didn’t you once tell me it’s better to walk away from a fight?” She kept her tone light, trying for playful.

He grunted. “I know better now.” He slapped his mug on the table and sat.

Olivia's heart sank. This was far worse than she expected. Her aunt and uncle were falling apart. They had cared for her all these years, she had to help them. And she wasn't leaving until she had.

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The miserable day suited Olivia's mood perfectly. Waves crashed against the sand and the Antarctic wind whipped the blonde curls which had escaped her ponytail around her face. She pulled her jacket closer around her and inhaled deeply, digging her toes into the soft, wet sand as she stood on the shore. The past three days had been exhausting. After seeing the state her aunt and uncle were in, she'd taken extended leave, telling her boss she'd do what work she could from here, but asking him to reschedule the rest of her appointments.

It had taken two days to convince Stuart to call a helpline and that was only after he noticed how much it had helped Hayley. Hayley had tidied the house, gone to the hairdresser's and started cooking breakfast again.

Eventually they'd decided it would be best for them to get away from Blackbridge for a while, to reset and focus on each other, so were taking their caravan north for a few weeks. Stuart's work had been supportive after Olivia had called and explained the situation.

Hayley had been anxious about leaving the house empty with the rise in crime in Blackbridge, so Olivia had promised to house-sit while they were gone. She'd called work and her boss had agreed to give her compassionate leave, as he had when Ian had been murdered earlier in the year.

Murder was such an ugly word—scarring, vicious, violent.

And though the man who had committed the crime was dead, Stuart's rants over the past few days had raised

more questions. Were all the culprits really behind bars? Were the police hiding the truth of what happened? How had Ian become involved in the drug ring in the first place?

Sure, he'd never been the perfect child. Her school holidays with him had been spent watching him doing the types of things teenaged boys often did. Playing pranks on friends and enemies alike, jumping off rocks and cliffs into rough seas below, and riding motorbikes on trails they'd made through the national park. More than once they'd been chased by the police, but it had all been part of the fun. Looking back on it now, it was surprising he'd survived to adulthood.

But his heart had always been in the right place. He could have left her at home, bored out of her brain at being dumped with her aunt and uncle yet again, but he hadn't. Ian always made sure she had something to do, told his friends to shut up when they complained about her tagging along. They'd been three years older than her, but when she proved she could keep her mouth shut and had an imagination for mischief, they welcomed her.

Her heart squeezed and she checked the time. She'd taken Hayley to the grocery store to get provisions for their trip and they'd run into a friend of hers. The women had decided to get coffee, so Olivia had said she'd be back to pick her up, but she still had half an hour.

Her gaze drifted to the point where they'd scattered Ian's ashes. It was a place Ian had loved fishing and she'd spent many an afternoon with him, either fishing or reading her book, sometimes chatting about life. When Stuart wasn't working, he joined them.

They'd never made her feel like a burden.

Tears pricked her eyes and she brushed them away.

It was time to give back to this family who had taken her in and treated her as one of their own. If Stuart

thought there were more people involved in Ian's death, then she would use her time down here to discover the truth.

Recently she'd been sent some accounting files which contained evidence of money-laundering and she'd highlighted the unusual sums of money that had been transferred from the apiary accounts to Foley's farm. No sheep farmer needed that much honey. Olivia sighed. She'd sent all her findings back to Alyse who owned the apiary, but still had a copy of the files. Perhaps it was time to go through them in more detail. Maybe Stuart was right, maybe the money-laundering was connected to Ian's death.

After Hayley and Stuart left tomorrow, she would get in touch with her friends down here, one of whom was engaged to a cop. She had to make sure they were following the leads.

She turned to head back up the beach and caught sight of two women jogging towards her. She grinned and waved.

Fleur stopped jogging in shock and then ran over to her. "Olivia! What are you doing in town?"

Comfort filled her as she hugged her university friend. "Visiting my aunt and uncle." She smiled at the small dark-haired woman with Fleur. "Hi, Mai. Nice to see you again."

"Likewise." Mai paced back and forth, hands on her hips, breathing heavily.

"Don't let me interrupt your run," Olivia said.

"Please do." Fleur laughed. "I had too many days off during my honeymoon."

"I was going to call you tomorrow," Olivia said. "I'll be in town for a couple of weeks, house-sitting while they take the caravan up north."

"You should come to my birthday dinner tomorrow

night,” Mai said. “Catch up with everyone. It’s at the Vietnamese restaurant in town at seven.”

Olivia smiled. “Thanks. I’d love to.” She’d stayed only a weekend in Blackbridge when Fleur had married recently but she’d spent time with Fleur’s friends, and they’d been friendly. All except Adam.

She pursed her lips. He’d been very easy on the eyes, but his personality hadn’t been easy at all.

“Want me to pick you up?” Fleur asked.

Olivia nodded. It would save her from walking in alone. They moved up the beach to the car park.

“Where are Hayley and Stuart going?” Mai asked.

“They haven’t booked anywhere, but they’re thinking of going up the coast to check out Ningaloo Reef. Maybe they’ll head across to Karijini National Park afterwards.”

Fleur grinned. “That’s Will’s land.”

Olivia reached the car. She wanted to ask what had happened with the apiary, but now wasn’t the time. “I need to meet Hayley.”

“We’ll see you tomorrow,” Fleur said. “I’ll pick you up just before seven.”

“You remember the address?”

Fleur laughed. “Of course. Blackbridge isn’t that big a town.” She waved and she and Mai wandered away to stretch against the fence.

Olivia backed out and headed for the grocery store.

Blackbridge might not be a big town, but it held big secrets.

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