

**A pregnant cop.
A deadly flood.
A case that comes
back to haunt her.**

*'A new contender
for Queen of
Australian crime'
Katherine Kovacic*

**DINUKA
McKENZIE**

*'Vivid, pacy and refreshingly
original. A gripping
whodunnit with heart'
Emma Viskic*

**THE
TORRENT**

WINNER OF THE BANJO PRIZE FOR FICTION

THE TORRENT

DINUKA
McKENZIE

 HarperCollins *Publishers*

THEN

Marty Drummond lowered himself into the flooded drainage culvert. The wet weather had begun again in earnest, the headlamp on his helmet illuminating the swift needles of rain against the gloom of the night. Clad in a wetsuit and lifejacket and strapped to a safety line tethered to the embankment, he began slowly treading across the churning waters of the open, concrete-lined channel. A slight tug of the line told him the second rescuer had entered behind him.

The headlights from one of the SES – State Emergency Service – trucks cast a sickly glow across the surge, revealing his destination some ten metres ahead to his right: a man perched precariously on debris, stranded in the middle of the drainage channel, his life raft consisting of nothing more than a tangle of tree branches, rubbish and silt that had built up against some kind of obstruction in the flow. Any second and the island of wedged-in materials could fall apart and wash away, taking its occupant with it. Despite the rain, a straggle of onlookers had gathered to witness the rescue operation, their phones out recording,

Dinuka McKenzie

pointing to the trapped man and shouting out directions, as if Marty needed instruction.

Mentally cursing, Marty pushed on. He had no idea how the man had ended up here, but after six years of volunteering for the SES, nothing the general public did surprised him anymore. It didn't matter that it had been raining for weeks or that the entire Northern Rivers region of the state was the subject of rising creeks and flood warnings. People still took no heed, risking their lives in floodwaters for all sorts of inadequate reasons, like being in a hurry. He had a feeling tonight was going to be one of those nights. Just a few hours ago, he had been enjoying a beer and a round of Xbox with his mates. Now, barely half an hour into his shift, he was already hip-deep in the drink.

The water was cold, but no more than Marty had experienced in previous rescue operations. What concerned him more were the unseen hazards swirling in its depths. He had no idea what muck was being carried by the dark turbid flow that eddied around him. If something large snagged him, he could easily lose his footing or get knocked into its silty current. Careful of where he was stepping, he slowly inched his way forward.

Peering ahead, Marty tried to get a better view of the trapped man. He could just make out the blue of the man's jacketed arm wedged into the mound. He was facing away, apparently unwilling to move for fear of losing his grip. He had been lucky to have been spotted by a jogger on the adjacent footpath. One of those diehard exercisers who pounded the pavement whatever the weather.

As Marty looked on, the fragile island seemed to shift, causing

The Torrent

the man to slip further towards the waiting liquid. *I'm coming, mate. Just hang in there.* He needed to get to the bloke and secure a life vest on him before the debris mound disintegrated completely. Marty could then use the safety line to steer the man clear. Only a few metres away now.

'Mate, can you hear me? Are you okay to put on a lifejacket?'

There was no response. The man hadn't moved or given any indication that he had heard him. Marty felt a shadow of foreboding. *Shit!* He had no idea how long the bloke had been stuck there. He could be hurt or unconscious. Or worse.

He pressed on, heaving himself forward against the pressure of the water. Almost there. A few more steps and he would be within reach.

He heard a shout. Looking back, he registered his safety-line operator screaming something at him, seconds before he felt his knees buckle. Something large and bulky had knocked into him. He over-balanced and only just prevented himself from being pulled under by clinging onto the line. Correcting himself and taking a moment to signal back to the safety-line operator that he was right to proceed, he resumed, ignoring the savage flare of pain in his knee.

The rickety raft of rubbish was right in front of him now. Careful not to lean or put any weight on it in case it collapsed or moved, he manoeuvred himself around until he was facing the man. For a second, the face visible from the light of Marty's headlamp didn't register. Only the odd angle of his head. The cuts to his face and the mud and dirt plastered to his hair. Marty reached across and wiped a stray leaf from the man's lips.

Dinuka McKenzie

Ice seared his nerves as recognition flickered. Instinctively, his fingers reached for the man's neck to feel for a pulse, even though he already knew the answer. Bile rose and he heaved into the water.

Joel. Jesus Christ. It was Joel.

His childhood friend. His footy mate. He had only seen Joel that afternoon. They had played Xbox together and mucked around. How the hell had Joel ended up here?

'You all right, mate? You need help?'

Rob, the second rescuer on the safety line, had reached him. His concerned face peered through the rain at Marty.

'He's a mate. I know him.' Marty gestured towards the limp body. 'I think he's dead.'

'Fuck! All right. Don't worry. Just help me get the vest on him and I can take him in.'

Marty nodded numbly. He grasped the lifeless body and held it steady, trying not to shudder at the unexpected weight of his dead friend, waiting for Rob to secure the life vest around Joel's chest.

He had little memory of treading back down the safety line, Joel's body being guided between Rob and him, a pathetic puppet on strings. The water felt like treacle, his limbs heavy against its shifting mass.

On the embankment, the spectators had turned silent, though some still held their phones aloft. A hushed audience bearing witness to the spectacle of death. Marty watched on as waiting ambulance personnel took charge of the battered body, going through the motions of checking for signs of life, before loading the body for transportation to the morgue.

The Torrent

He retched again behind a tree, but nothing came out. Gulping water from a bottle, he splashed the liquid onto his face to hide the hot barb of tears that flooded his eyes.

He looked up to find one of the gawkers, a teenage boy, had made his way towards him and was watching him through the gathering rain.

‘You right there, mate?’ Marty’s tone was sharper than he had intended. He didn’t need a witness to his grief.

The boy’s answer when it came was jerky and agitated. ‘Do you know who that was? Was it ...? Do you know if it was Joel Marshall?’

Marty stared at him, suddenly alert. The kid’s features were in shadow, obscured by his hoodie.

‘Who are you? Why are you asking?’

The teenager turned away abruptly, but not before Marty had caught a glimpse of his face. A countenance marked by fear.

1

Thursday morning, first week of April

Dawn scratched the sky, pink-and-orange hues smudging into grey as Detective Sergeant Kathryn Aneesha Miles – Kate, to everyone who knew her – pulled into the carpark off Tweed Valley Way. An ambulance and a couple of patrol cars had arrived already. A disgruntled truckie was being moved on to get his morning McMuffin fix at the next fast-food restaurant along.

She collected herself in the unmarked Commodore, struggling into her jacket and straightening her bed hair as best she could in the visor mirror. She hadn't had time to get organised that morning, after being jolted awake by the dispatch call, cold recognition hardening into certainty as the call details came through. *A second one.*

She had slid carefully from beside the comforting warmth of her husband and their four-year-old son, Archie, moving his small, splayed arm from her chest, and creeping around the room

The Torrent

in the dark to collect her clothes and shoes. Her fumbling had woken Geoff, and he had kissed her sleepily before she left.

‘Pooh. Your breath smells.’ She had stifled a laugh as she pressed her face to his.

‘Have I told you you’ve put on weight, recently?’ he had replied, ducking under the blanket as she swatted him.

She smiled at the memory, examining the puffiness around her eyes in the tiny square of glass. Sleep no longer came easy. Excess flesh padded the dusky curves of her face. Her body felt tight and strained, stretched uncomfortably under her swollen belly.

For a split second, an image of flushed crimson on cotton preyed on her mind; intimate and accusatory. *No*. She dismissed the unwanted memory, shrugging away the shard of guilt. She had talked to her doctor, she reminded herself. She would be fine. It was only one more week, anyway.

With a final hurried corralling of her hair into a pony tail, she hauled herself out of the car and into the brisk early morning. It was technically autumn, but the coolness lacked conviction and wouldn’t survive the morning, burned away by the North Coast sun.

She glanced over at the fast-food eatery. It was one of the original restaurants of its kind to be built in the area back in the early nineties, and the building’s brown brick façade had somehow come into style again as a retro throwback.

Making for the entrance marked by the iconic brazen yellow arches, she passed a ring of cockatoos, the bully boys of the bird world, raiding one of the external bins, picking through burger wrappers and discarded drink containers. They eyed her as she

Dinuka McKenzie

passed, standing their ground and protecting their haul, daring her to move them on.

The automatic doors sighed open and Kate stepped into a blast of recycled air heady with the smell of chip oil, burgers and sugar. Her gaze quickly swept the room.

Paramedics were attending to someone lying prone on the floor. Three young McDonald's employees in uniform – two boys and a girl – were huddled together watching on, the girl crying softly into a crumpled tissue. A female constable – Kate recognised the pert bob-cut of Vickie Harris – was with them, speaking quietly to the group. She clocked Constable Greg Darnley at the far end of the room, taking a statement from an agitated-looking young man in formal slacks and a pale-blue shirt with the McDonald's logo, a manager or supervisor of some kind.

Her eyes scanned the room for her partner, Josh Ellis, as yet a no-show. Swallowing her annoyance, she headed in the direction of the paramedics, walking slowly, one hand supporting her protruding belly, ignoring the discomfort of her straining body. A stirring within informed her that her baby was awake.

She caught the eye of Harris, who peeled away from the group. Kate didn't miss the young constable's quick glance at her belly. She knew what so many of them thought. That she was too late in her pregnancy to be effective. That she was a liability rather than an asset. The last time she checked though, her brains hadn't diminished despite the changes to her body. Ignoring the familiar niggle of irritation, she waited for Harris to bring her up to speed in a whispered conference.

The Torrent

‘The victim’s name is Josephine Allen, Sarge. Sixteen. She’s been kicked and punched fairly heavily in the face and torso. Plus, she’s got lacerations to her wrist and a stab wound to her stomach. The others are unhurt. Just scared. I’ve managed to contact all the parents except the Allens. The rest are on their way to pick up the kids.’

Kate nodded, taking in the pale, pinched faces and hunched shoulders of the group. ‘Keep trying the Allens. If necessary, send an officer to the house and get them to go straight to the hospital. Have we got preliminary statements?’

‘Yep. Everyone except Josephine. But nothing useful. None of them recognise the assailants.’

‘Okay. Let’s keep them together until the parents arrive and we can take it to the station.’

Seeking permission from the paramedics, she approached the girl – Josephine – on the floor, kneeling with difficulty beside her. She tried not to flinch at the sight of her facial injuries. Her left eye was swollen shut. Angry red bruising ballooned across the entire left side of her face. The girl appeared very young under the oxygen mask. A single darting, frightened eye locked onto Kate’s face. She reached for the girl’s hand and held it, pale and bleached against her own mellow brown.

‘Josephine. My name is Detective Kate Miles. You’re doing really well ... The paramedics are going to take care of you. They’re going to take you to the hospital and your parents are going to meet you there. I’ll come and visit you a bit later on and we can talk when you’re feeling up to it, okay?’

Dinuka McKenzie

There was no response. Kate had no idea if the girl had understood or even heard her. She squeezed the small hand in her palm, waiting for the girl to be lifted and strapped into the trolley that would wheel her into the ambulance outside, before letting go.

‘Kate—’

She turned to find the imposing frame of Detective Ellis at the automatic doors. He reached her in long, unhurried steps, stopping only to make way for the exiting paramedics. Kate watched as he surveyed the room, his eyes pausing momentarily on the svelte figure of Constable Harris before moving on.

As usual, he was immaculately put together: a fitted suit, gel-moussed hair, and perfectly manicured stubble grazing his jawline. He looked fresh and rested, the perpetually sunny Tweed Shire apparently having no effect on his sweat glands. Next to him, Kate immediately felt dowdy in her stretched and dated maternity wear, saved over from her pregnancy with Archie.

Josh was a new transfer from down south, all the way from Sydney. He had been with Esserton Station less than a month and would be acting in her role when she left on maternity leave in just over a week. He was polite enough, she admitted, giving her the respect due to her seniority at least on the surface, but she was yet to get a proper handle on him. There was a slight insolence in his manner. Nothing obvious that she could put her finger on. Maybe it was because she was a woman. Possibly it was her colour, though she didn’t think so. He didn’t strike her as that kind of insecure. Most likely, it was the regional posting he had to endure to secure a promotion. Whatever it was, he was clearly biding his time.

The Torrent

She launched in without preamble. 'It's another holdup. Three boys, wearing superhero masks and armed with a knife. Just like the bakery job in town. Except this time, one of the staff got hurt. A Josephine Allen, sixteen. Stabbed in the stomach and bashed in the head. So they're escalating.'

Josh didn't reply, his eyes still flickering around the room with no indication that he had heard her. Impatience snagged at his lack of reaction. This was clearly just a piddly small-time job for him. He wasn't impressed or interested.

'Darnley's interviewed the manager,' she ploughed on. 'That's him over there.' She pointed to the gangly young man pacing laps at the back of the restaurant, his hands fiddling nervously with a mobile phone. He appeared defeated, like a cornered animal. Shoulders hunched and large sweat patches starting to bloom under his armpits. The man looked up, feeling their eyes on him, and blanched. Kate felt a sliver of sympathy for him. He seemed very young to be a manager in charge of the welfare of four teenagers. He struck her as being barely out of his teens himself.

When Kate turned back, Josh was signalling to Darnley at the other end of the room to join them. He nodded to Darnley for his report, assuming control. Kate willed herself silent.

Consulting his notes, Darnley directed his reply to Kate, the senior officer. She couldn't help but smile. Darnley was old-school and a stickler for the pecking order. He was showing the newcomer where his loyalties lay.

'Sarge, there were four employees plus a manager working the midnight-to-seven-am shift. Abigail Masters, Josephine Allen and Lucas Unwin, all sixteen, were on service together, manning

Dinuka McKenzie

the drive-through window and the front counter. Jack Goodwin, seventeen, was in the kitchen. There was meant to be one more employee helping out in the kitchen, another seventeen-year-old, Jarvis Ellwood, but he called in sick just before the start of the shift.

‘The bloke in charge is Adrian Martello, twenty-four. Very nervous and jumpy. Like he’s afraid of losing his job. And with good reason, I’d say, because it doesn’t sound like he was much of a manager last night.’

Kate waited, knowing there was more to come.

‘Yep,’ continued Darnley, referring to his notes and settling into his stride. ‘According to Jack Goodwin, Mr Martello was meant to be helping him in the kitchen to pick up the slack, but instead he spent all his time on his mobile, either in the staffroom or out the back. Jack thinks Mr Martello’s fiancée is in the process of breaking it off with him and he was trying to talk her out of it.’

‘Apparently, he wasn’t in the store when it all happened and missed the whole thing. He had gone out the back to haul the garbage into the dumpsters – a five-minute job at most – but he didn’t reappear for a good twenty minutes. By that time, the assailants had come in, taken the cash and gone. According to the kids, even when he got back inside, he wasn’t much help. He basically panicked when he realised Josephine was hurt and bleeding behind the counter. Fair to say, he’s not the most popular boss at the moment.’

Darnley glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the beleaguered supervisor, and added with a grin, ‘He’s perked up

The Torrent

a bit now, though. Suddenly remembered that he's meant to be in charge and is asking all sorts of questions. "How long will this take" and "how soon can the store reopen".

Beside Kate, Josh was fiddling with his phone, clearly impatient for Darnley to finish.

'Okay, Greg,' Kate cut into Darnley's soliloquy, not unkindly. 'Let's leave Mr Martello for a second. Is there any CCTV footage?'

'Yep.' Darnley hurriedly flipped forward through his notes and resumed. 'That was something he was able to help us with. There's internal and external footage. Two cameras inside the store and one overlooking the store entrance—'

Josh interrupted. 'Anything of the carpark itself?'

'Unfortunately no. None of the cameras face the carpark—'

Josh swore as Darnley continued, undeterred. 'None of the staff on shift remember seeing or hearing a vehicle immediately before or after the incident, including Martello when he was out at the bins.' He motioned to the glass wall-panels set into the brown brick walls of the restaurant. 'The majority of the carpark is visible from the restaurant, apart from the southern end' – he pointed – which is blocked by the playland equipment. The bin area where Martello was holed up is on the opposite side of the store. In theory, a vehicle could have been parked at the southern end of the carpark and not have been spotted by anyone inside.'

'Right, Greg,' broke in Kate. 'Let's get the footage we do have and we'll review it at the station.'

'Not much use when they're wearing masks,' muttered Josh.

Ignoring him, she continued to instruct Darnley. 'Also, have someone check the Hungry Jack's next door, will you, and see if

Dinuka McKenzie

they have any external cameras that may have an angle on this carpark.’

Darnley nodded, scribbling into his notepad.

Kate glanced at her silent partner. ‘We’ll need to pull traffic footage off Tweed Valley Way going in both directions. They got lucky, no one seeing a vehicle. There’s no chance they travelled here by foot ... Plus, we should check on Mr Martello’s fiancée. Make sure he was actually speaking to her all that time, and check the phone records to confirm.’

She waited to see if Josh had anything to add. Not a word.

‘I’m going to speak to the kids again. See if they remember anything more. You coming?’

‘You go ahead. I might just have a look around.’

Controlling her irritation, she turned away and headed towards the still-huddled group of employees.

Three faces peered up at her approach. The girl, Abigail Masters, had clearly been crying heavily, judging from her red eyes and blotchy face. Her two companions sat numb and silent, the adrenaline from the night starting to wear off. Despite their obvious distress, she instinctively recognised them as the popular kids. Blessed with good looks and confidence, they no doubt ran the joint on any normal day. They had that air of untouchability, a world unto themselves that she remembered from high school. It was no wonder the unfortunate manager of this group felt on the outer.

Mentally shaking herself, she addressed the teens, carefully taking them through the events of the early morning. Each of them agreed on the main points – the boys, the masks and the knife –

The Torrent

but couldn't add anything new to their original statements. None of the three had recognised the assailants. Their faces had been covered and their voices unfamiliar. The only thing of interest she gleaned was that evidently all three youths had worn skin-tight disposable gloves.

She was interrupted by Constable Harris, who pulled her away from the group's hearing.

'We have a problem, Sarge. Josephine Allen's father. It's Roman Allen, as in Councillor Allen. He's at the hospital now and wants to see the detective in charge.'

A pebble of memory dislodged and settled like an unwelcome guest. An added complication that would need careful handling. She nodded, dismissing the constable.