

**EMMA  
VISKIC**

**THOSE  
WHO  
PERISH**

**A CALEB ZELIC THRILLER**

*echo*

# 1.

Caleb's car finally died on the outskirts of Resurrection Bay. After a last shuddering jolt, the Commodore cruised to a stop in the middle of the empty highway, windscreen-wipers at half-mast, headlights dimming.

Shit, not now. He'd broken every road rule and speed limit, but it had still taken three endless hours to get here. Six-twenty a.m. Twenty minutes late already.

He threw open the door. Ran. Down the darkened side street towards the bay, rain misting his face and arms. He'd been asleep on the couch when the text came, TV still on, mind fogged with dreams. Blocked number, no name or greeting.

—Anton in danger. Res bay foreshore 6 am

He'd bolted from his flat before fully awake, typing questions as he went. No reply.

At the Bay Road shops now, chest heaving, the foreshore park opposite. No cars, just Marty McKenzie's dump truck abandoned as usual near the pub. Caleb sprinted across the road.

The rain had stopped. A pale wash on the horizon, daylight peeling back the shadows. Empty boardwalk and wide-open lawn, mounds of struggling garden beds. Everything still, except the beacon out on Muttonbird Island flashing its warning. No standover men beating Ant with iron bars, no drug dealers demanding payment. Cops couldn't have scared them off – he'd passed both patrol cars attending a pile-up

outside town. Ant would be here somewhere, hiding.

Lot of ground to cover, the reserve stretched all the way to the marina in the distance. He zigzagged across the grass, looking behind the pavilion and broad red gums, breath rasping in his throat. His brother had to be here. Couldn't bear it if he wasn't. Nearly a month now, desperately clinging to hope.

Through the playground to the orange dump truck, its squat shape glowing faintly in the nearby streetlight. Empty, not even Marty passed out drunk on the front seat.

A flash in the corner of Caleb's eye as he turned from it. Something moving? He wiped the water dripping from his hair. Scanned the inky landscape. Up near the toilet block, someone was crouched in a garden bed, waving. Dark hoodie pulled up, familiar hunch to his shoulders – Ant. Relief dissolved the bones in Caleb's legs. Not dead. Not lying blue-lipped in an alleyway, needle still in his arm. But was he high or hiding? Couldn't have chosen a worse place for it either way, a few straggling bushes in the middle of a sloping lawn. Once the sun was a little higher he'd be exposed like an overgrown garden gnome.

Caleb hesitated; Ant would never forgive him if he ruined a deal. Then again, Ant was never going to forgive him, anyway. He started across the grass.

Ant waved urgently, then switched to Auslan, hands a pale blur as he signed, 'No! Get out of here. Run!' Expression hidden, but fear showing in each sharp motion.

Caleb stopped. Checked behind him. 'Who,' he signed. 'Where?'  
'Toilet block. He's –'

Beside Caleb, a flicker of movement in the truck. He whipped towards it. The window had cracked. Small hole in the pane, as if someone had thrown a stone.

A spray of light.

Glass flying. Disintegrating. Window gone, a gaping crater in the passenger seat.

Brain and body frozen.

Gun.

He threw himself to the ground. Jesus, fuck. Exposed out here, keep moving.

On his hands and knees, scrabbling across the muddy grass to the shelter of the truck. Over the kerb and onto the road. Sitting with his back pressed hard against the tray, heart pounding. Had to be a rifle – the toilet block was too far for a handgun. Barrel poking through the lattice-work blocks at the top. Nearly killed him. Had no idea they'd been shooting.

Hearing aids. In his hip pocket where he'd shoved them, running out the door. Didn't give him much sound, but at least he'd hear a rifle shot. He dug for them, fumbling at his wet jeans, fingers numb with fear and cold. Forget it – couldn't avoid a bullet once it'd been fired.

Oh God, Ant. Sheltering in that scrappy garden bed.

Caleb shuffled around. Scooted backwards, keeping the dumper tray between him and the toilet block. Ant was still there, peering towards the truck, tensed as though about to run. Eyes black in a stark white face. Easier to see him now, colour bleeding into the grey as the world lightened. He slumped back when he saw Caleb.

'You hurt?' Caleb asked. Hands surprisingly steady as he signed.

Ant shook his head.

No point asking if he'd called the cops. OK, think it through. The sniper obviously thought he was Ant, so just stay put until help showed up. Miserable Sunday morning, but a town of three thousand. Someone would eventually come out to walk their dog or wonder if those rifle shots were too close to be from a fox-hunting farmer.

Except the sniper wouldn't be dazzled by the streetlights much longer. Only minutes until daylight separated the shape of Ant's body from those bushes. Seconds.

Ant was clearly thinking the same thing. He lowered his hands into a runner's position again, arms trembling. Nothing but open park all around him. Wouldn't make it.

'Stop!' Caleb said it out loud, tried to yell. Ant's head snapped towards him. 'Wait,' Caleb signed. 'I'll distract him. With the truck.' Making it up as he went, anything to stop Ant from dashing into the line of fire. 'Meet me behind the supermarket. The carpark.'

Before Ant could reply, Caleb was up and running. Hunched low, he reached the driver's side. Cracked open the door – keys in the ignition like he'd expected, but too bright, the high windscreen capturing the lightening sky. Dog hair and takeaway boxes, a shining layer of glass across the seats. He slid in, head first. Eased himself into a crouch behind the wheel.

The truck shuddered to life as soon as he turned the key. Slow lurch forward, hauling hard right towards the shops. A jolt. Cracks streaked across the windscreen. Bent lower, arms and knees wedged. Come on, come on, turn, you fucker. Percussive thumps, hard pebbles raining down, icy wind in his hair. Windscreen half gone, sagging inwards. There, the top of a wrought-iron veranda. Truck's nose pointing to the newsagents, arse to the foreshore. He risked sitting up. Into reverse, eyes on the side mirror, the blocky form of the public toilets. Gradually gaining speed. Splintering light – the mirror shattered. And the other one. Just have to guess. Faster now, must be close. Shit, seatbelt. Yanking on it, one hand on the wheel, tugging hard. Clipped. Jarring stop, head smacking against the seat.

Stillness. Metallic taste of blood and fear. Get out, move.

He shoved hard at the door, keys in hand, half fell from the cabin. Scrambled to his feet, muscles braced.

The back of the truck had punched into the building, collapsing stall walls. Dust and gushing water, tumbled grey blocks. The acrid smell of stale piss. Iron entrance gate flung wide. No sniper, no gun. OK, breathe. Wouldn't have to attack an armed man with a couple of keys and a rego tag.

Around to the far side of the truck – bare swathe of lawn to the boardwalk. The garden bed where Ant had hidden only shrubs and silver-green saltbush.

Over. Nearly over. Just had to bring Ant home.

Caleb headed for their meeting point in the carpark, breaking into a jog as he crossed the road, bright crystals of glass showering from him as he ran. Past the shops. Up the pedestrian walkway, out into the asphalt lot. It was empty.