

CHAPTER 4



Lily looked shocked by her own death – those polychromatic eyes frozen in surprise – her lips parted as if gasping at a particularly scandalous secret. But beneath her flower crown and halo of golden hair, a pool of blood had blossomed. She was lying on her side, in the foetal position, with one arm outstretched as if she were reaching towards something – or someone – unseen.

Her matching lace top and skirt were still a pristine white, both seemingly spared from the blood that had slowly drained from the deep wound on her temple. Had her head not been resting in the gelatinous red pool, I may have never even noticed the injury, hidden beneath her curls.

It struck me as fitting that, even in death, she inspired awe. The whole scene seemed staged. It was too perfect. Too pretty. A meticulously constructed tableau.

I'd seen bodies before, though never in real life. My dad had a nasty habit of leaving open copies of the *Police Journal* lying around the house. On the kitchen counter, the dining room table or next to the toilet. As a child, I was never quite sure when or where I'd inadvertently catch my next glimpse of a corpse. I grew desensitised to the bodies and eventually became fascinated by the articles behind the pictures. It was one of the main reasons I aspired to be a crime reporter. One person's early childhood trauma is another's career catalyst.

But none of those bodies looked like Lily's. They were all gruesome, macabre and – above all else – ugly. The trauma of the crime seemed to permeate every aspect of the body. Faces frozen in distorted depictions of fear. Blood and viscera spewing from necrotising flesh. Extremities awkwardly contorted in agonising positions. They lost all aspects of their humanity. They were nothing more than meat.

A surge of nausea took over my body, and a watery, acidic feeling stung the back of my throat. I sprang to my feet and ran to the edge of the stables before projectile vomiting into a pile of pine needles. Above me, the fireworks kept erupting – the sound echoing around the stables like gunshots. When I turned back towards Lily's stall, I finally saw the ugliness.

Lily's top had ridden up underneath her sash, exposing the small of her back. A patch of her skin was missing, but the wound didn't look fresh. As I walked towards her, I noticed seven strange symbols had been carved around the flayed flesh. I could only just make out the markings when the fireworks exploded and they faded into obscurity in between bursts. I looked around. The area was still deserted. I placed my backpack on the ground and carefully reached inside, retrieving my camera.

I only took a few photos. Enough to be able to see the markings clearly. My instinct told me they were the key to her death, and the reason behind her fear on the ghost train. I was careful, though, trying to time the flashes with the fireworks so as not to draw attention.

Looking at the symbols on the camera's screen, I struggled to recognise them. Some were letter-like, but others were made up of strange intersecting lines. Much like the patch of missing flesh on her back, they didn't look fresh.

In the distance, rapturous applause broke out. The fireworks had finished and the show was officially over. I removed the camera's battery and placed it in my pocket – so no one would be able to tell I'd taken the photos – before returning the camera to my backpack and

CATCH US THE FOXES

slinging it over my shoulder. I had to tell my dad about Lily. Her killer must have been at the show and everyone was about to leave. I began walking away but hesitated, turning to take one final look at the body. I raised my hand to the shoulder Lily had rammed into earlier that evening. It was the last time I saw her.

I rounded the corner of the stables and walked up the incline, spotting the police four-wheel drive about halfway down the show ring. My dad was still sitting on the bonnet, staring up at the sky as if waiting for more fireworks to erupt. He looked smaller than he should have and I realised that was a thought I'd been having more and more lately. It seemed connected to the grey overtaking his sideburns and the deep lines embedded in his jowls. A wave of guilt overwhelmed me.

Already, the crowd was slowly filing out of the grandstand, making their way towards the exits. I struggled to think that Lily's killer could be among them. While Kiama was a tourist town, the show was predominantly attended by locals. It was our way of reclaiming our home after spending the summer holidays being swamped by strangers. Which meant, as unfathomable as it may have seemed, that I likely knew the culprit. I quickened my pace.

'I don't want to hear it, Lo,' my dad said as I finally reached the car. He sounded genuinely hurt.

'But –'

'It's fine.'

'No –'

'You're twenty-two –'

'Dad –'

'You can make your own choices about who you spend –'

'Jesus Christ, Dad, shut up! There's a body!'

His brows knitted in confusion. 'What?'

'It's Lily. She's dead. In the stables.'

His eyes scanned my face, searching for answers. 'What happened?'

'I don't bloody know – I only found her. But we've got to hurry; her murderer could be walking away with the rest of the crowd.'

He seemed taken aback. 'What makes you think she was murdered?'

'Well, I don't think she bashed her own brains in! And she has these weird symbols carved—'

'Get in the car,' he said, sliding off the bonnet.

On the short drive back to the stables, my dad questioned why I had been there. It was only then that I realised how suspicious it seemed.

'I didn't kill her!'

'I know. But you're going to be interviewed and you need to get your story straight.'

'I was taking a shortcut. The queue for the Hurricane was really long and, by the time we finally got on, I'd lost track of time. I didn't want to miss the fireworks so I took the shortest route.'

'So, you've been with people all night?'

I replayed everything I'd done that evening. 'Yeah. The only time I was alone was running from the Hurricane to you.'

'Did you see anyone else there?'

'No, it was deserted.'

We pulled up near the stables and my dad asked me to retrieve a pair of latex gloves from the glove box while he searched for a torch in the back. Acquiring both, we returned to the scene of the crime. Immediately, he spotted my pile of vomit at the edge of the stables and shone the torch's beam over it. My nausea returned.

'That's mine,' I sheepishly admitted.

'Oh, are you okay?'

'Yeah. As I said, I went on the Hurricane. You know how I get.'

The torch's beam swept along the concrete floor of the stables and the padlocked doors until it spilt into the open void of Lily's stall. From that angle, you saw the symbols before you saw anything else. The crimson etchings almost shimmered in the torch's light, and the

CATCH US THE FOXES

strange misshapen patch of missing flesh looked even more horrifying illuminated.

‘Shit,’ my dad murmured.

I watched as he examined her body – squatting down beside her, his eyes meticulously scanning every millimetre of her flesh – but his gaze always returned to the symbols. He carefully pulled the gloves over his hands before turning to face me.

‘Lo?’

‘Yeah?’

‘I need you to do me a favour. It’s gonna sound bad, but you have to trust me.’

There was something in his voice that scared me – like I was talking to a completely different person.

‘What?’

‘You can’t tell anyone about the markings.’

‘But –’

‘Marlowe, listen to me. This is important. I’m going to pull her top down and that’s going to be how you found her. The rest of your story will stay exactly the same, you just never saw the marks, okay?’

‘Dad, you’re really –’

‘You did *not* see the markings.’

The ferocity behind his words shocked me. I’d never seen him act like this. I found myself slowly backing away from him; my eyes swaying from his stern face to Lily’s corpse. I didn’t know what to do.

He sensed my fear and softened. ‘I’m sorry, but I promise there’s a good reason for this. I wouldn’t put you in this position if there weren’t. It won’t impact the investigation, but it will keep you out of it, and that’s what matters here. Please, Lo, trust me.’

I felt as if a pair of hands had wrapped around my throat, slowly crushing my windpipe. I could feel my heart thumping against the wall

Nicola West

of my chest. None of it felt real, like the crescendo of a nightmare just before you woke up. It wasn't real. It wasn't happening.

But she was there, and so were the marks.

Between ragged breaths, I was somehow able to utter two syllables.

'Okay.'