

'Justice': Stephanie McBride - Book 4

Chapter 1: The haunted detective

My fingers tremble over the keyboard, hovering like hummingbirds unsure of where to land. I exhale, jaw clenched tight enough to crack molars and open the encrypted message flashing on my secure work phone.

The code sprawls across the screen, a tangled web of numbers and symbols. My eyes narrow, scanning, decoding, absorbing every scrap of intel. Hints of a new cybercrime operation unfold before me—ghost accounts, siphoned funds, a digital trail vanishing into the ether.

“Bloody hell,” I mutter under my breath. The implications crash over me like a rogue wave, pieces clicking into place with dizzying speed. This isn’t some two-bit hacker showing off; there’s big money behind this, more zeros than I would ever earn. Or even could count. Whoever’s pulling the strings has some serious tech savvy.

I lean back in my chair, the clutter of case files and empty takeaway coffee cups blurring out of focus. My mind races down branching paths, calculating odds, connecting dots most will miss.

This might blow wide open, unearth corruption that’d make front page news from Broome to Hobart.

A bead of sweat trickles down my temple. The familiar buzz of anticipation mixes with an icy knot of dread in my gut. I’ve seen first-hand how deep the rot can go, how high up it can reach. Powerful people with dangerous friends, all too willing to bury secrets six feet under.

But that’s never stopped me before. I didn’t earn my detective stripes by playing it safe, keeping my head down. Every killer I’ve brought to justice, every victim I’ve spoken for—their faces flash through my memory, steeling my resolve.

“Buckle up, McBride,” I whisper to the empty room, “it’s gonna be one hell of a ride.” My fingers fly into action, momentum building. No rest for the wicked. Time to see just how far this rabbit hole goes.

The memory hits like a freight train, the acrid tang of gunpowder flooding my senses. I’m back in that dingy alley, the rookie cop trembling beside me. The crim’s got his Glock trained

on the hostage, a teenage girl, mascara-streaked tears cutting through the grime on her cheeks.

“Drop the gun, mate,” I call out, my voice steadier than my hammering heart. “This doesn’t have to get messy.”

His eyes, wild and bloodshot, dart between us. The girl whimpers. I’ve got a split second to make the call.

Bang.

He crumples, crimson blooming across his chest. The girl screams. My rookie partner retches into the gutter.

I blink, the flashback dissipating like smoke. The weight of the moment lingers, a familiar heaviness in my bones. I’ve lost count of the times I’ve had to pull the trigger, the lives I’ve taken in the law’s name. Each one leaves a mark, invisible but indelible.

Shaking off the memory, I refocus on the encrypted message. This is what I do, who I am. I hunt the monsters lurking in the shadows of the web, drag them into the light. It’s a thankless job, but someone’s gotta do it.

My fingers dance across the keyboard, lines of code scrolling past. Decryption algorithms whirl in the back of my mind as I sift through layers of obfuscation. Whoever sent this message knows their stuff, but I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve.

Gotcha. The ultimate piece of the puzzle clicks into place, and the message reveals itself. Coordinates, timestamps, aliases—breadcrumbs leading to something big. Something that maybe shifts the balance of power in the criminal underworld.

I lean forward, my nose touching the screen. This is it, the break I’ve been waiting for. The chance to make a real difference, to strike a blow against the darkness that threatens to engulf this city.

But I know too well the price that comes with this kind of knowledge. The danger that follows those who dare to uncover the truth. I’ve lost friends, colleagues, loved ones to the crusade. The scars on my heart run just as deep as the ones on my body.

Is it worth it? The question whispers in the back of my mind, an insidious doubt. I glance at the framed photo on my desk, a rare moment of carefree laughter with Brett, before our boys were blown apart by a bomb, before everything went to hell.

No. I can’t go down that road. Not now. The job comes first. Even if it means sacrificing everything else.

I’ve made my choice. No turning back now. I steel myself, taking a deep breath. Time to save the world, one byte at a time.

The sound of the front door opening jolts me out of my thoughts, and I reach for my service weapon before realizing it's just Brett. He steps into the apartment, a gentle smile on his face, but I see the concern in his eyes as he takes in the scene before him—the cluttered desk, the glowing screen, and me, hunched over it like a gargoyle.

“Hey, love,” he says, gently setting down his keys on the counter. “Burning the midnight oil again?”

I lean back in my chair, easing the tension in my shoulders. “You know how it is. Crime never sleeps.”

Brett nods, his gaze drifting to the untouched bottle of 21-year old Auchentoshan on the kitchen counter. I can feel the unspoken questions hanging in the air between us, the worry that I will slip back into old habits.

“I haven't touched it,” I say, answering the question he's too polite to ask. “Not even tempted. It's for when Logan or Andy come over.”

“I know,” he replies, but there's a flicker of doubt in his voice. “I trust you, Steph. It's just... I worry about you, out there on your own, chasing down these monsters.”

I stand up, crossing the room to take his hands in mine. They're warm and solid, an anchor in the chaos of my world. “I'm not alone. I have you, don't I?”

Brett smiles, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. “Of course. But sometimes I wonder if that's enough.”

The words sting, even though I know he doesn't mean them to. I wonder the same thing myself. How much longer will I be able to keep putting my job before my marriage, before the man who's stuck by me through thick and thin?

I lean in, resting my forehead against his. “I'm sorry, love. I know I'm difficult to live with, but I'm trying. I promise.”

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me close. For a moment, the rest of the world falls away, and it's the two of us, holding onto each other like a lifeline.

“I know you are,” he murmurs into my hair. “And I'm not going anywhere. But maybe... maybe it's time to think about the future. About what comes after this.”

I stiffen in his embrace, the old fear rising like bile in my throat. The future. It's a concept I've never allowed myself to consider, too afraid of what it might mean. Giving up the badge, the gun, the thrill of the hunt... it's like asking me to give up a piece of my soul.

But as I look into Brett's eyes, I see something else there, too. Hope. Love. The promise of a life beyond the darkness. If only I've got the guts to reach for it.

"You're right," I say, the words feeling foreign on my tongue. "But not yet. Not until I finish this case. I owe it to the victims, to their families. I can't walk away now."

Brett sighs, but there's understanding in his gaze. He knows me better than anyone, knows the demons that drive me. Please promise me you'll be careful. That you'll come home to me."

I nod, sealing the promise with a kiss. "Always."

As Brett moves to the kitchen to put the kettle on, I turn back to my notes, the encrypted message still glowing on my screen. The symbols mock me, taunting me with their secrets. But I refuse to be beaten. Not by this case, not by my own demons.

I take a deep breath and dive back in, my mind whirring with possibilities. The message mentions a location, a date, a time. It's not much, but it's a start. I jot down the details in my notebook, my pen scratching against the paper.

The old warehouse district. Midnight. Friday the 13th. A meeting place? A drop site? Need to run background checks on the area, see if anything stands out.

I lose myself in the work, the outside world fading away until there's nothing but the puzzle before me. It's always been like this for me, ever since I was a kid. When the world got too loud, too chaotic, I found solace in the muted tones of my mind, the satisfaction of unraveling a mystery.

The kettle whistles, jolting me back to reality. I glance up to see Brett pouring the boiling water into two mugs, the steam curling in the air. He catches my eye and smiles, that crooked grin that still makes my heart skip a beat after goodness knows how many years.

"Find anything interesting?" he asks, nodding toward my notes.

I hesitate, the old instinct to keep my work separate from my personal life warring with the desire to let him in. But something in his eyes, in the gentle way he sets the mug of tea beside me, makes me want to give it a go.

"There's a location mentioned in the message. An old warehouse district. I'm going to see if I can dig up anything on it, perhaps send a few plainclothes to scope it out."

Brett nods, his brow furrowing. Please be careful, okay? I know how easily you get caught up in these things. To let them consume you."

I feel a flicker of irritation at his words, the old defensiveness rising. But I push it down, reminding myself that he's only looking out for me. That he loves me, even when I make it tough to do so.

"I will be," I promise, reaching out to squeeze his hand. "But I have to see this through. I have to know the truth."

He sighs, but there's no anger in it. Only acceptance, tinged with a hint of sadness. "I know you do. Remember that the truth isn't always worth the price you have to pay to find it."

I nod, but inside, I'm not so sure. Because for me, the price of not knowing, of letting the darkness win... that's a price I'm reluctant to pay. Not again. Never.

As Brett returns to the kitchen, I find my thoughts drifting, pulled back to the past. The memory rises unbidden, vivid and sharp, a moment of triumph amidst the chaos of my career.

It was the Blackburn case, a labyrinthine web of cyber fraud and identity theft that had consumed me for months. Late nights hunched over my computer, countless cups of coffee gone cold at my elbow, the flickering glow of the screen burning into my retinas. But in the end, I had cracked it wide open, unraveling the threads that led to a network of hackers spanning three continents.

I remember the moment it fell into place, the pieces clicking together like tumblers in a lock. The rush of elation, the sense of purpose and clarity that had been lacking in those long, lonely months. For a brief, shining instant, I felt invincible. Unbreakable.

But now, staring down at the cryptic message on my phone, I feel that certainty waver. The doubts creep in, insidious and relentless. Am I still that same detective, sharp and hungry and fearless? Or have the years worn me down, dulling my edge and leaving me vulnerable?

The clink of ceramic on wood jolts me back to the present. I glance up to see Brett setting a steaming mug of tea beside me, his eyes soft with understanding.

"Thought you could use a break," he says, settling into the chair across from me.

I wrap my hands around the mug, letting the warmth seep into my fingers. "Thanks. I guess I got lost in my head there."

He smiles, but there's a flicker of concern in his gaze. "Anything you want to talk about?"

I hesitate, the instinct to deflect rising. But something in his gentle, patient expression makes me pause. Makes me want to let him in, a little.

“Just... remembering an old case,” I say, my voice quieter than I intend. “One of my first big wins. It felt so clear then, you know? Like I knew exactly what I was doing, exactly who I was.”

Brett nods, his fingers brushing mine. “And now?”

I shrug, a rueful smile tugging at my lips. “Now... I’m not so sure. This case, these messages... it’s like I’m grasping at smoke. Every time I have a handle on it, it slips away.”

“But you’ll figure it out,” he says, with a conviction that warms me from the inside out. “You always do. And I’ll be right here, whenever you need me.”

I squeeze his hand, the tension in my chest easing a fraction. “I know. And I don’t say it enough, but... thank you. For being here, for putting up with this.”

He leans in, pressing a soft kiss to my forehead. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be. Now, drink your tea before it gets cold. And tell me about your day. The parts that don’t involve encrypted messages and cyber criminals, I mean.”

I laugh, the sound startling in the apartment’s quiet. And as I launch into a story about the new barista at my favourite coffee shop, I feel the weight receding, just for a moment. Long enough to remember that there’s more to my life than the darkness I chase. That there’s still light to be found, if I’m willing to look for it.

The shrill ring of my phone shatters the moment, pulling me back to reality with a jolt. I glance at the caller ID, my stomach tightening as I recognise the number. It’s my senior, and there’s only one reason he’d be calling me at this hour.

I shoot Brett an apologetic look as I reach for the phone, my voice steady and professional as I answer. “McBride.”

“Stephanie, we’ve got a fresh case.” My senior sergeant’s voice is gruff, tinged with an urgency that sets my nerves on edge. “High-profile target, possible data breach. I need you on this one.”

“Of course, Senior. Send me the details, and I’ll get started right away.” My mind is already racing, sifting through the possibilities. A high-profile target might mean anything from a celebrity to a politician, and a data breach... well, that has every possibility of being catastrophic.

“I’m sending the file to your encrypted email now. And Stephanie... be careful with this one. We’re dealing with some serious players.”

“Understood, Senior. I’ll keep you updated.” I hang up the phone, my fingers already itching to dive into the new case.

Brett watches me, his expression a mix of concern and resignation. “Duty calls?”

I nod, my mind already a million miles away. “High-profile case. Possible data breach. I need to...” I trail off, gesturing at my computer.

“Go,” he says, his smile tinged with sadness. “I’ll be here when you’re done. Just... be careful, okay?”

“Always am,” I say, but this time around my regular reply feels hollow. We both know the risks of my job, the toll it takes on our relationship. But we also know that I can’t walk away, not when there are people out there who need my help.

I lean in, brushing a quick kiss across his cheek before settling back at my desk. My digits dance on the keyboard, swift strokes painting the screen with words. I pull up the encrypted file as my mind shifts into high gear. The thrill of the hunt is already thrumming through my veins, the familiar rush of adrenaline that comes with a fresh case.

But beneath the excitement, there’s a flicker of unease. My Senior’s warning echoes in my mind, a reminder of the stakes we’re dealing with. High-profile targets, serious players... maybe bigger than anything I’ve tackled before.

I take a deep breath, pushing the doubts aside. I CAN do this. I HAVE to do this. Because if I don’t, who will?

With a last glance at Brett, I dive into the file, my focus narrowing to the screen in front of me. The game is on, and I’ll be damned if I let the crims win, no matter how smart they might think they are.

The cursor blinks on the screen, a silent challenge. I stare at the encrypted data, my mind already racing through the possibilities. This case... there’s something different about it. Something that sets my instincts on edge.

I feel Brett’s eyes on me, the weight of his concern palpable in the air. He knows me too well, knows the obsessive spiral I too often fall into when a case consumes me. But he also knows better than attempt to stop me.

“I’ll be in the study if you need me,” he whispers, his hand brushing my shoulder in a fleeting touch. “Don’t forget to eat something, yeah?”

I grunt in response, my attention already slipping back to the screen. The code blurs before my eyes, a tangled web of secrets waiting to be unraveled. I almost taste the bitter tang of coffee on my tongue, the countless nights of burning the midnight oil ahead of me.

But that's the price I pay, isn't it? The sacrifices I make, the pieces of myself I leave behind with each case. Sometimes I wonder if there'll be anything left of me when it's over.

I shake my head, pushing the maudlin thoughts aside. Now's not the time for self-pity. I've got a job to do, and I'll be damned if I let my own demons get in the way.

My keyboard mastery is in motion, muscle memory taking over as I lose myself in the familiar rhythm of decryption. The outside world falls away, narrowing to the glow of the screen and the puzzle before me.

Hours pass, the sky outside my window fading from dusky orange to inky black. My eyes burn, my neck aches, but I don't notice. I'm close, I feel it. A few more lines of code, a few more pieces to slot into place...

And then it clicks. The final tumbler falls, and the encrypted file spills its secrets across my screen. I sit back, a triumphant grin tugging at my lips. Gotcha, you bastards.

But as I scan the contents of the file, my elation fades, replaced by a growing sense of unease. This isn't another run-of-the-mill cybercrime. This is something big, something that has the potential shake the very foundations of Adelaide. Of Australia. Of...

I lean forward, my eyes narrowing as I read on. Names, dates, locations... Every detail meticulously inscribed, a map within marks on a screen. The pieces of the puzzle, waiting to be assembled.

And assemble them, I will. Because if there's one thing I know, it's that I won't rest until I've seen this through. No matter the cost, no matter the danger.

I'm Stephanie McBride, and I won't back down from a fight. In the balance of lives hanging precariously, in the pursuit of righteous scales tipping.

The game is on, and I'm playing for keeps.



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