

**THE  
FALLBACK  
D.L. HICKS**



**PANTERA  
PRESS**

The hands are the first thing I feel. Pulling and prodding, nudging me, forcing me down. Before I'm even able to open my eyes, I can feel them, tugging me roughly to where they want me to be.

The acrid tinge of seaweed drifts into my nostrils as I regain my senses. I'm dragged by my feet, the sand scratching at my back, itching at my shoulder blades. Water laps at the left side of my body, my elbow intermittently submerged with the easy tidal sway, in and out. I try to move, to kick out, make them aware I'm still alive – surely that will stop them? – but the circuit between my mind and my muscles seems somehow severed.

Left in the shallows like driftwood, I struggle to open my eyes. Straining with the effort, I finally prise them apart, my eyelashes obscuring the slit of vision. I can tell it is dark, stars glittering in the clear night sky, a gentle breeze in the air.

I float until my body comes to rest against the sharp edges of an oyster bed. Unable to move, panic sets in as I fight for breath. Eventually, I am immersed.

*It's a beautiful night to die.*

# CHAPTER ONE

*'Any unit, Imlay 306 if you're on air, any unit in the area that can assist with a possible priority one deceased.'*

With the clock barely edging past six am – and the temperature hovering somewhere around ten degrees – it was the worst possible call to hear over the radio to begin their shift. The van crew glanced at each other across the muster room, resignation on their faces. Maybe it would just be an old bugger, died in his sleep. *Fingers crossed.*

Teaspoon still churning the steaming liquid in his coffee mug, Senior Constable Mick Farrow dipped his chin towards his left shoulder, depressing the button and activating his radio with his spare hand. 'Imlay 306, good morning. We're two up in the truck, currently code two at the station, and it looks like that one will be ours. What a lovely way to start the day.' He tossed the spoon into the sink with a clatter.

*'Good morning, 306. We have a report of a possible body caught up in the oyster beds in Lake Imlay. Nothing confirmed yet but*

*given the location and the initial details provided by our complainant the job is a priority one. Received?'*

Farrow heard his partner groan as he accepted the job.

'Great, *another* body,' she said, wriggling Houdini-like into her ballistic vest, then velcroing it together. 'At least if it's legitimate then this one sounds like it might be a bit out of the ordinary – and that means the detectives will take it and not us, thank God.'

Constable Grace Kane had only been at the Point Imlay station for three months – and in the job for a little over twelve months in total – but she had already gained a reputation on two fronts. Firstly, she wasn't seen as the most motivated of the newbies; and secondly, she gave off the impression that she already knew everything there was to know about policing.

Not the ideal mix.

Farrow gulped at his scalding coffee before sloshing the remainder down the sink. 'What's this going to be, your second body for the month?' he asked, grabbing his folder and flicking through the pages, making sure he had Statement of ID and Report of Death forms handy. 'You got that fatal out on the highway, where the young fella veered off and hit the only tree for miles, didn't you? And now this one. You should be all over it, Grace. Looks like I'll scribe and you can steer the ship.'

He tossed her the keys to the new Ford Ranger they had only received at the station a week ago, and headed for the back door, kitbag slung over his shoulder

As they drove along Coast Drive, Kane hummed

something vaguely familiar, her blonde locks twirled into a tight bun on the crest of her head. Farrow watched her from the corner of his eye as she accelerated through the centre of town, a parent scrutinising a child. The road was still damp from the overnight storm, the slate-grey clouds responsible for the deluge skulking away over the distant mountain range, their work done.

For Kane and Farrow, it was only just beginning.

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They made quick work of the short distance to Market Street, pulling up at the small marina and killing the sirens. The drive was only a minute or two from the station, but in these parts urgent-duty driving was so rare you grabbed any chance you could to activate the lights and plant the foot. The blue and red strobes pulsed through the tranquil morning air, their reflection flickering off the mirrored surface of the water, reaching far enough to tint the facades of the houses on the opposite bank.

Despite the bleak weather, rugged-up fishermen were dotted along the small pier, and they turned in unison at their arrival like a clan of beanieed meerkats.

Farrow reached into the glove box and grabbed the compact pair of binoculars, more often used to spot the odd humpback or minke on their migration north. There would be no whales caught in their lenses today. He stepped from the van and took in the smooth arc of the bridge to his right, stretching over the channel. Shades of aqua streaked the

weaving water as it made its way towards the waiting ocean. Small fishing boats bobbed on the surface, their silver hulls straining the chains that held them as the tide rushed by. A solitary vessel purred through the canal heading seaward, its bow wave rolling towards the shoreline.

Farrow and Kane moved in silence along the damp walkway to the bend of the L-shaped jetty. To their right, a modest navy blue and white weatherboard structure, which housed the fishing charter offices, cast a cold shadow in the early-morning light. Farrow rested his elbows on the top rung of the railing for stability, and felt it give slightly as he raised the binoculars to his face. The lapping of the water against the supporting poles kept a regular beat as he scoured the lake's surface. The outgoing tide was gathering momentum, revealing more of the oyster beds. The tips of the wooden structures bobbed through the surface, as if coming up for air, row after row emerging, scarring the flawless expanse of the lake.

‘Anything in particular I can help you guys with?’

Farrow glanced at the middle-aged fisherman, his weathered face scrunched up, eyebrows knitted, then ignored the question and continued scanning the oyster beds. He'd been in the job long enough to know that stickybeaks usually hindered more than helped.

Kane stepped between them. ‘We're all good at the moment, sir, but just one quick thing – has anyone been out to the oyster beds yet this morning?’

Farrow was impressed at her conversational tone, concealing more than she was prepared to reveal.

‘Nobody as far as I know.’ The fisherman’s voice was gravelly, forcing Kane to clear her throat. ‘I been here since before daybreak. Just me, the clouds and the pelicans that early, like every morning.’

‘You haven’t noticed anything out of the ordinary? A strange boat, anyone hanging around who you didn’t recognise?’

‘Just a regular morning in paradise.’

Kane ushered the fisherman away, and Farrow retrained the binoculars on the oyster beds, his eyes adjusting to the morning light, the cover of darkness dissipating. As the feeble winter sun broke through the clouds hanging low over the water, a weak glow was cast over the scene.

‘Holy fuck.’

The body was face down, and even from a distance Farrow could see the large split across the back of the skull, like a gaping red smile. Murky green water undulated around a human leg, its bare foot extending from the frayed hem of a pair of jeans. An arm was roughly tied by the wrist to the protruding pole.

In that instant, Farrow knew whatever had happened here was no accident. He turned to Kane. ‘Cancel whatever plans you had for this afternoon, Grace. Looks like it’s going to be a long day.’

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As the sun eased its way from the horizon into the cloudless sky, the curious residents of the coastal town began to group

at the southern end of Main Street on the still-cool footpath in the shadow of the pub. Conversation was sporadic, foggy breath giving away each word spoken, the rumour mill already in overdrive.

‘I heard it was a drug bust – apparently they pulled a bag full of money out of the water.’

‘No way. Didn’t you hear the sirens? They were in a hurry. Someone’s dead I reckon – why else would they call the ambos?’

‘Dead, out there? At this time of morning? The tide’s going out, the body would be halfway to New Zealand by now. Nup, it’s got to be a robbery gone wrong. Maybe someone held up the office?’

‘There was nobody in the office, ya goose. I reckon two boats crashed into each other and sank – I’ve always said they go too fast in this channel.’

A flimsy barricade of chequered police tape was all that held the murmuring crowd back; out of respect they kept their distance, content to observe and assume. The action out at the pier took place slowly and systematically, the participants like chess pieces being manoeuvred by an unseen hand. A photographer and his partner in crime, the local journalist from the *Point Imlay News*, cut forlorn figures in the pale light as they stood on the roadway attempting to glean even the vaguest morsel of information. They weren’t having any luck; everyone was tight-lipped.

The movement was centred around the middle of the lake, where two boats had been tethered. Only a couple of people remained on the pier – a uniformed police officer

keeping a log of who entered and left the area, and a crime-scene officer, clad in billowing white protective overalls. His partner was poised in one of the boats, brilliant bursts of light coming from her camera at regular intervals. A wetsuit-clad swimmer could be seen adjusting and re-adjusting something in the water as the camera flashed.

In a plain silver tinny, hunched beneath its white canopy, Detective Archie Noones examined the scene. The victim – male – was clearly deceased, his exposed skin wrinkled and pallid from being submerged. Where the little finger of his right hand should have been was a ragged wound, from which poked a small segment of ivory bone. The skin and dark hair knotted together on either side of the split across the back of his skull. His left arm was secured at the wrist to the edge of an oyster bed, a rough cord wrapped several times around both anchor points. His leg was tied in similar fashion. The constant movement from the flow of the water had caused the tie to scrape at the skin, leaving a red welt just above the ankle bone. Constricted in such a manner, the body swayed with the tide, waving in the water like a flag.

After the photos were taken, the body was flipped. The man looked to be in his mid-twenties, with dark shoulder-length hair, thick eyebrows and full lips, a semi-bushy beard hanging off his jaw like a costume. Life hadn't been kind to him; an old scar arched across his right cheekbone, and there was some significant trauma to the features of the left side of the face – most obviously, the hollow where his eye would normally have sat, which now cupped a small amount of water.

Detective Noones shook his head in disgust. ‘All right, there’s nothing more to do out here, let’s get him in the boat.’

The ropes were cut away, and in no time at all the body was untethered, the current pulling it towards the fast-flowing water in the channel.

Between himself and the officer in the water, they managed to push the body to the edge of the boat before unceremoniously heaving it over the side. The victim rolled onto the floor of the vessel with a thud, causing the tinny to pitch sharply to the starboard side.

‘Fuck.’ Noones shuffled to the port edge, allowing the boat to shakily right itself. ‘That was close.’ A smile crept onto his face. He could just see the headline – *Local detective causes splash at murder scene.*

As Noones steered the boat back to the pier, he could hear the crowd gathering. He wasn’t surprised by the curiosity – things like this just didn’t happen in this town.

The female constable designated to crime-scene log duties appeared at the top of the ladder, easing a plastic tarpaulin into position in the slight breeze.

He motioned up to her, but she didn’t seem overly keen to assist.

‘You’ll have to help me – Grace, isn’t it?’ He watched her nod, saw her bite her lower lip in hesitation. ‘I’ll push him from below, and you’ll have to guide him up and over, onto the tarp, okay? Close your eyes and think of a happy place – whatever you have to do. Just get him up and onto that pier.’

‘Sure,’ she muttered, clearly uncomfortable. The reality of police work affected people in different ways. Noones just

hoped she didn't vomit on him – or worse, pass out when the body was halfway up.

'On three, then ... one, two, LIFT!'

Straining, they managed to heave the body out of the boat, Noonos shoving from below, until it came to rest on the walkway, dripping wet.

Noonos clambered up the ladder and snapped on a new pair of gloves. He gestured to Kane's partner, Mick Farrow, a seasoned senior constable. Farrow nodded back, his sunglasses perched high on his thatch of blond hair, threatening to tumble into the water at any moment.

'I'll start at his head and work my way down,' Noonos ordered. 'You take the notes.'

Farrow obliged, leaning against the railing and retrieving a small notebook from his back pocket. They waited as the crime-scene officer's partner made her way back onto the pier, camera at the ready.

Noonos slid his hand over the contours of the victim's head, keeping as much distance as he could from the ashen face. Bodies were part of the job, but they tended to stay with him. 'Large laceration to the back of his head; an abrasion to the left side of his face; left eye appears to have been gouged out and is missing. No other noticeable contusions around the scalp area.'

Constable Kane seemed to have involuntarily covered her mouth, as if that would somehow help. Clearly this was going to stick in her memory too.

Feeling his way down the deceased's torso, Noonos furrowed his brow. The victim's dark blue T-shirt was glued

to his upper body, moulding to every lump and deviation. Not overly muscular, he had more of a cyclist's build – lean and taut, up for the fight. Noones' eyes were drawn to a tell-tale bruise in the crook of the man's left elbow. A section of skin – about ten centimetres either side of a reddened puncture mark – was vampire-white in colour, as if it had never been exposed to the sun. He averted his eyes as the photo was taken.

'Tells us a couple of things,' Noones said. The plastic tarp crackled as he moved around the body. 'He was a user – they aren't old track marks. That may indicate how he died. He's got the gash on his head, but it could have been a hot shot that tipped him over – from a dealer, a fellow user, or just someone out to settle a debt.'

'And I'd say he's right-handed,' interrupted Kane.

Noones looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

She held his gaze. 'There's no way he'd trust himself to inject with his non-dominant hand.'

'Right,' Noones said with a nod as he held the victim's right arm up to allow the photographer a clear shot of the hand, and the missing little finger. Rolling the body onto its side, he reached for the back pocket, felt a familiar lump and eased out a dark brown, scuffed wallet. It oozed water, the contents drenched. 'Odd.' Noones glanced up at Farrow. 'Not sure I'd go to the trouble of tying up someone I'd just killed in the middle of a lake only to then leave his wallet in his pocket. Either they don't care, or they were in a hurry.'

'Maybe they just missed it,' Farrow said, still scribbling away. 'What's he got in there?'

Noones slid the saturated cards from the front section of the wallet. It was a standard array: driver's licence, credit card, Medicare card, Flybuys card. All in the name of Eric Johnstone. Two twenty-dollar notes were stuck together and Noones peeled them apart, their surface greasy. A thin wad of business cards, now melded together, was squeezed behind the plastic window. Noones unstuck them one at a time, scanning the titles as he went. Imlay RSL Club. Bad Boys Pizza. The Waterfront Cafe. Thai Noodle House. Captain Hook's Takeaway.

'Eric liked his fast food, but I'm pretty sure that's not what killed him.'

It wasn't until he reached the second last card that he paused, taking in the faded printing. 'Well, what have we here ...' He stood up, business card still clutched in his fingers, and spun it around so the others could read it.

In the end it was Farrow who spoke.

"Detective Senior Constable John Darken – Gull Bay Police," he read. "Call me when you need to." There's a date written in the corner too – that's six months ago now.' He looked back at Noones, eyebrows raised. 'So where the fuck is Gull Bay, and what's a dead junkie doing with *that* in his wallet?'

## CHAPTER TWO

As he used a screwdriver to jemmy open the fresh can of paint, Detective John Darken felt the familiar smell drive straight into his nostrils. He placed the lid messy-side-up on the sports page of a newspaper, then stood back to take in the colour. Was that really what he had ordered in Bunnings last week? If it was, maybe the sausage sizzle had gone to his head.

The tint was much more dazzling than he had anticipated and he tried to blink the brightness away, amazed at the discrepancy between the small colour swatch in the store and four litres of the stuff in a can at home. True, it was only for the front door, but still – there was orange, and then there was *orange*. The thick, viscous paint crept up onto the rim as he stirred it, like something straight from Wonka’s factory.

It had been his wife’s idea to freshen up the house, not his – at least he would always have that to fall back on when

the inevitable ribbing came from his work colleagues. A front door the colour of a Jaffa – he could only imagine how well that would go down.

Come to think of it, could he still call them work colleagues? And more importantly, if they were separated, could he still call Amber his wife?

Technically, both situations were the same as they always had been, but in reality ... well, that was another story.

Right now, he had some painting to do. With rain forecast for later in the day, he needed to get onto it while the weather allowed. It had taken him weeks to get motivated enough to do this – to rack up a few good nights' sleep in a row, to finally start to feel a little normal again, put some of the monsters back in their cages and lock the doors.

With The Angels belting out a line about Santa Fe from the portable speaker on the deck, J.D. nodded his head to the beat as he eased the brush through the bright orange paint.

'Here goes nothing ...'

He slid the brush down from the top left corner and couldn't help but feel some similarity to the old wooden door. Much like his current self, it gave off the appearance of being bland and uninteresting, jaded and tired. As the colour was slapped on, that image changed to the outside world, but underneath, the old wood remained. J.D. knew he was the uncoated version, and he wasn't quite sure where the glossy paint was going to come from – or if it would ever come.

It was a mind-numbing process, but precisely what he needed. Paint, dip and reapply – over and over until the job was done. His counsellor had suggested small steps.

By the time he'd finished the first coat, tiny flecks of bright orange were scattered across his hands and an apricot half-moon was smeared across his cheek. His salt-and-pepper hair – straggling about his shoulders, even longer than usual – was damp, the exertion taking its toll on his weary body.

Resting for a second, he reached for his phone. Another missed call from Amber. He reflexively shrugged his shoulders, knowing that all he'd dodged was another argument. It seemed that whenever they talked these days, all they did was bicker, despite having reached the point of living separate lives.

For J.D., most nights were spent huddled under the doona, his body a tight ball aside from one arm, which hung out and rested on Samson. The Saint Bernard lay in solidarity, sprawled on the bedroom floor, his heavy, rhythmic breathing the only sound to break up the ringing silence.

At least he always had Samson's unrequited love.

The welfare people and doctors had all told him that what he was experiencing was perfectly normal, that it would take some time but they expected he would recover and be back at work full time in the not-too-distant future. Having returned four days a fortnight, he could see a pinprick of light at the end of the tunnel, but it was only that – a miniscule dot, still engulfed by the surrounding darkness.

He'd never been the type to have a lot of friends, but now J.D. found himself facing an even lonelier world, as if his fragile mental health was somehow contagious. Contact from his colleagues was sporadic. Conversations were stilted. People who usually suffered from verbal diarrhoea were now constipated.

Ironically, he was acutely aware that his old partner Charlotte Callaghan would've been the one to break through the barriers and make his progress seem not only achievable, but inevitable.

He felt the tackiness of the first coat of paint with the palm of his hand. Then, happy that it was dry enough, he knelt down and dipped the brush again and continued his task, one stroke at a time.

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Half an hour later, he stood hunched over the laundry sink, his fingers playing through the bristles of the brush as a small orange whirlpool flowed down the plughole.

He wandered down the hallway to the bathroom, peeling off his splattered T-shirt and shorts as he went. Catching sight of himself in the mirror, he took some solace in the fact that he had at least managed to keep in shape. Exercise was integral to improving his mental health, and as a longtime athlete, it was one thing he could control in a world that had spiralled out of his grasp. Pounding the footpath had remained second nature to him, as instinctive as breathing.

He ran his hands down the length of his tender thighs, digging his fingertips in deep and getting perverse enjoyment from the pain it induced. In his forties, he was far from old but neither was he a young man anymore.

He stepped under the heat of the shower, feeling the water beat sharply against his back. Lathering soap in his hands, he began scrubbing at the orange dots that speckled

his palms. The water cascaded onto the tiled floor with a slap, the noise taking him back to a better time, so long ago now that the memory blurred at the edges. He and Amber had been holidaying as a family in Perth for their son Isaac's ninth birthday, only a few months before he disappeared. After a day spent visiting art galleries and museums, they had taken a trip to Outback Splash, a water-park oasis. It had blown Isaac's mind – so many options, so much fun. His favourite part had been the simplest – a large purple bucket that slowly filled with water before tipping its contents onto the waiting children below with an almighty splash. Isaac had stood rooted to the spot on the spongy yellow flooring, laughing till he almost burst as deluge after deluge of water spilt from the overflowing bucket onto his waiting head, almost tumbling him over. J.D. could've watched his son all day that day. And if he'd known what was coming, he would have.

He stepped from the shower, shaking the moisture from his hair. His mobile buzzed on the vanity, and J.D. reached for it – just too late. His boss, Detective Sergeant Phil Blake-Harris – better known as Dash – left an eight-second message.

J.D. hit play and listened as he walked to the lounge room.

*John, we need to talk. Something's come up that you might have to deal with. Call me – you'll need to drop in, soon.'*

J.D. felt his chest tighten. The mention of work made his veins constrict. He leant against the doorframe, the timber pressing into his flesh as he counted to ten, inhaling and exhaling until his heartbeat fluttered back to an acceptable level.

Samson came padding towards him, slobber hanging in viscous strings from his jowls, his dopey eyes half closed. He sat on the rug, his huge head tilted, waiting for some attention. Squatting down, J.D. grabbed the dog's ears and ruffled them as their noses touched. As if he'd been shot, Samson dropped sideways to the floor, exposing his stomach for a rub, legs pointing skyward.

J.D. grinned, scratching the beast's underbelly. 'That's enough boy,' he muttered, taking a seat on the couch, phone in hand. 'I've got business to attend to.' He dialled, then leant back, eyes closed.

'Detective Sergeant Blake-Harris, Gull Bay CIU.' The greeting was perfunctory at best.

'Dash, it's John Darken, returning your call.'

He heard shuffling noises in the background, then the sharp slam of an office door closing.

'J.D., how are you mate?'

'I'm o—'

'Thanks for calling me back. I won't take up too much of your time, especially when you're at home. I don't want to get the blame for sending you back over the precipice, do I?'

J.D. heard Dash laugh at his own words, and rolled his eyes. *Thanks for the support.*

'Anyway, something has come up involving you, and I'm hoping you can shed some light on it. We've been contacted by local police in a small town called Point Imlay, down the coast. Ever been there?'

'Can't say I have,' J.D. replied. 'What's this got to do with me?'

‘They located a body this morning, basically right in the centre of town. The victim was murdered, most likely overnight, and left tied to the oyster beds in the middle of a lake. Local detectives searched the body and didn’t find a whole lot of value other than the victim’s wallet, which gave them an ID, and one other thing – a police business card. With your name on it.’

‘My name?’ J.D. said, his voice rising. ‘You sure?’

‘We’ve checked the guy’s details; no criminal history; in fact, there’s no history at all. It’s like he’s been living under a rock his whole life.’

J.D. swallowed. ‘What’s the victim’s name?’

There was the sound of paper rustling. ‘ID was all in the name of an Eric Johnstone.’ Dash paused, waiting for J.D. to fill in the blanks.

J.D. got to his feet. ‘We need to talk. I’m coming into the station.’

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An hour later, J.D. pulled up outside Gull Bay Police Station. The mid-afternoon drizzle washed across his windshield, highlighting the dirty smears his wipers had left the last time it rained. He’d been meaning to fill the car’s water reservoir for days, but still hadn’t got around to it. He stepped out of the vehicle and the stale, all-too-familiar scent of desperation wafted at him through the crisp air. It hung around the station like a London fog.

It was a regular weekday afternoon in the watch house as

J.D. walked through the station foyer. An overly enthusiastic young constable with ears too big for his head was signing a document at the counter. Waiting her turn for service, a woman in her mid-twenties sat in a zebra-striped onesie in the middle chair of the set of three against the back wall, her sunglasses doing their best to hide a serious black eye. Her nicotine-stained fingers fidgeted with an empty cigarette pack as she stared vacantly at the carpet, the despondent look on her face one that J.D. had seen too many times.

J.D. activated the access code and escaped into the safety of the police station. Luckily, the CIU muster room was deserted. J.D. wasn't in the mood to talk; he was only here because he had to be. He made a beeline for the boss's office.

Dash was on the phone, his polished boots propped up on the desk. He motioned to J.D. to take a seat. While he waited, J.D. looked around the office. The room was standard management set-up: a couple of off-green filing cabinets; a computer monitor clasped on the end of a black mechanical arm; three regulation certificates of achievement displayed in black frames on the wall. *Like anyone cared.*

'Yeah, I hear you,' Dash said, rolling his eyes at J.D. 'Yep, well ... he's here now, I'll let you know how it all goes down and get back to you ... Sure will. Bye.' He slammed the phone back into its cradle, shaking his head. 'Now I know why you guys all complain about me. Fucking bosses are a pain in the arse, aren't they?'

J.D. nodded, eyebrows raised. The fact that Dash was talking to a boss – which at his level would be inspector rank or higher – about J.D.'s current situation was not lost on him.

‘Right,’ Dash said, sliding his feet from the desk and closing a red manila folder on the desk in front of him, its contents bulging. ‘First things first. Are the two days at work each week helping or hindering?’

‘They’re helping,’ J.D. replied, hesitant to paint too rosy a picture too soon. ‘But I’m still re-finding my feet, y’know? It just takes a little time.’

‘Glad to hear it,’ Dash said as he typed out an email with two fingers and sent it off. Then he turned to face J.D. ‘Okay, shoot.’

J.D. sat back in his chair. ‘You mentioned Eric Johnstone on the phone earlier. Well, I don’t really *know* Eric Johnstone, per se, but I am fully aware of why he isn’t recorded on the LEAP database, or anywhere else for that matter – and it’s not because he’s a saint, believe me.’

‘Go on.’ Dash leant forward, his elbows resting on the desk.

The explanation took a few minutes, and with each word he uttered, J.D. could see the frustration building in his boss’s face till he was set to erupt.

‘Why the *fuck* wasn’t I notified at the time?’

‘Like I said, it wasn’t my decision. It was a strictly need-to-know basis, and they determined that you didn’t need to know.’

Dash slammed back into his office chair and crossed his arms, barriers up, lips pouting like a petulant toddler’s.

‘Anyway, that’s not important right now,’ J.D. continued. ‘Bottom line is, I’m up for the challenge. I’m sure you’re not expecting this, but I’m happy to go out there if you’ll permit it.’

‘Out there? You mean to Point Imlay?’

‘It’s not like you can’t spare me. A change of scenery might do me good, anyway – get me away from the shit memories around here. I know it’d be unusual, but so are my circumstances. I’ve run it by my psych, and she thinks it’s fantastic that I’ve even had the balls to suggest it. It’ll only be for a week, two at the most. You know the deal around homicides – first forty-eight hours and all that. You want your best detective back in full working order, and the coppers out there just want their murder solved. This could tick both boxes.’

*Ticking fucking boxes* – he knew that would light Dash’s eyes up. That’s all they seemed to do these days – it was all about perception, not what was actually happening. So long as they could say they had done their best to help him return to work, that was all that mattered. *Box ticked*. But it was so much more than that for J.D. Policing was his life, not sitting at home getting paid to redecorate. He was a copper to his bones, and even running on three cylinders he was better than most. He needed this.

Dash rubbed his chin. ‘If you’re up for it and the psych’s on board, I’m sure Imlay would love the help. A week away, who knows, the sun might even be shining? It’s a win-win from where I sit. But are you sure about this?’

J.D. nodded. ‘I am. Look, I’m not saying I was confident you’d say yes, but ... let’s just say my bag’s already packed and sitting on the back seat of my car. And there’s a direct flight leaving for Point Imlay in three hours.’

## CHAPTER THREE

*Six months earlier – New Year's Day*

It's the water that catches my eye first. Twenty-eight different shades of blue and green sparkle in the morning light, outstretching liquid arms dragging me in. I am perched on the main bridge that snakes into town, watching the current flush underneath me at speed. Fish dart, their silver skin flashing. The whiff of salt in the air takes me back to Gull Bay, the place I used to call home – but, more than that, it transports me back to happier times as a young child, immersed in family, sand and surf. Endless summers of cricket on the beach, bodysurfing the crashing waves and losing sticky battles with dripping Paddle Pops in the afternoon swelter.

Like the water I look down on, so much of my life has rushed through the gutter of existence since those heady days of innocence, those experiences now gone, washed out to sea with the frothy mix of flotsam and jetsam. I'd give the world to return to those days, armed with the knowledge

of what was to come; to warn that carefree little boy of the pitfalls to avoid.

In my mind, I see my mother, flipping eggs in the kitchen, the scent of seared bacon heavy in the air. Sunlight slants through the windows as she dances to a silent rhythm, keeping beat with a spatula, moving back and forth in the dappled light. I'm smiling at the bench, a picture of contentment.

It was a golden time in my life, before everything changed. Before I ended up here.

I take it all in, this new town of mine. It's the first day of a new year and this is where I will restart my life, where I will try to move on from everything that happened before. Maybe now I can finally stop running, rest and re-imagine what a normal life can bring. Maybe.

A steady breeze is at my back, whipping the loose hair that pokes from the bottom of my cap around my neck, tickling. The township of Point Imlay nestles on the banks of the waterway, at the foot of the surrounding hills. The greenery is dotted with houses, their windows sparkling in the sun, balconies built to maximise the spectacular view. It's a classic beachside hamlet, big enough to sustain itself but not so big as to be overrun by tourists, even in summer.

This is my unlikely second chance. I cannot take it for granted.

I hear my watch beep twice and tilt its face towards mine: 10 am.

With twenty minutes until my appointment, I make my way into town on foot. Joggers and cyclists cruise past on the recently paved footpath. Families bunch around picnic

tables on the small strip of grass between the pathway and the flowing water, the salty smell of hot chips making my stomach rumble. I notice a section of the area is paved with individual bricks, terracotta in colour, adorned with sponsor names.

*The Wallace Family – Sydney, John & Thelma Finkle, Grateful Grandparents from Melbourne.*

*Hamish, Wendy and Yasmine Trew from Hahndorf, forever thankful for this family paradise.*

*Our own little slice of heaven. The Sinclair Family, Bundaberg.*

There are hundreds – perhaps thousands – all placed together. A warm feeling pervades my chest, and for a second I think I am about to break down and cry. I swallow hard, composing myself. I swallow a second time, ridding my mouth of the acerbic aftertaste of jealousy.

I turn away and take the curve of the road left, past the obligatory golden arches of McDonald's and into the main street. The central strip is abuzz with activity, the township bustling at the summer pace of a seaside town. Families mingle with friends, kids running on the footpath, grabbing at each other and laughing in the shade of shopfront awnings under their parents' watchful gaze. Touched by the light of a summer morning, the happiness here is palpable, and a yearning swells in me. Life only offers once chance, though. I know that better than most.

Heading up the gentle hill, I dodge groups of locals deep in conversation, paused on the periphery of the footpath to discuss the council's move to make the recycling bins smaller, or their assessment of the recent change of chef at the bowling club and how it has affected the world-class chicken

parmigiana. Fishing rods form a thin canopy over my head as I pass the bait shop. Brightly coloured boogie boards in skin-tight plastic wrapping are waiting to be liberated by a mop-haired, rash-vested teenager.

Eventually I find my destination. The chime of a bell announces my arrival as I enter through the glass front door.

‘Good morning.’

The voice belongs to a middle-aged woman sitting behind the reception desk. A headset is clamped across her head, compressing her curly black locks. She reminds me of a sports commentator.

‘Welcome to Sure Thing Recruiting, how can I help you today?’ Her eyes scrutinise me as she speaks, bejewelled hands clasped on the desk in front of her.

I pause, and in that split second, panic sets in. ‘Yeah ... ah, I’m looking for work,’ I stammer, feeling my pulse quicken. It’s been a while since I’ve had to do this, and the rust is visible. Why is it so easy to be a criminal but so hard to be legitimate?

‘That’s exactly what we’re here for.’ She extends her tanned and freckled arm across the counter and hands me a faded clipboard with a document attached. ‘If you could just fill out as much of this form as you can. All we need at this stage are your qualifications, employment history, and some basic personal contact details. You can take a seat in the foyer. I’m Marissa, by the way, and your name is?’

I force myself to think, hoping she doesn’t notice my delayed response. ‘I’m Eric,’ I hear myself say. ‘Eric Johnstone – with an E on the end.’

‘Nice to meet you, Eric Johnstone with an E on the end. Take a seat and one of our intake workers will be with you shortly.’

I go through a narrow doorway into the waiting room. A TV plays silently in the top corner, and rows of padded chairs run down each wall. I feel like I’m at the dentist. There are three other people already seated. Right next to the door – wanting a quick exit? – is a young mother dressed in a crop-top and faded three-quarter jeans. She barely looks old enough to be out of school, let alone trying to join the workforce. A grubby baby perches on her hip, a tiny finger shoved up its nostril.

On the far wall, a man in his forties is seated directly under the television, unable to view the screen without craning his neck – something he does frequently. He is well dressed – black suit pants, tight-fitting grey business shirt, pink and black chequered tie with a large Windsor knot. His bald head shines as if recently polished, and I struggle to get the image out of my head of him buffering it to perfection in the privacy of his bathroom. He seems embarrassed to be here, too good for this.

I take a seat opposite the third client. The man stares at me with bloodshot eyes, the deep wrinkles on his unshaven face like widening cracks in a parched front yard. A scrappy beard clings to his jaw, sparse in patches, barely covering his blotchy skin. His dyed blond hair is long and tied back in a ponytail, the darker roots already exposed down his part, which splits his skull into two perfect halves.

I avoid eye contact, but there are only so many places you can look in a room like this. He eventually catches my gaze,

and nods knowingly, like we share a secret. I've never met him before, but I know why.

He's a drug addict. Cannabis, meth, probably a little heroin too. He salutes me – a strange gesture given the setting – with a slight tremor in his fingers.

Almost everything I sense in him, he must sense in me – no matter how much I wish it weren't so.

It's more than likely he's only here to tick a box; I know from experience the kind of work he's probably involved in, and it's nothing this office can help him with.

'Eric Johnstone?'

An intake worker calls me to the counter, and I follow her into her office. Her hair is jet black, one side shaved close to her scalp, the other quite long, a blue streak running down its length. She introduces herself as Chloe.

After a quick glance through my documents, Chloe declares that I am fantastic employee material, which feels so foreign to me. To have had my past wiped clean and replaced with a sparkling new one is difficult to comprehend.

'Okay, Eric, I see you're qualified to drive trucks,' she says, her darkly outlined eyes coming to rest on me. 'Are you happy to do something in that field?'

Contrary to what I had imagined, there is no judgement from Chloe, no looking down her nose, no sense of disgust or disappointment. I find I am drawn to her, but can't exactly explain why.

'I'm happy with anything,' I reply, trying not to appear as desperate as I feel. Fortunately, my driving quals were one thing that wasn't forged. I run the heel of my palm across the

pointed edge of the desk, feeling it dig into my flesh. I have to make this work, but am I strong enough to play the part of a normal person? Can I be sure the imprint of my previous life is not going to rise to the surface again? Nerves jangle inside me, twisting my gut.

Chloe licks at the silver ring that pierces the right side of her bottom lip, nudging it with the tip of her tongue as her gaze runs from the paperwork to the computer screen, up to my face, then back to the paperwork again. ‘We’ve got a new job that came in only this morning. It’s the coveted position of lead bus driver at the local retirement village, Seascape Gardens. It’s only a thirty-seater bus – you just need to remember to drive it appropriately for the clientele. It’s mainly Monday to Friday with the occasional weekend thrown in. Pretty simple stuff – they really only go to one of the golf clubs around, the RSL for the pokies, the odd restaurant in town for dinner and maybe to the movies. An Uber driver for pensioners, more or less. Thoughts?’

She smiles up at me, open and warm, but I don’t need any convincing – it’s perfect.

‘I’d love it,’ I say.

‘Great.’ Chloe nods, twirling her index finger – a treble clef tattooed just below the central knuckle – around the leather necklace resting in her cleavage. Unable to avert my eyes, I notice another tattoo peeping out on the curve of her left breast. She catches me looking but says nothing, and my face flushes.

She finishes filling out the forms on her computer, then turns back to me. ‘Perfect.’ She holds up her hand, offering

me a high five. Not usually one to relish physical contact with strangers, I awkwardly acquiesce, the slap of our palms echoing around the tiny office. 'I'll ring Seascape and let them know,' Chloe says.

I nod, a smile creeping onto my face. 'What happened to the last guy, if you don't mind me asking?'

Chloe looks around her office, then beckons me towards her. I rise from my chair and lean over the desk conspiratorially, our faces almost touching. I can smell a hint of musk and vanilla on her skin, and it takes my breath away.

'Keep this under your hat,' she whispers into my ear, her hand cocooning the sound like a conch shell, 'but he died. Jumped in front of a semi out on the highway, just last weekend.'

I sit back in my seat, stunned. 'So, all I need to do is stay alive and I'm an improvement then.'

She cracks into a giggle, pressing her hand to her mouth. 'You're a live one, aren't ya?' she says, her eyes alight. 'I was only joking by the way; just wanted to see your reaction. The last driver just moved on to greener pastures – at the golf club, from memory.'

I smile back, happy to be duped. I like her.

I've only been here a couple of days, but already things are looking up, and the glint in Chloe's eyes as I shake her hand – holding it a little longer than I normally would – raises even more hope.

As I walk back out into the sunshine, I realise I haven't felt this way in a long time.