



MISSING MELBOURNE MUM

'She wouldn't just WALK AWAY'

The vanishing of a 'kind-hearted, loving' mother exposes family secrets and financial problems. WHO investigates the mysterious, tragic disappearance of Karen Ristevski

Her mother's disappearance is "so out of character," said Sarah (with father Boris at the July 14 press conference).



Missing woman Karen Ristevski (with husband Boris and daughter Sarah) "is a kind-hearted, caring, loving kind of girl," a close friend tells WHO.



NO CLUES

Since she disappeared, there has been no clue to Karen Ristevski's whereabouts. Said Inspector Stephen Dennis: "We are treating it as a missing person case, but the longer she remains missing the more difficult it becomes."

SES workers searched behind the Ristevski home in Avondale Heights on July 14.



asked WHO not to reveal her name] who had dinner with Karen six weeks before she went missing. "She was always

As a mother, businesswoman and charity champion, Karen Ristevski has always been devoted to making people feel good. Whenever anyone came into the women's boutique she owns and operates with husband Borce "Boris" Ristevski in Melbourne, "they were made to feel comfortable, especially for those who had a mastectomy," says her cousin Lisa, who asked WHO to withhold her surname. "Karen was able to give them dress options that worked best for their body shape, in order to be proud. Karen was able to make them feel special." She brought that same warmth to the Avondale Heights home she shares with Boris and their 21-year-old daughter, Sarah. "Her family is most important to her, especially the love and devotion she has for her daughter Sarah," says Lisa, a Sydney HR director. "Sarah and her mum are extremely close, they spoke many times per day. They are best friends."

Which is why her family believe she wouldn't just walk away. Yet in a case that has gripped Melbourne and has police scouring a waterway, Karen, 47, disappeared on June 29, leaving no clue to her whereabouts and exposing a raft of problems and issues in what otherwise appeared to be a close, well-to-do family. At time of going to press, there was still no trace of the mum, who TV star and philanthropist Samuel Johnson called a "community champion" for her work helping those with breast cancer (see box). The mystery has left her heartbroken family desperate for answers. "It's not possible for someone to just disappear like this," said her aunt and family representative Patricia, who has asked the media not to use her surname. "It's not Karen. Karen would not leave us."

"It's not Karen. Karen would not leave us"

—Karen's aunt Patricia

Wearing a black blazer, jeans and carrying a gold Coach handbag and purse on the day she went missing, Ristevski was last seen at 10 AM by Boris, he said, as she left their \$1.1 million

home for a walk. Boris, who has been formally interviewed by police as a matter of routine, said his wife left to "clear her head" following a heated argument over money. The couple are partners in formal-wear business Bella Bleu, which is in apparent financial trouble with reported debts as high as \$600,000. *The Australian* also reports the business had fallen behind in rent payments to the Broadmeadows Shopping Centre, where one of its two stores is. If the couple were under pressure, Karen kept a poker face. "I never got that impression," says a long-time friend [she

on the go, not stressed." While the family home has security cameras, they had not been operating for some time, so no vision of Karen leaving is available. Further, no neighbours or other witnesses have yet come forward to say they saw her on a walk that morning. Her phone and bank accounts have not been used since June 29. "Little did we think four weeks later we would be still looking for her and wondering what has happened," says Lisa. "It's the not knowing that's the hardest." To that end, police and SES have scoured parkland and the Maribyrnong River near Karen's home in a hunt for



"Our hearts are bleeding," said Samuel Johnson (with Karen in an undated picture).

'KIND KAREN'

When *The Secret Life of Us* and *Molly* star Samuel Johnson began his "Love Your Sister" fund-raising campaign for breast-cancer awareness, Karen Ristevski stepped up. Hearing that Johnson's sister, Connie, had undergone a double mastectomy in her battle against the disease, Karen offered to donate customised gowns. "Karen's a sensitive, generous, intelligent and kind woman," said Johnson, the driving force behind the Love Your Sister charity. "She is the last person in the world you would expect something like this to happen to. She never puts a foot wrong. Our hearts are bleeding for her daughter." loveyoursister.org

FROM LEFT: AAP IMAGE; SUPPLIED IMAGE; NEWSPIX; AAP IMAGES

Sarah (with her mother) "was Karen's everything," says a friend.



Anthony Rickard (in Melbourne on July 21) said family problems were "swept under the carpet."



FAMILY SECRETS

Karen's disappearance has brought to light a secret Ristevski family conflict involving Karen's stepson Anthony Rickard, who harbours anger over the issue. Still, "I don't hate her," he said. "Because I can't—she showed me love."



The Ristevski family home in Melbourne's Avondale Heights.



answers. And on July 30, police divers returned to the waterway following "information we received from the public," said Det Sr Sgt Craig Rhodes. At press time, no clues had surfaced. Said Det Insp Stephen Dennis: "We have grave concerns for her welfare."

In a twist to the mystery, Boris's 32-year-old son from a previous relationship has revealed a long-standing secret "conflict" within the family. In an interview with the *Herald Sun*, Melbourne father-of-two Anthony Rickard said he did not kill his stepmother, but his "anger" over the so-called conflict gave him a "motive to hurt her." Ten days before the disappearance, Rickard, who calls his childhood a "nightmare" and for a time in his teens lived in the Ristevski household, called his stepmother to talk about the "conflict," the nature of which has not been made public. "It was a shock that she disappeared after my phone call to her," said Rickard, who is reportedly battling an ice addiction. "I had nothing to do with [her disappearance] besides calling her to confront her."

Rickard also reportedly told police that Karen often said to him "that once Sarah

turned 21, she would be 'out of there,' meaning she'd be leaving my dad." The claim remains unsubstantiated. "Never ever did she say anything bad about her family life at all," says the friend, a Melbourne mother who has known Karen since high school. "She never said a bad word about [Boris]. She never said anything that would make me think she was in danger."

The family stand united on that front. If

"She was always doing kind acts"

—Sharryn Hili

Karen met with foul play, her aunt says she knows of no-one who would want to harm her. "And if that was the case, we would already know something about that," Patricia told a press conference on July 14. "It would be an ongoing thing." Rickard also came to the defence of Boris, who was asked by a reporter at the same media conference if he killed his wife. Rickard told the *Herald Sun* his father does not "have it in him [to kill]."

So could Karen have been abducted? A young woman who takes her dog for daily walks in the parkland near the Ristevski home told News Corp she was accosted twice by a man who once made lewd comments about her breasts. The last instance reportedly took place

just weeks before Karen's disappearance. At press time, police had not named any suspects in the case. "We've spoken to members from the family and we've spoken to other people as well," said Det Insp Dennis. "I'm not going to speculate on any individual at this stage."

As investigations continue, Karen's friends are spreading the word of the disappearance—delivering flyers, posting messages on social media—in the hope of somehow helping the woman who always went out of her way to help others, especially those suffering personal hardship. "She was always doing kind acts," says the friend. "One of our old friends was battling cancer and Karen messaged her on Facebook, saying 'Hey, I heard you are going through a rough patch, why don't you come into the store and pick out a dress to make yourself feel a bit special and go out?'" She was always doing that to others. Very caring."

At her home in Sydney, Karen's cousin Lisa is trying to remain positive, recalling memories of the last time she saw the woman who has been an unwavering source of support since the untimely loss of her own parents. "I recently saw Karen and her family when we all had a vacation," says Lisa. "She was happy. We had lots of laughs. We talked about our next trip away. I just hope they find Karen soon, as does everyone who knows her."

■ By Michael Crooks. Reported by Emma Martin and Louise Talbot
Crimestoppers: 1300 333 000

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SUPPLIED IMAGES; NEWSPIX; SEVEN NEWS