

# Silence

by Alison Clifford

Gabi was on the run, hiding from the voice on the phone.

“Keep your mouth shut,” it had said, “or else.”

“What do you mean?” she’d asked.

“You know what I mean. Don’t talk to anyone. I’m watching you.”

She’d had no idea what he’d meant, but had promised silence anyway. When you’re being threatened, why wouldn’t you? But now, weeks later, she understood. And she ran.

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Gabi had almost forgotten about the phone call when on a bright Saturday morning the police knocked on her door. As Gabi saw the badges the men held up, the voice echoed in her head.

*Keep your mouth shut, or else.*

Nerves trembled deep in her belly, but she smiled at the officers. “Hello.”

They returned her smile. “Good morning. We are hoping to speak with Gabrielle Sanders.” The officer who had spoken smiled politely.

“That’s me.”

“May we come in? We’re making some queries regarding an investigation. We won’t take much of your time.”

*Keep your mouth shut.*

She didn’t want to let them in. Would they be suspicious of her reasons if she didn’t? It would be better to appear helpful, and maybe it had nothing to do with the voice on the phone. She shrugged her shoulders.

“Sure, come on in.”

Gabi opened the door wide for the officers to enter, then led them into the lounge room. The two officers stood in front of the sofa, waiting for the invitation to sit.

Gabi sighed. “Have a seat.” She dropped into her armchair, opposite the men.

“Ms Sanders, I’m Detective Senior Sergeant Burles, and this is Detective Sergeant Duggan.” Burles paused, turning to look out of the window. It looked out onto the street, giving a clear view of any activity outside. “It’s nice and light in here.”

“It can get a bit hot in the front here, especially in summer,” Gabi said. “The sun shines in through the window most of the day. I tend to keep the curtains closed a lot of the time. The view out the back is better - the garden backs onto bushland. Much nicer.”

*I didn't see a thing.*

There was a pause before Burles spoke again. “Ms Sanders, we are looking into some reports of illegal goods being moved around this area. Have you seen any large deliveries, or regular visits by vans to local homes?”

Gabi almost cried with relief at his question. She wouldn't have to lie - she could be honest.

“I haven't seen anything like that.” The release of tension made her talkative. “I work full time, so I'm not around during the day. And as I said, I usually sit out the back whenever I can. I wouldn't know.”

Burles stared at her. His eyes were a strange colour, a light grey, making them seem almost transparent.

“Have you seen anything on weekends? New furniture being delivered, perhaps? Any new residents, or people moving out of homes?”

“No.” A second passed, then Gabi's heart skipped a beat as a memory rushed back. She's seen the man across the road take delivery of a new mattress, weeks ago. Was that what she was supposed to be quiet about? Fear lodged in her chest as a tight ball.

“Ms Sanders, are you all right? You look pale.”

Gabi looked up at Burles' light eyes, seeing the muscles around them tighten as his gaze intensified on her.

*Make up something, quick.*

“I've got a bit of a tummy bug. You'll have to excuse me,” she said, rising from her chair.

The officers stood too.

“Of course,” Burles said. He passed her a card. “Please call me if you see or remember anything that may be related to our investigation.”

“I will.”

She saw them out of the house and stood on her front step as they drove away in a marked police car. As she turned to go back inside, her eyes were caught by a movement across the road. The door of the house had opened, and the man stood in his doorway, staring at her. She held his look for a second, her heart pounding, before walking back through her door, and locking it.

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The officers didn't speak until they'd left the street behind.

"What do you think?" Duggan asked Burles, who was driving.

"She was nervous at first, then she relaxed. I think she remembered something when I asked her about furniture deliveries - she tensed up again."

"I agree."

"Her initial reaction intrigues me. Why was she nervous to start with? If she didn't remember what she'd seen until the end, what caused her fear at the beginning?"

"Maybe she doesn't like cops."

Burles frowned. "No, I don't think it was that. She relaxed quickly enough once we started the questions. She doesn't have any convictions - I checked. She's a law abiding citizen as far as her record goes." He tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. "If she doesn't call me, I might pay her another visit. Perhaps at her workplace. If she has something to tell, she might be more comfortable doing so away from the eyes of her neighbours."

"It's worth a try."

\* \* \* \*

The voice called Gabi again that night.

"I told you to keep your mouth shut."

"I did, I swear. I told them nothing." Fear turned her blood cold, her muscles tightening, and her gut churning. "Please believe me."

"Then make sure you keep your mouth shut. Understand?"

"Yes."

Gabi's hand shook as she replaced the receiver. She looked around the lounge room, seeking any gap in her defences. The curtains were drawn over locked windows. She'd checked her doors several times. They too were locked. She could see nothing, witness nothing. It was better that way. She would be able to tell the police the truth. Except for the mattress delivery. Her conscience pricked at her. She should tell the police what she knew. The voice scared her though. Surely someone else had seen more than she had, and they would tell. She didn't need to.

Gabi closed her eyes and leaned back against the wall.

"There was no delivery, I saw nothing at all," she whispered. She opened her eyes again and took a deep breath. She would say nothing, and nothing would happen. Everything would be okay.

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Burles smiled at the girl sitting behind the reception desk.

“I’m here to see Gabrielle Sanders.”

“Certainly. Your name?”

“Detective Senior Sergeant Burles.”

The girl’s eyes widened, then flicked down to his waist, looking for his gun and handcuffs. Burles saw a flash of curiosity cross her face as she picked up her phone and dialled. After a brief conversation, she hung up the phone. “Please take a seat. She’ll be with you shortly.”

“Thank you.”

He didn’t have to wait long. Gabi appeared around a corner and scowled down at him.

“What do you want this time?”

He looked up at her, surprised at her anger. He rose, and she took a step back, surprising him further. She was scared, not angry.

“Is there somewhere we can talk, somewhere private?” He needed to get to the bottom of what she feared, and he couldn’t do that in a public foyer. Burles watched the emotions play through her eyes. Fear, annoyance, resignation. She sighed.

“Follow me.”

Gabi lead him to a small room and closed the door behind them, and sat down. He took a seat opposite her so he had a clear view of her face.

“Okay. So what do you want?” she asked.

“I want to know what you’re scared of.”

She looked out of the window. “I’m not scared of anything.”

“Are you sure about that?”

She brought her gaze back to him. Her eyes were the most vivid blue he’d ever seen. They were also wary. “I’m quite sure.”

“Well, you should be. Scared, that is.” He saw her fear grow in the tensing of the muscles in her face.

“Why do you say that?”

“Because you’re hiding something, and I think it could get you in trouble.”

“With the police?”

“No, with the person you’re hiding it for.”

Her eyes darkened. She crossed her arms and hunched her shoulders. He was right, she was hiding something from him.

“You’re wrong.”

Okay, time to shock her. “Gabi, if you know something, you need to tell me. My investigation involves a large quantity of stolen guns; guns that have been smuggled into the state, and will probably be sold to other criminals. How would you feel, hearing of someone being shot in a robbery, or a home invasion, knowing you might have been able to help stop the distribution of the gun involved?”

Her face had gone pale again. “I don’t know anything about guns.” She stood up as if she was going to leave, but after turning towards the door, she stopped, her head bowed. “Oh geez,” she whispered. He could see tears in her eyes. “I don’t know what to do.”

Burles stood and moved around to her side. “Gabi, please tell me what you know.”

“I’m scared.” Her voice trembled. She sat down with a thump and Burles sat in a chair by her side.

“Has someone threatened you?” Fear flared in those blue eyes. He thought for a moment she would clam up again, but then she nodded. “Who, Gabi?”

“A man. He rang me and told me to keep my mouth shut, or else.”

Burles pulled out his notebook and pen. “When did he call?”

As Gabi told him the story, Burles wrote notes.

“And you said you saw a mattress being delivered.”

“Yes.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

Burles looked at her as he thought. If she’d only seen one item delivered, and it had caused the threats, then it would be logical to think the mattress had concealed guns within it. There was no other reason why she would be threatened over an otherwise insignificant thing.

“Will you sign a statement, detailing what you have just told me?”

She hesitated. He knew what her answer would be before she spoke - the fear still sitting in her eyes told him.

“No.”

He nodded. “Okay. I understand.” It was frustrating, but pushing her wouldn’t help.

“I’m sorry.” She paused. “I don’t like guns.” Her eyes touched on his police issue Glock, holstered at his side.

“I don’t like them either - in the wrong hands.”

Her face went scarlet. “I’m sorry,” she repeated. Her brow creased and she caught her lower lip in her teeth. “Am I going to be safe going home?”

“You should be. No one knows what you’ve told me.” He smiled at her. “You have my card. Call me if anything happens, okay?”

She smiled back, the strain in her face easing. “I will.”

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“Any luck?” Duggan asked, when Burles arrived back at the station.

“Yes, and no. She told me she’d seen a mattress being delivered to our suspect, and she’d been threatened - told to keep silent.”

“Wow. That explains why she was nervous.”

“Sure does. She refused to sign a statement though.”

Duggan shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t really need it, do we? We have plenty of other evidence to go on, and now we know where to look.”

“Exactly. I’ll get the paperwork together. You organize a team for the search.”

\* \* \* \*

Gabi dipped a spoon into the pasta sauce simmering on her stove and tasted it.

“Not bad, not bad,” she murmured as she dropped the spoon in the sink. It had taken a while, but her nerves were beginning to settle. Nothing had happened since she’d arrived home, she hadn’t see the man from across the road, no calls had come, and she could relax. Gabi was completely unprepared for the gunshot and sound of smashing glass from outside.

She didn’t think - she ran. Out the backdoor, through the garden, and over the fence into the bush.

Gabi pushed through the scrub, tripping and stumbling over the uneven ground. The half-moon provided little light in the dense bushland, the thick darkness surrounding her, enfolding her in its embrace. She fought on, slowing when the lights of the town faded from sight. Only then did she feel safe enough to stop. She slumped to the ground behind a clump of bushes, gasping for air. The crack of the shot still rang in her ears, the terror making every nerve and every sense strain for sounds of pursuit. None came. No thrashing of scrub as humans moved through it, no shouts, nothing. It had to be the voice. He’d come for her. Gabi sat alert and silent, watching and listening.

The quiet of the bush was broken by the distant sound of sirens. Someone had called the police. Gabi listened as the noise grew louder. Blue and red flashed through the trees, tiny

sparks of light, the colours of help. She didn't move. She had no idea who was down there, whether the owner of the voice waited for her. She sat still, and listened, and watched.

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Burles circled round the back of Gabi's house, torch in one hand, the other resting on his holster. There was no sign of life, no movement visible from the outside. He shone his torch along the back wall of the building.

"Back door's open," he whispered to Duggan, standing behind him. "Let's take a look."

They approached the door. Light shone through from another room. Burles paused in the doorway.

"Gabi? Gabi, can you hear me?"

No answer. He stepped through the door into the house, his torch sweeping the room, highlighting the sofa and extensive bookshelves. "Gabi?"

Footsteps approached through the house. "No sign of her," reported a constable as he appeared through a doorway.

"Damn." Burles turned to Duggan. "Have a look around the backyard, see what you can find."

Duggan nodded and headed outside. Burles followed the constable through to the lit kitchen.

"She's left the stove on," the constable said. "She must have run for it when the shot was fired."

"The back door was open, so she probably went that way. We'll need to search the bushland behind the house. Can you get onto the canines - get them to come out pronto."

"No worries." The constable left. Duggan arrived.

"No sign of her."

"Looks like she ran when she heard the gunshot."

Duggan looked around the room. He walked over to the phone on the bench. "I wonder if she had a call first, and left before the shot was fired." He turned back to Burles. "I'm going to jump the back fence - see if there's any sign of her nearby."

"Okay. The dogs will be on their way soon."

Burles watched Duggan head out the back door. He'd seen the mess of glass when he'd arrived at the house. The bullet had gone through the windscreen of Gabi's car, but the house itself seemed untouched. He felt sick; he'd told her she would be all right at home, and

he'd been wrong. Something else was wrong, too. Burles couldn't put his finger on it. He looked around the kitchen, then walked from room to room, finishing in the kitchen once more.

Then his eye lighted on the phone, and Duggan's voice echoed in his head - 'I wonder if she had a call first' - and his unease turned to horror. He hadn't told Duggan of the calls. So how did he know? There was only one way.

Burles ran outside. "You, you, and you, come with me now. And you," pointing to another officer, "call for more support. We're heading into the bush to find Sanders. She's in danger." He ran down the drive, followed by the officers. He stopped at the fence.

"Listen up. I believe Gabi Sanders is up in the bush, as is Detective Sergeant Duggan. Be careful, I have reason to believe Duggan is behind all of this."

"Duggan?"

"Yes. I want him arrested, regardless of what he may say. Do you understand?"

They all nodded, serious.

"Once we're over the fence, spread out. Look for signs of disturbance."

He hoisted himself over the fence, followed by the others. They crept forward into the scrub.

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Gabi didn't feel safe anymore. Goosebumps rose on her flesh, her instinct screaming for her to move. She rose from the ground, and crouching, began to make her way further into the bush. The scrub thinned out as she climbed upwards, the trees getting taller, the undergrowth turning to bracken. She halted behind a broad trunk, peering around for signs of movement. A glint caught her eye. She froze. A man appeared through the trees. She sighed with relief as she recognized him. Burles' partner. The police had found her - she was safe.

Gabi stepped out from behind the tree and waved.

"I'm here," she called.

The man stopped, looking up at her.

"Is that you, Gabi?" His voice, familiar and terrifying, sent her sprinting through the trees. The voice on the phone had found her.

She darted around trees, trying to find somewhere to hide, something to use to cover her escape. A log in her path sent her stumbling, but she regained her balance and ran on. A crash behind her told Gabi the voice had not been so lucky. This was her chance.

She turned left, circling behind a small group of saplings. Their foliage intermingled forming a screen, one Gabi hoped would disguise her route. She ran on, her lungs aching with the effort; her legs, scratched from bushes and bracken, felt like rubber. She wouldn't be able to run much further.

The trees stopped abruptly as Gabi emerged at the edge of a quarry dug into the hillside. She spun to head back into the cover of the trees, but the sound of pursuit was getting close. There was nowhere to go. Gabi peered over the edge of the quarry. She could make out a small ledge about two metres down. It would have to do. She slid over the lip of the quarry, lowering herself. Her feet flailed for a moment before they hit the rock of the ledge. Her fingers found a hold, and she pressed herself into the rock face, trying to remain as still and silent as she could.

Moments later, the sound of running feet announced the arrival of the voice's owner. Gabi heard a low growl of frustration and the shuffle of feet on the dirt near the edge of the quarry. Then a chuckle.

"Good try, but it didn't work."

She looked up at his grinning face. An icy wave ran through her.

"Please don't hurt me. I'll do anything. Please."

The grin grew wider. "Too late, Gabi dear. You should have kept your mouth shut, like I told you."

"I didn't make a statement. I'll say it was all a lie. Please." She would have grovelled at his feet if she wasn't clinging to a rock face.

"Nah. It's gone too far now. You'll have to go."

"No." Her scream echoed around the quarry, giving her an idea, and hope.

"Shut up," he yelled, his voice rebounding on the rocks.

"Help, he's going to kill me!" Gabi screamed, the noise reverberating through the quarry.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Gabi saw him lift a rock and raise it above his head, his eyes fixed on her. Another hand appeared in her vision, grabbing the voice's wrist and pulling his arm backward.

"I don't think so."

The sound of Burles' voice was the sweetest thing Gabi had ever heard. A group of police appeared above her, surrounding her assailant and pulling him from her sight. Burles' face appeared, looked down at her, his hand outstretched to reach hers. She grabbed hold, another officer joining him to pull her to safety, and away from the edge of the quarry.

“Are you okay?” he asked. He still held onto her hand.

Gabi nodded. “A few scratches maybe, but otherwise fine.”

His eyes searched her face for a moment. He nodded, releasing his grip. “Sit tight. We need to deal with a few things before we head back.” He looked at Duggan, standing handcuffed a few metres away. Gabi saw his mouth tighten to a firm line. He turned back to her. “There are additional officers on their way. Once they arrived they can escort,” he scowled, “...him...back down. We’ll follow.”

He moved away, leaving Gabi to the care of another officer.

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Gabi didn’t talk to Burles again until the following day. They’d made their way back down to her house, and once she’d been checked by the paramedics, she’d gone to a friend’s home for the night. Now she was at the police station, her statement made, waiting to see him.

He walked into the room where she sat, and sank into a chair beside her. He looked drained, exhausted. He sat in silence for a few minutes, his forearms resting on his thighs as he stared at the floor.

Gabi touched his arm. “Do you want to talk at another time? You look like you should be heading home for some rest.”

He turned his head and smiled at her. “I’ll be fine. How are you holding up? You’ve been through a lot.”

“I’m not scared anymore, so I guess I’m all good. Can you tell me what this was about? I would never have guessed who the caller was.”

The smile died from Burles’ face. “I’m struggling to believe it. I’ve known Duggan for eight years.” He sighed. “He sent us on a false trail. We were searching for guns, and we would never have found them. They were smuggling drugs in the furniture, not weapons.”

“Drugs?”

“Ecstasy tablets.” He shook his head. “The mattress you saw? It was a foam mattress that had been hollowed out and filled with tablets. We would have run a metal detector over it, and when that picked up no metal, moved onto the next item.” He sighed again, looking across the room to the window. “We were completely duped, and by one of our own.”

Gabi touched his arm. “I’m sorry. His betrayal must hurt.”

He gave her a quick glance. “It’s not nice.”

A short silence, then Gabi spoke. “Do you have a first name, Detective Senior Sergeant Burles?”

He sat up and smiled at her. “I do. My name’s Adam.”

“Well, Adam, what happens now?”

“I hand over the reports and evidence to the department of prosecution, and take you out for dinner.”

Gabi felt her cheeks begin to glow. “Are you asking me on a date?”

He reached for her hand, holding it in his warm grasp. “Not yet, but as soon as everything is handed over, I’ll be dropping by to see you.”

She smiled into his grey eyes. “I’ll look forward to it.”