

# Tuesday, 14 August

12.14 am

Freezing air slices my lungs every time I breathe. I walk to the other side of the tunnel in an attempt to shift blood into my numb feet. I peer into its black depths. I assume it's just a long stretch of concrete and rubbish, shelter for rats and mice, that eventually merges with other concrete passages running underneath unsuspecting roads and buildings. Faded graffiti hugs the curved wall, the colourful scrawls harshly exposed by a mobile spotlight and fresh police tape across the entrance is taut, barely shaking in the breeze. The nearby asphalt path is slick with recent rain. High above, a plump moon peers down at the blunt edges of the city. As the white puffs exit my mouth, I think about how much grittier the crime scenes always seem here than they did in Smithson. So much more sinister somehow.

I was drifting into my second hour of sleep when the call came through. A fatal attack in Carlton. Putting the phone down, I threw a glance at the lightly snoring man in the giant bed beside me. I slipped out of the warm cocoon, stumbled into the small lounge, then quietly pulled on the clothes I'd stripped off only an hour earlier. After easing the door shut, I made my way to the lift

and rushed through the gleaming lobby, eyes on the floor, before jumping into a cab. The city is smaller at night, and less than fifteen minutes later I'm staring into the face of a dead man, the wind biting at my nose and ears.

My body aches for rest. I taste wine on my breath. Sex is still fresh on my skin. I pull my wool coat tighter around me and shake my head, forcing my brain to accept that for the next few hours at least, sleep is out of the question.

The forensics officers are silent as they go about their business, glowing in their puffy white uniforms. Their jaws are set as they pluck items from the ground with gloved hands and tweezers, dropping them carefully into evidence bags, their experienced eyes taking in the story of the scene.

All I can hear is the endless buzz of the sprawling night.

I jump slightly as a camera flash lights up the dingy surrounds—once, twice, again—and it reminds me of a music video. But in place of curvy dancing silhouettes, there is only the profile of the victim, his head hanging forward into his lap, his back hard against the wall. In death, the old man's gnarled fingers curl gently into each palm. His bald head is partly shielded from the cold; a woollen beanie dotted with holes grips his head. His tracksuit pants are down around his knees but his oversized shirt grants him some dignity. His hands are slick with drying blood, indicating that he tried to keep the life inside his body. He didn't want to die despite living like this. The dark red mingles with the rubbish on the ground, creating a murky, smelly puddle. I wonder if anyone is left alive who remembers him as a child. I wonder about his mother.

The glowing tip of a cigarette bobs into my vision.

'What a place to go,' says Detective Sergeant Nick Fleet, extinguishing the smoke and placing it in a plastic bag before shoving it into his pocket.

The familiar smell finds my nostrils and instantly triggers a craving.

‘It’s pretty isolated,’ I observe. ‘And badly lit. You’d be fairly safe to assume that you could get away with pretty much anything out here.’

Fleet snorts. ‘Well, if it wasn’t for the witness I’d guess it was a gay hook-up gone wrong, seeing as our guy’s half naked.’ Fleet squints into the tunnel at the body, wrinkling his nose. ‘But it was probably drug payback. Usually is.’

‘Maybe,’ I reply, ‘but I don’t think so. Everything here suggests that he was taken by surprise. I think he was urinating against the wall when someone attacked him.’ I point to the rancid wet circle not far from the body.

Fleet clears his throat loudly and the rattle of loose phlegm nauseates me. ‘My money is still on drugs.’

‘It’s possible,’ I say, ‘but there’s no suggestion that he was using or selling. No track marks, no drug paraphernalia.’

‘Maybe he pissed someone off.’

‘Maybe,’ I say curtly.

Fleet clicks his tongue. ‘We must keep an open mind, Gemma,’ he says in a faux-wise voice. ‘It’s early days after all.’

A familiar surge of frustration flares just as headlights swing across the darkness nearby. The bark of a dog explodes behind us. Moments later, our boss, Chief Inspector Toby Isaacs, ducks under the tape and into the mouth of the tunnel. He nods at me, then Fleet, before surveying the scene with wide grey eyes. His features don’t move but his gaze lingers on the dead man’s worn boots; the sole of the left one gapes open at the toes like a howling mouth.

‘What do we know?’ asks Isaacs.

‘He was stabbed,’ I say, straightening my shoulders and forcing strength into my voice. ‘Looks like a single wound, though we haven’t moved him yet. No sign of a weapon. I’ll arrange for a field

team to do a search at first light and see what CCTV we can pull from the area, but I think we'll hit a dead end on that front. I can't see any cameras.'

Isaacs nods briskly. 'And we're sure he was homeless?'

'It certainly looks that way,' I confirm.

'And smells that way,' says Fleet. He points past the forensics team to a blanket and a tatty backpack. 'That looks like his bedroom over there.'

'We can't find any ID,' I add.

'Where's the witness now?' asks Isaacs, looking around.

'She's at the station,' I tell him. 'We'll head back there and take her statement once we're done here. Apparently she's elderly and homeless herself. On my way here I spoke to the constable who's with her, and he says she's in a bad way.'

'She definitely doesn't have anything to do with it?'

'It doesn't sound like it. He said she's terrified.'

Isaacs purses his lips. 'Do we have a description to work with?'

'A man in a hoodie,' I reply. 'We'll push for more details but it's so dark out here I doubt she saw much.'

'Men in hoodies really are the root of all evil, aren't they?' quips Fleet.

I watch as he scratches his elbow and pushes a hand roughly through his wiry hair. Isaacs seems to tolerate rather than favour him, which he never seems too fussed about—but, then, Nick Fleet never seems particularly ruffled by anything.

In the three months I've been in Melbourne, I've worked more closely with him than anyone else on the squad. He's a detective sergeant like me but at least a couple of years older—I'd be surprised if he's forty. I get the feeling he had another life altogether before entering the force. I also quickly learned he has a massive reputation with the ladies, though I'm yet to see the charm.

He's unappealingly hairy and frequently rude, and he has a rough, primal quality: a harshness.

The forensics officers begin to trawl through the pile of bedding. The camera strobes again before a jumper and a faded picnic blanket are swiftly bagged.

Isaacs rubs his hands together and breathes into them. 'Hopefully it was someone he knew. A random attack on the homeless is the last thing we need.'

'I'm going to have another smoke,' announces Fleet. 'I'll have a bit of a look around while I'm at it.'

Isaacs just clasps his arms and rocks back slightly on his heels. He turns his head to look out across the parkland, his angular profile sharp. The moonlight paints his hair silver. As always, I can't tell what he's thinking.

I shift my gaze past Isaacs to take in the maze of lights and uneven rooftops. I feel uneasy, not knowing who might be watching from the darkness.

'Detective Woodstock?' says Brenton Cardona, one of the senior techs. 'We're going to move him in a minute. That okay with you?'

Aware that Isaacs' eyes are on me, I give Cardona a firm yes before squatting next to the nameless victim one last time. Careful to avoid the blood and debris, I look into his face. His bottom lip hangs open slightly and shines with saliva. His unseeing eyes are fixed on his broken shoes. I would place him around sixty-five but the layers of grime on his leathery, pockmarked skin make it hard to tell. He might be much younger. My back teeth grind together as I play out his macabre demise in my mind: the split-second register of a presence, his surprise at being grabbed from behind and spun around. The blinding pain as a knife is pushed into his chest, eyes widening as his blood flowed straight from his heart and onto the ground. His panic as he realised he was dying. His terror.

It's impossible for me to know if he was good, bad or any of the shades in between. But no matter what happened at the end, right now—punctured, slumped forward and drained of life—this dead old man looks like an abandoned little boy.

# Tuesday, 14 August

7.43 pm

The heavy door thuds shut behind me and I stand in the dark boxy entrance for a moment. I just want to be perfectly still as the day fades away. The brutality of the homeless man's death has pulled me down, his crumpled corpse heavy in my thoughts. I walk over to the lounge-room window and take in the sprawl of activity below. Cars creep along the ruler-straight roads, the angry glow of red tail-lights evidencing the collective frustration of their drivers. Everyone here is so impatient to *be* somewhere.

My apartment is at the top end of Melbourne, near the corner of Little Collins and Exhibition streets. It's eight floors up and the view gives the city such a sense of grandeur. Smithson, my home town in regional New South Wales, is definitely growing, but its 25,000-odd people has nothing on the crazy melting pot of lives that Melbourne homes.

Dropping my keys onto the kitchen bench, I shake off my jacket and flick on the ancient wall heater. It chokes into life, half-heartedly filling the room with warm stale air.

I ended up leaving the station just before 3 am, wired on caffeine, my eyes like two hot discs in my face after interviewing

Lara Maxwell, the terrified witness. Lara couldn't tell us much and knew the victim only as Walt. Both homeless, they'd spoken occasionally but she said he'd mainly kept to himself. She described him as simple but harmless; she often saw him talking to the pigeons and whistling show tunes. The perfect sitting duck.

Fleet and I calmed Lara down and arranged some temporary accommodation for her before heading home.

By the time I returned to the station at midday, Isaacs had appointed Ralph Myers as case lead and we'd confirmed an ID. Swallowing my disappointment at being overlooked again, I sat through the formal briefing.

Our victim, Walter Miller, a 62-year-old perennially homeless man with a staccato history of mental illness, had been living rough for over two decades. He last had a fixed address in the early nineties. Tammy Miller, his 33-year-old daughter, hadn't seen her father for almost twenty years, after her mother, Walter's ex-wife, decided she wanted nothing to do with him. Tammy, now an event planner with two young children, is clearly bewildered about what to do with the news of her estranged father's murder. She's suddenly grieving for a man who in many ways was dead to her years ago. Her mother died in 2013, and the shock of her orphan status and the horrific circumstances of Walter's death were written on her pretty face as Ralph led her to an interview room.

At around 3 pm I was sent back to the crime scene to interview workers in nearby factories. Had they seen anything the previous evening? They hadn't. They were all long gone and tucked up safely in bed by the time Walter met his grim fate.

So far, our investigation has revealed a life as lonely as his death. There's no sign of chronic drug use and no criminal record. There is no apparent motive for the attack at all, unless the objective

was a cold-blooded kill. We'll continue to pull his world apart, analyse his recent interactions and track his movements, because someone is better than no one to blame, even if it's the victim himself. I'm already getting the feeling that Walter's death will remain an inexplicable cruelty. A nasty statistic. Sometimes you can just tell.

Walking past my tiny bedroom, I consider collapsing straight into my unmade bed. But not yet. It's a Ben night and it's almost time for our call. I should eat now so that I can put all my focus into his face and voice. The slow turn of my stomach is familiar, my pre-Ben conversation physiology always the same. I've come to recognise it before I'm consciously aware of it. It's similar to the feeling of having a crush but with a ribbon of melancholy tied tightly around it. I love talking to him but it is somehow also very unsatisfying, the pain so acute when he hangs up that I'm still not convinced the high is worth the crashing comedown. But, of course, none of it is supposed to be about me.

In the end, my relationship with Ben's dad Scott simply faded away. After working a major murder case a few years ago, where the victim was an old classmate of mine, I was empty. Rosalind Ryan's murder had completely broken me. It forced so much of my past into the present that eventually I collapsed under the weight.

In the immediate aftermath of Rosalind's case Scott and I came together, but ultimately we ended up even further apart. Scott tried, I know he did. He is a solid person, inside and out: broad-shouldered and stocky with a thick crop of dark hair and a sense of reliability that always sees him called upon for favours. His kind eyes, full of hope and effort, followed me around the house. He wanted to be close to me, to connect with me, but I'm ashamed to say, that after a few months of hypervigilance in regard to taking

it easy, and giving our relationship the attention it deserved, I regressed to my old ways and funnelled my scant energy into work. I was an exceptional detective but a shitty partner and a barely passable mother. Rosalind haunted my dreams and I was grieving badly for Felix, my colleague who had transferred to a Sydney squad. Our affair, and the resulting miscarriage I'd endured, paired with the emotions Rosalind's murder unearthed, left me badly bruised. Over time the pain faded to apathy, and I found myself directing that toward Scott. It was as if I'd decided that if I couldn't be with Felix, there was no point in trying to make it work with anyone else. I was high-functioning but deeply broken and eventually something had to give. When the opportunity to transfer to Melbourne arose, I needed to take it. Living in Smithson was slowly killing me.

I lean against the bench, looking at my poky kitchen. I can't be bothered to cook but I know I should eat, especially after my coffee lunch and afternoon snack of crackers and chewing gum. I've lost over five kilos since arriving here. I fire up the gas. Grate some bright yellow cheese and pour the dregs of some fading chardonnay into a wineglass. As the water begins to boil I dump half a cup of pasta into the saucepan.

I close my eyes as I tip the wine down my throat. Next door a man's voice yells through the thin common wall and a woman's sharp voice retorts loudly, sparking a ping-pong argument; it penetrates the soothing shield that alcohol is gallantly trying to form around my brain. I picture the cold grey tunnel that Walter Miller called home and shiver, turning the heater up higher. I open a new bottle of wine and pour another glass. It seems that the TV options on Tuesday night are no better than those on Monday.

I flick from an episode of *The Street* to the news, and my boss's face fills the screen. I sit up a little straighter and note how Isaacs'

grey stare holds the reporter's as he calmly answers her questions about Walter Miller's death.

As I shovel my unappetising dinner into my mouth, I have to admit my boss is compelling on TV. His thick grey hair obediently falls into place every time he shifts his head. His nose hooks slightly, set above full lips. His movements are slow and deliberate, like those of a lizard whose blood needs warming in the sun. His low voice is steady, an authoritative baritone.

Isaacs is polite to me, polite to everyone, but everything about him feels distant. I sense it's intentional: he seems determined to keep everyone at arm's-length. Our relationship is formal, forced, and so far I feel like I've struggled to transcend the job interview phase, which is unsettling as I'm still technically on probation. Nan, Ralph and Calvin are his clear favourites but even with them he is frosty. He's so unlike Ken Jones, my old station chief who wore his heart—and every thought that ran through his head—prominently on his sleeve.

Rumour has it that everyone thought Isaacs was a shoo-in for the commissioner role a few months back, but instead Joe Charleston, a well-regarded inspector from Tasmania, got the gig. Allegedly Isaacs has been even more aloof since then.

The news shifts a gear and a reporter is now talking excitedly about the Hollywood movie *Death Is Alive*, which will begin filming in Melbourne tomorrow. I'm vaguely aware of the production—a bunch of our guys have been working with the film's security team and the council for the past few months, and Candy keeps mentioning it because she has a crush on the lead actor.

Candy Fyfe is a reporter back in Smithson and probably my closest friend. She is a force of nature, the first indigenous journalist Smithson has seen and probably the most dedicated. We weren't friends initially, in fact we were openly hostile, but I've

grown to love her relentless energy. She is single-handedly trying to keep our friendship alive via various forms of electronic correspondence. With a stab of guilt, I realise I never got back to her most recent message, which she sent over a week ago. I pull it up on my phone, laughing as I reread her updates about our home town. She's heard a rumour that the local Presbyterian minister is having an affair with the funeral director, so she's been fronting up to church every Sunday to investigate. I can just imagine Candy, her athletic brown body poured into one of her trademark tight-fitting outfits, lurking around the church trying to catch the unlikely couple out.

Famous faces flash onto the screen as the reporter chatters on. Having zero interest in celebrities, I barely recognise any of them. I yawn and get up to pour another wine. My hips creak as I rise and stagger the few steps to the kitchen. I might be losing weight but my fitness is at an all-time low. I've stopped running. I do enough at the squad gym to pass for trying, but I'm only going through the motions. I need to get into a better routine.

I need to do a lot of things.

Checking the time, I head onto the tiny balcony for my daily cigarette, eyes on the twinkling dots in the sky as smoke fills my lungs. I begin to picture Ben's face. His pale green eyes, identical to mine. His smattering of freckles. The sweet curve of his mouth. 8.28 pm. He will ring any second now. He is punctual, a trait inherited from his father.

Scott sometimes says a quick hello to me but we spoke on Sunday so it's unlikely that we will this time. The finances are agreed for now, Ben is fine, so there's nothing for us to talk about.

Shoving the cigarette into the growing graveyard of yellow butts in an empty flowerpot, I go back inside and pull the door closed. I drink more wine, wrestling with the memory of the hotel room

from last night. The abstract art on the walls, the strong eager hands on my body. I cringe slightly, my head pounding. I realise the bottle of wine is already half empty.

My phone buzzes and I scramble to mute the TV. Wipe my mouth. Pull my legs underneath me and curl into a ball to Skype with my son.

‘Hi, Mum.’ His face fills the screen and he waves at me.

‘Hey, Ben!’ I summon my best smile and push my guilt firmly aside. ‘How are you, darling?’

‘Good.’

My chest tightens at his little boy nonchalance. He’s not obtuse; he just doesn’t go into detail. Our conversations are a blissful jumble of simple words and sweet silences. They are everything. They are not nearly enough.

‘Did you have sport today?’

‘Yep.’

I smile, just taking him in. He always sits up straight when he talks on Skype. It’s still a task that requires his full concentration, like he’s worried he’ll get the next answer wrong if he relaxes. Ben has just turned five and I often struggle with the thought that he’s not that many years from being the same age as so many of the kids I deal with at work. The kids who are tangled up in the bad situations I’m trying to figure out. Kids who’ve been around evil for so long that it has seeped into their souls and erupts in all the worst ways. I swallow past an image of a future Ben, broken by his mother’s rejection.

‘Soccer, right?’ I say.

‘Yep. And my team won again!’ He beams at me.

‘That’s great, sweetheart! And do you have footy on the weekend?’

‘Yeah, this Saturday, and then we have a week off. That’s what Dad said.’

We chat about his friend's mini-golf party, and he asks about my goldfish.

'Frodo is fine,' I tell him, shifting the phone so he can see the fishbowl. 'He told me to tell you he says hi.'

Ben giggles and I smile again before sadness bubbles inside me. Oblivious, he chatters on about school, his teacher and what he ate for lunch.

'Do you want to look at the stars now?' he asks, already knowing the answer.

'Of course,' I say, careful to hide the crack in my voice. 'I bet I know which one you're going to talk about first.'

'Well . . .' He moves toward the window in the lounge. 'There's that big one right in the middle of the sky. And like, three little ones in a little line next to it. Can you see the one I mean?' He turns the phone around and I get a sweeping glimpse of the familiar room before hazy sky fills the screen.

'Sure can,' I tell him. 'That's a good one. Can you see the sneaky sparkly one on the right? I think it's right near my apartment.'

'Oh yeah,' he says, eyebrows shooting up, 'it's kind of yellow. Cool.'

He stifles a yawn and his eyes drop away from the heavens. 'Time for bed,' I say firmly—still able, occasionally, to be his mother.

'Okay,' he agrees, yawning again. 'Speak to you on Thursday, Mum?'

'You bet. Have a great day tomorrow. I'll give Frodo an underwater kiss for you.'

We blow a kiss to each other and, as I hang up, I realise that my hand is flat across my heart.

I brush my teeth, use the toilet and undress, sliding into my freezing bedding. My head spins and my stomach cramps uncomfortably. In the lounge, the heater makes an unhealthy ticking

sound. The TV next door mumbles. Rock music thuds through the ceiling. Glass smashes on the street. A cat meows. I toss and turn, picturing first Ben sleeping peacefully in his bed and then Walter Miller slumped forward in his cold bloody puddle. Until finally, I am asleep.

# Wednesday, 15 August

5.55 am

I wake before the alarm goes off, my eyes sore and grainy, traces of wine fixed offensively to the walls of my mouth. Rolling over, I stare at the ceiling for a few seconds, considering the day ahead. I expect it will mostly consist of attempting to confirm Walter Miller's final movements, trying to work out why the hell someone wanted him to exit the world so dramatically.

I pull myself up and throw the blanket roughly back over the bed. Turning on the shower, I let the steam warm the air before stepping in. Wash, dress. Blast my hair with the dryer and I'm ready for whatever the day hurls my way. I tap some flakes into Frodo's bowl and give him a half-hearted kiss for Ben. As I thump down the stairs, I swallow the tail of an overripe banana.

At the base of my apartment block is a tiny cafe called The Boil, which does a strange mix of breakfast food and noodles. I order two takeaway coffees and pick up the newspaper. A grainy, decades-old photo of Walter Miller and his daughter is on the front page, the bold headline above his face screaming 'Homeless and Hunted'.

When I step back outside, the cold air fingers my scalp and flicks up my hair. I pull my scarf around my head in an attempt to pin

it down. I walk up to the corner where, behind a bench seat, a little concrete alcove is cut into the base of an old office building.

‘Morning, Macy,’ I say, relieved to see the familiar mass of blankets. I hold one of the cups out to the large woman curled underneath the hard grey overhang. A giant beanie rests just above her eyes and her round chin juts out above her tatty coat collar as she appraises the new day. She heaves herself up, her face cracking into a smile as she takes the cup from me. This alcove, about two hundred metres from my front door, is the closest thing Macy has to a home. Everything she owns is in an ancient North Face backpack that she uses as a pillow.

A few weeks after I arrived in Melbourne, I locked myself out of my apartment block after a night shift. Tired and alone, I collapsed on a park bench crying my eyes out. Macy emerged from her alcove and sat with me for over an hour listening to my story, while I waited for the property manager. And then she shared hers. It turned out we both have sons we don’t get to see anymore. These days I find it easier to talk to Macy than anyone else I know. Surveying Walter Miller’s crime scene had reminded me of her modest jumble of earthly things more than I’d wanted to admit to myself.

‘What’s news today, big cop lady? More of my fellas turning up dead?’ She’s smiling but I think she must be so scared about what happened to Walter. She must feel so vulnerable out here. Not for the first time I think about helping her in some way. Finding her somewhere to stay or inviting her into my apartment, but when I alluded to this a few weeks ago it was clear it made her uncomfortable. She is such a proud woman and wears her resilience like an invisible badge. So I settle on buying her coffee and the occasional snack but anything beyond a token gesture feels like it’s off limits.

‘No news yet today, Macy,’ I tell her, sitting on the bench, ‘but it’s still early.’ I pause, then say, ‘You didn’t know the man who died, did you?’

She wipes her nose on her sleeve. ‘Not really. Met him once or twice. But my friend Lara, she knew him. She said you spoke to her the other night at the cop shop. She’s not doing so well. Keeps remembering what she saw.’

I instantly summon Lara’s terrified face, her jerky movements and nervous glances as Fleet and I interviewed her about what she witnessed at the tunnel. I wonder if she’s back on the streets already; I don’t know how far the empathy of the tax-paying dollar stretches to a homeless witness.

‘I’m sorry to hear that, Macy,’ I say. ‘We’re doing everything we can to find the person who attacked Walter.’

She shrugs and sips more coffee, suggesting little faith in the likelihood of this outcome. As she pulls her mouth into a smile again, her stained teeth gleam in her dark face. ‘Well. Anyway, enough sad talk. There’s big excitement around here later today. They’re shooting a movie along the top of Spring Street.’

‘That’s right,’ I say, putting my coffee down so I can make jazz hands, ‘the big Hollywood film.’

‘They’re blocking off all the cars, you know. Your lot are gunna be everywhere, keeping people out of the way. I read the information flyer they were handing out. There’s gunna be some big action scene. With real movie stars.’ Her gravelly voice rolls across the path, and we get a few odd looks from eager corporates in tailored suits and sleepy shift workers heading home. ‘I’m going to get myself a front-row seat. Try to get Lara to come.’ She knocks back more coffee and closes her eyes. ‘Man, this is good stuff. Just a beautiful, beautiful thing.’

I tuck my feet in their new boots under the bench as I notice her woollen socks sticking through holes in her worn broken ones.

‘How is your little boy?’ she asks.

I sigh and have some of my own coffee. ‘He’s fine. He seems happy. You know, with school. With his sport.’

‘Well, that’s the main thing. And don’t you go worrying about things that aren’t really there. If he’s fine, then everything is. Remember?’

I nod and try to smile. ‘I know you’re right. But look, I gotta get going, Mace,’ I say, already on my feet.

She gives me a reproachful look. ‘You take care out there, Detective Gemma.’

‘You too,’ I say, giving her a pointed look. ‘I mean it, be careful.’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ she says, but I see a flicker of fear in her eyes again.

I smile at her. ‘I’m looking forward to hearing about your day at the movies.’



I don’t know why I went to the hotel that first night. It was a Thursday. I’d been in Melbourne for exactly one week and had barely spoken to a soul. I was still staying in a serviced apartment, applying for rentals and due to start work the following Monday.

I’d spent the day wandering aimlessly around the city, up and down the corridors of the Queen Victoria Market, sitting in cafes, nursing coffees until they became cold. Just before five I went back to the apartment and had a shower. I craved a drink and figured I may as well make myself look half decent and go out somewhere. Maybe I could pretend I was here on business, I reasoned. I put on the only dress I owned and dried my long hair. Stepping outside and walking along Exhibition Street toward the heart of the city, I saw a stream of taxis rounding into a hotel entrance. There would be a bar there, I thought, and it would be nice to look out over the main street. It started to rain, fat droplets splattering onto the pavement, and I hurried across the road and through the glass doors, past the smiling concierge.

I ordered a wine and sat on a velvet-covered chair, watching night-time take hold of the city. Every surface shone and I was

mesmerised by the glittering chandelier. I felt gloriously at peace, more relaxed than I'd been in weeks. I took off my jacket and crossed my legs, leaning back against the plush cushions. The waiter returned, a full glass of wine already perched on his tray, and told me that the gentleman at the bar had bought me a drink.

I looked over to see an olive-skinned man in a navy suit smiling at me.

I smiled back and picked up the drink, my eyes still on the man as I took the first sip.

Just as I was finishing the wine, he came over carrying two fresh drinks. 'What a day, huh?' he said, handing me a glass. Underneath his smile his gaze was intense as it raked over my body.

'Yes. It's nice to relax now though.'

'How long are you staying here?' he asked me.

I blinked. 'Home tomorrow. Back to Sydney.'

'Me too—I'm based in Auckland,' he said, and I detected the hint of an accent.

We exchanged looks before I pulled my eyes away. My breathing was all through my mouth.

I was drunk when we got to his room. My arms were above my head, pinned against the wall before the door shut. I let him strip off my clothes; I let him take control. I felt like a piece of driftwood, tossed around by the raging water. It felt good to be held by this stranger. For him to know nothing about me. He held my wrists and threw me onto the bed. His long lean body was heavy on top of me and he pushed so far inside me I winced.

Hours later, in the dead of the night, I crawled into my own bed, breathing as if I'd been chased. The room danced around me, my pulse pounding through my whole body, while I thought about how I wanted to do it again.

# Wednesday, 15 August

7.29 am

‘Morning,’ says Calvin Atkins perkily as I drop my bag on my desk. Coffee churns in my guts, lonely with only the banana for company.

‘Hi,’ I say, my eyes already trained on my computer screen, blocking off more chat.

Calvin agreeably busies himself with a pile of paperwork, the angles of his thin face emphasised by the glow of his computer screen.

Nan Sheridan walks in, grunts, and deposits her sizeable bulk into her worn office chair, which groans in response. She plucks out her earphones and rustles in her bag, dumping a worn-looking Val McDermid novel on her desk next to a haphazard stack of crime novels. Emptying her handbag of fast-food wrappers, she snaps on her computer and stares at the blank screen as it whirs into life.

‘Want a coffee, Nan?’

She looks at Calvin right between his eyes, which he seems to understand means yes because he nods and scoots off to the tearoom muttering, ‘Long black, no sugar.’

I don’t say anything to Nan and she doesn’t say anything to me. I think we like this about each other.

There are just over a hundred detectives in the Melbourne homicide squad. Nan, Calvin, Fleet and I are in one of the sixteen groups along with Billy Benton, Ralph Myers and Chloe Senna. Each group has a mix of experienced senior detectives like Nan and Ralph, and then junior detectives like Chloe, with people like me falling somewhere in between. Nan has been a senior DS for almost a decade and surely must have her eye on Isaacs' job. She's good, I'll give her that, ferocious—though I'm not sure how well she'd go at managing people. She has slightly more patience with the dead than with the living but not much. I watch as she jabs a single finger at her keyboard. Technology is another thing that Nan merely tolerates—if she could do the entire job with her bare hands, she would.

A small commotion flares up a few pods along. One of the juniors is back from a holiday and there's a lot of excitement about her tan. I stay at my desk, working steadily through my emails. Ralph is usually in early but I assume he's at Walter Miller's autopsy, which was scheduled first thing this morning. Billy is probably there with him too. Isaacs has set a ten-thirty meeting to review the Miller case and any updates on the Jacoby case, and until then I have plenty to keep me busy.

I briefly wonder where Fleet is before I firmly shove the thought away. I'm not Nick Fleet's keeper. He'd have to be missing for days before I would call his mobile. Fleet isn't the kind of guy who likes to be managed, and I wouldn't want him to know that I've noticed he's missing.

The three of us work in silence for a while and just as I'm considering another coffee, my personal phone buzzes. It's a message from Josh Evans, wondering if I have time to meet him this morning. I feel a pulse of guilt at not texting him back all day yesterday.

I look at my desk, piled high with papers. Seeing as I'm not lead on the Miller case, I should be able to get through it all later. I can

always stay back anyway—it's not like I have a family to go home to. Placing the papers in my bottom drawer and locking it, I grab my coat. 'I'm heading out for a bit,' I tell Calvin. 'I'll be back for the case briefings.'

He nods, looking slightly bewildered.

Nan grimaces as I push in my chair. 'Don't be late,' she says bluntly.



'Hey,' says Josh, flashing me a big white smile as I approach the table. 'I've ordered for you already. A latte.'

'Oh, okay, thanks,' I reply, smiling back as I sit down across from him and toy with my watch. 'Sorry I've been a bit AWOL this week. Things have been intense at work.'

He grabs my hands, pulling them over to his side of the table. 'Don't be silly, Gemma. I know you're busy.' He leans forward and gives me a quick kiss. My eyes close and I breathe in the musky scent of his cologne. Not for the first time, I wish I liked Josh as much as he seems to like me. He is so good-looking, so uncomplicated. As I pull away, a businessman at an adjoining table raises a bemused eyebrow at me, and I wonder if my thoughts are that obvious.

'It feels like ages since I saw you,' Josh says.

'I saw you on Thursday night,' I reply lightly, gently tugging my hands free.

He laughs. 'I know it hasn't really been that long—it just feels like it. You should have come out on Saturday, it was such a fun night.' He goes on to describe the evening in detail.

With Josh has come an instant social life: noisy busy people with interesting jobs who hang out in achingly small bars that turn

fifteen dollars into a swish of wine. His cool breezy world has been intoxicating from the moment we met, just over a month ago, and part of me wants to tumble in. To relax into his strong arms. The other part of me stubbornly rejects it. The closer he inches toward me, the further I lean the opposite way. So that I don't feel so bad, I tell myself he's probably seeing other people too.

He ends his story with a sip of coffee and says more seriously, 'So the homeless man's murder sounds pretty brutal. Are you working on it?' His dark eyes are bright with interest as he runs a hand through his short gold hair.

'Yeah. I got called out there on Monday night.' I picture Walter's broken body again. 'It wasn't very nice.'

Josh gives a low whistle. 'Poor bugger.'

He finishes his coffee just as mine arrives. He orders another and I curl my hands around the warm glass, watching as a little boy seated near the door drives a toy car across the table in front of his plate. He dips the car into his steaming hot chocolate. He is small, his narrow shoulders only a ruler-width apart. Thick white-blond hair falls in cartoon-like chunks toward his eyes. His furious mother swats at his hand as she admonishes him and I look away, focusing back on Josh.

'Anything else exciting happening at work?' he asks.

'Just your standard bashings, shootings and suicides,' I say flippantly. His tan face remains serious and I drop the humour, adding, 'This murder case is a big one, especially if it really was a random attack.'

'Are you still working on all your other cases too?'

'Yep,' I say. 'Though, I think this one will become a focus now.'

'Sounds like you'll be pretty busy then.'

I shrug. 'Always.'

'I don't know how you do it, Gemma,' he says. 'You're amazing.'

I duck my head, brushing off his praise. Josh seems fascinated by my job and appears to understand the unpredictable nature of my world, which is a welcome change—and in stark comparison to Scott’s steady stream of exasperation and judgement. Josh rubs his foot against mine under the table and winks at me, causing a deep wave of shame about Monday night to swirl through me. And Saturday night. All of it. I know I need to stop. Or I need to stop seeing Josh. It’s not fair to string him along. But at the same time, it’s so nice having someone here to rely on, having someone be so into me. And so far, Josh seems fine with taking things slowly, though surely at some point that will change. I imagine being in bed with him but my bones get twitchy and my insides squirm. For the hundredth time, I wonder why I’m so much more comfortable being intimate with complete strangers. Somehow it seems less dangerous than being with Josh.

‘What about you?’ I ask.

‘I’m good,’ he says. ‘Work is really busy. I think I’ll need to stay back late tonight and maybe tomorrow too, which is why I wanted to see you this morning.’

Josh is a junior lawyer at a huge firm with a string of letters for a name. His weekdays are a blur of court, research, teleconferences and coffee.

‘So, did you have fun with your friend on the weekend?’ he asks me.

‘Yeah, it was great to catch up with her,’ I lie. ‘It was low-key though, just dinners and sightseeing.’ I wave my hand to emphasise the fun of my imaginary weekend.

‘Sounds great,’ says Josh, clearing his throat. ‘So, hey, I thought it might be nice if you come over to my place on Saturday. I’ll cook us dinner.’

I smile and nod, alarm bells sounding at the potential awkwardness of this scenario.

The woman at the table near the door leans close to the little boy, angry-whispering in his ear. He keeps his eyes steadily trained on the tabletop where his toy car sits, sticky with chocolate. She straightens, still scowling, and her eyes meet mine. I try a tight smile but it is not returned: she doesn't recognise any maternal solidarity in me.

'That sounds great,' I say when I realise Josh is waiting for an answer. 'As long as things don't get too crazy at work.'

He takes my hand and laces his fingers through mine. 'Cool. We can meet some of my mates afterwards if you like, or we can just have an early one if you're tired. I want to spend some proper time with you.' His voice lowers. 'You can tell me all about your week and maybe I can even give you a massage or something.'

Outside, the wind has picked up and it's raining again. Sheets of water are falling at an angle, sneaking under the edges of umbrellas and threatening expensive handbags. Parents clutch their children, yanking hoods onto small heads in futile attempts to keep them dry. I think about Macy and hope that she's found shelter. Suddenly anxious, I rub at my face: my skin feels sallow and dry, like a rubber mask. Josh is stroking his fingers in circles on the top of my other hand, making my eyes droop.

'I've got to get going,' he says, frowning slightly and looking at his watch. 'I'm due in court soon. But hey, I'm really glad you could meet me. I'll call you about Saturday. Don't work too hard.' He stands up. 'God, I can't wait for summer,' he mutters, seeing the rain.

He aims another kiss on my lips but I turn my head and he catches the side of my face instead. I watch him pause to collect his golf-sized umbrella from the bin near the door and carefully open it into the rain, his tall figure crossing the road and disappearing into the gloom. Once again, I'm struck by how attractive he is.

How attentive and fun. I have to admit I feel like I've known him a lot longer than a few weeks.

I look back at the little boy and his mother. His face and hands have been cleaned, and he is picking at a scab on his hand, his mouth in a pout. The mother is frowning too, her thumb scrolling on her phone.

I sigh heavily as my conflicting thoughts battle each other. I down a glass of water to drown them out. There's so much that Josh doesn't know about me; I imagine how quickly he would back away if he knew even half of it.

Noting that the rain is fading to drizzle, I stand up and rally myself for what is sure to be a long day. I can worry about Josh later. Right now, I need to get my head firmly in the Miller case.

# Wednesday, 15 August

10.29 am

Fleet slides into the case room just as Isaacs is closing the door. He tosses a nod in my direction, and I dip my head and push stray hairs behind my ear in response. The smell of fresh smoke wafts off him and gropes at my edges.

Ralph stands at the front of the room, legs spread wide, and launches into an overview of the Miller case. We have accessed some grainy CCTV footage from a nearby car park, which shows a shadowy figure walking quickly across the corner of the screen around the time Walter was attacked. The figure appears to be male and young, matching the description that Lara gave us, and is perhaps slightly taller than average, which hardly narrows the field. Walter himself appears to have had no apparent enemies. Although his flimsy medical records show a mild learning disability, it seems he kept to himself and, until now, avoided trouble. Preliminary autopsy findings reveal a single deep stab wound to the chest and some bruising along his collarbone where the killer probably pinned him against the tunnel wall with his forearm.

Looking at the grim photos, I try to see all the things around the

violence: pale wrinkled skin, spidery veins, a rangy beard and dirty broken fingernails.

After Ralph has run through his updates, Isaacs joins him at the front of the room. Looking at the small group, he doesn't speak for a few moments and I sense that we collectively become self-conscious. I cross and uncross my legs, trying to mute my growling stomach.

'While we know our victim was homeless and had been for a long time, what we *don't* know,' Isaacs says, eyeing each of us in turn, 'is if he was killed *because* he was homeless.'

I know what Isaacs is referring to, thanks to Calvin, who got me up to speed just before the meeting started. About two years ago there was a spate of homeless bashings across Melbourne. Back then the media embraced the story, with one journalist even sleeping on the streets for a week and reporting from the 'front line of poverty'. One of the four men who were attacked died from his injuries, and the entire city was on edge for months. A couple of the incidents were captured on film, though tragically the perpetrators were never caught. At the time, it seemed most likely that the trio of young thugs had desired to inflict pain and found the perfect victims on the streets: alone, weak and vulnerable, with no family waiting for them to come home. No one looking out for them.

'Well, he certainly wasn't killed for money,' says Fleet, smiling at his own joke.

Isaacs looks at him blankly for a long beat before saying, 'I'll be confirming the number of extra uniforms we're putting on at nights to the press this afternoon.' He scans the room with his grey gaze and continues, 'Fleet, Woodstock and Senna, you will work with Myers on the homeless-shelter interviews and the secondary-witness reports.'

In the row in front of me Chloe Senna nods, the straight line of her thick blonde hair shifting up and down on her shoulders. She absently rubs her pregnant belly. Fleet shifts next to me, kicking the side of my shoe.

Ralph clears his throat. ‘We’ve identified three other homeless men who frequently spent time with Miller and we believe two of them saw him the day before he died. We obviously want their statements as soon as possible. And we need a clear view of Miller’s regular habits and movements. We want to know if anyone was hassling him or if he’d been involved in any conflicts recently, or if he mentioned anything that might be linked to his murder. I want reports by Friday if we can manage it.’ Ralph puffs out his chest, revelling in handing out orders.

Isaacs is nodding his approval at this action list. ‘It’s a shame we’re still thin on the ground because of the Jacoby case but we’ll just have to make do,’ he says. He turns to Nan pointedly before his eyes stray to me. ‘I don’t want to lose focus on Jacoby.’

Next to me Fleet muffles a burp.

I’m unsure which group I’ve been lumped into. Clearly I need to help Fleet with the statements from Miller’s contacts but it seems like Isaacs also expects me to help Nan on the Jacoby case.

Before I have time to confirm, Isaacs reels off a list of things he wants me and Fleet to follow up on top of Myers’ tasks, including retrieving the footage from the 2016 bashings. Isaacs’ gaze seems to rest mainly on me; I can’t shake the feeling I’ve done something wrong. The energy I summoned earlier has fizzled, and I look around at the others, convinced I’m the odd one out. Glancing at Miller’s autopsy photos again, I feel so frustrated. I want to be leading the case but Isaacs obviously doesn’t trust me enough, even though I was first to the scene. I clench my jaw and, for a horrifying second, I think I might cry.

It's hard here, I admit to myself. Harder than I thought it would be. There's no special treatment, no reassuring winks from Jonesy. No end-of-day cuddles from Ben. Not for the first time, I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake. I do wonder what the point is sometimes. I am a mother to a son I can't seem to look after, and his father wants as little to do with me as possible. My old life, the only one I've ever had, is over a thousand kilometres away. There's nothing I'm looking forward to, I realise, the thought like a laser beam into my brain. And in the meantime, I'm wrapping my body around strangers, pretending to be someone else, when a perfectly good man is interested in me. Outside the window, a crow tips its head from side to side and looks down its beak at me. In the end, I have to look away.

I love being a detective, I'm instinctively driven to right wrongs, but truly ridding the streets of crime wouldn't suit me at all—the death and horror keep me going. I have nothing else: no hobbies, nothing to fill the minutes, let alone the hours. In a utopian world of pure white goodness, I would be lost. If the killing and the pain and the hurt all stopped, I'm not sure what would become of me. Deep down I suspect that I would probably stop too. Luckily, we humans seem hell-bent on ensuring I won't need to contemplate that scenario any time soon. We enjoy hurting one another too much.

Isaacs asks Nan to give the room a brief update on the Jacoby case. Now that it's almost six weeks old, everyone is starting to acknowledge the possibility that a solve may not happen. You can literally sense the shift: hope and optimism have a certain smell to them, while defeat emits a very different scent. Full credit to Nan though: she's convinced she will get her man and is studiously ignoring the increasingly pungent stench of hopelessness wafting from her colleagues.

The Jacoby case is one of those complicated puzzles you dream of taking on when you're a young idealistic detective with a genuine belief in the justice system. For a bunch of sceptical detectives who've been around the block a hundred times, it's mainly just a pain in the arse. A woman turns up dead at the base of a luxury apartment complex one Sunday morning. It's quickly established that she fell from the penthouse suite, where she'd attended a Christmas-in-July party the night before. Ginny Frost was a 37-year-old escort. The post-mortem was inconclusive but several of her injuries indicate that she was pushed.

To complicate matters, the suite is owned by Frank Jacoby, a retired chief justice in his late sixties. Charming and connected, he has the rich and powerful firmly in his silk-lined pockets. He's married, to high-profile academic and artist Ivy Strachan, but that hasn't stopped him having a 'healthy interest in all kinds of women,' which was how he referred to his philandering in one of the many interviews Nan has subjected him to.

'If those walls could talk, they'd talk dirty,' Nan has taken to saying as she sifts through the seemingly endless pile of photographs that detail every square inch of the apartment.

But the walls can't talk and neither, it seems, will any of the people who attended the elaborate party hosted by Jacoby that fateful night. The only lead we have is the statement from Ginny's friend Sasha Cryer: she claims that she witnessed—through a guest bedroom window that night—Jacoby and Ginny arguing on the balcony. Unfortunately, Sasha is also an escort with a history of drug use, and the attractive blond man who she claims also witnessed the argument has either disappeared off the face of the earth or is a figment of her imagination.

Nan is as determined as ever but I can tell that even she is tiring of Jacoby's endless denials, fiercely loyal mates and passive-aggressive

threats toward our department. The media isn't helping: their insane theories and rogue investigations have choked the front pages and dominated social sites for weeks, the general incompetence of the homicide squad a key part of their narrative.

Now Nan runs through the latest leads on the case, which almost all involve hunting down the missing male witness. I pick at some skin under my nail. Pulling at it with my teeth, I'm surprised to taste blood as it breaks away. I suck on my finger discreetly, enjoying the coppery taste, before realising that Isaacs is looking at me, his brow creased. I yank my finger out of my mouth and focus studiously on my notebook.

I glance at Fleet and wonder if he is also pissed off about not leading the Miller case. I can't help feeling that we're on the outer—that Isaacs is toying with us, considering us for a bigger role but only when he thinks we're up to it.

I sigh, forcing my attention back to Nan. Even though I find her prickly, I'd prefer to work more closely with her: perhaps some of the glow Isaacs obviously sees in her might rub off on me.

'Alright, let's get moving,' says Isaacs. 'I want a big push to pin something on Jacoby. Let's find that missing witness or put it to bed. I don't know if we'll be able to avoid an inquest but let's give it our best shot. And let's get this homeless man some justice. If this thing is linked to those old bashings, I want to know about it. Is everyone clear?'

'Yes, sir,' we chorus as he exits the room.

I rise, trailing after Nan and Calvin like a puppy.

Fleet brushes past me roughly, still reeking of cigarette smoke as he heads toward the car park. I stand watching his retreating figure, annoyed, my finger throbbing, before I head back to my desk to watch grainy footage of faceless young men beating fellow humans into oblivion.