

TAKEN

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To my fam, Scott, Harvey and Edie, always.

The need to touch the child is overwhelming. Just to graze my finger across her cherub cheek and her soft, downy hair. She is asleep in a bassinet pram. Her little fist has wriggled itself out of the wrap and lies beside her face, a hair's breadth from her tiny wrinkled ear.

The pram sits by a park bench, alone and vulnerable, the ragged branches of a gum tree creating dappled shadows across its stroller cover. The park is deserted in the afternoon. An empty swathe of grass, green and blunted, recently shorn. Where is her mother?

Anyone who wants to can take the child. Whisk her away and no one would be the wiser. Her mother would be blamed. As she should be. Who leaves a newborn out in the open like this, without protection? A woman like that deserves everything she gets. That's what people would say.

Just one more peek. A light hand on the bub's tightly wrapped form. Not enough to wake her, but enough to feel the soft rise and fall of her chest. Up and down. Up and down.

The sound of voices. They are returning. The woman and her boy.

I whip my hand away as if burned. The baby starts to wail, my jerking movement having woken her. Too late now. I have to get away. Don't be seen. Don't get caught.

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Phone out. Pretend to be scrolling. Cap down over my eyes. An innocent passer-by on their phone. Move away but not too fast. Slow and steady.

Breathe. In and out. In and out.

1

Thursday

Detective Sergeant Kathryn Aneesha Miles slammed her foot on the brakes and felt her body recoil, the seatbelt digging taut and tight into her chest. The car came to a shuddering halt, inches away from a zebra crossing.

She had not seen the walker. Her body had reacted unconsciously to something her eyes had not yet fully registered. He had been right in her dead spot directly behind the pillar dividing the windscreen from her driver-side window. A car horn beeped and onlookers stared. Sickening heat rose through her body and she felt light-headed at the thought of what could have been.

The pedestrian, a young man in a worn and paint-splattered hoodie and work pants that marked him as a tradie, death-stared her before continuing along the crossing. She could feel the outrage of the bystanders. A mother in immaculate office clothes herded her rugged-up offspring away from the road and waited

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pointedly for the car to pass. Kate drove on, rigid at the wheel, her eyes fixed ahead, not meeting the stares of the passers-by.

Stopping the car at the first opportunity, she fought a wave of nausea. Her hands shook as she gripped the wheel, fighting to regain control, goosepimples prickling her skin. Outside along the verge, silvery-grey eucalyptus trees thrashed against a brisk late-August wind; a cold spell bearing uncharacteristically bleak winter conditions to the north coast. A political candidate on a poster for the upcoming council election grinned inanely down at her from an electricity pylon.

You're not ready, Kate. It's too soon. Her husband's words rang in her ear as she breathed through the flood of anxiety pressing against her ribs – *inhale for two counts, exhale for four, in and out, until it passes.*

Geoff had expressed his concern when she had first spelled out her intention of going back to work once Amy, their baby daughter, had turned three months. His worry still lingered, screaming its misgivings in every meaningful look, sigh and unhappy glance he threw her way. Yes, the financial imperative was real, but he hadn't thought her serious, that she would actually go through with it. No one had. Geoff had been adamant that his work would pick up. Her father had offered to lend them money.

They had all been watching: her husband, her father, her partner, Josh Ellis, and her chief inspector, Andrew Skinner. Observing and assessing. Waiting for her to break. But she had pushed through anyway.

It had been six weeks since she had pressed the point, juggling

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child care, overfull breasts and the rest. Six weeks with Skinner relegating her to desk duty, judging her incapable. Tasked with checking the paperwork for local court, traffic and minor offences like she was some newbie constable fresh out of Goulburn. Her years of experience counting for nothing; her position in the team supplanted by Detective Ellis, the rising star.

‘I think this’ll be good for you, Miles. Take things slowly until you get into the swing of things again. You’ll get home at a reasonable hour. See the kids. Just until you’re settled, and then we can see how you’re travelling.’

Her first day, sitting in Skinner’s office in the late afternoon, weak sunshine pooling through the dusty fingers of the venetian blinds behind Skinner’s head. On the desk between them lay her psychologist-endorsed return-to-work plan, prominent and inescapable in all its carefully crafted wording. The detailed assessment of her state of mind that was now part of her permanent record.

Unconsciously, her fingers dug into her left shoulder, the site of her gunshot wound. A mere graze, really, now entirely healed. She could hardly feel it through her shirt. Only the ruptures in her mind remained, gaping and sore to the touch.

She recalled Skinner’s final words, spoken almost as an afterthought: ‘Prove me wrong.’

Gritting her teeth at the memory, she waited for her breathing exercises to work, for the shaking in her hands to stop.

A call crackled through the radio: ... *Esserton dispatch to any car in the vicinity. Domestic disturbance at thirty-three Denman Drive ...*

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Kate heard Constable Darnley's voice, partially obscured by static, responding: *Esserton Two. Copy that. We're nearby. About ten minutes out ...*

Digesting the address spat out by dispatch, she realised it was less than a block away. She had passed the turnoff not two minutes ago. She could get there before Darnley.

The past few weeks of forced inactivity nagged at her, her instinct wrestling with her better judgement. *Fuck it!* She waited for the traffic to pass and made a U-turn.

2

Even as Kate pulled up outside the two-storey brick veneer, she could hear the screams issuing from inside. An elderly man in a shapeless woollen sweater and saggy sweatpants stood waiting near the letterbox, clearly the neighbour who had called it in. The rest of the street remained empty and shuttered, the occupants at school or work. As Kate stepped out of the car, the man, stooped and shrunken yet with eyes that were sharp and alert, regarded her doubtfully.

‘You the police, are you?’

She didn’t miss his clear derision as he took in her appearance, obviously neither the sex nor the skin colour he had expected. She ignored his question and concentrated on the house. Another wail rose and fell within the house. It sounded like an infant crying.

‘They’ve been at it all morning. I’ve never heard it this bad before. Velu’s his name. He’s a bastard when he’s had a skinful.’ He hocked a globule of phlegm on the ground for emphasis.

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‘Are there any kids in there, do you know?’

‘A couple of little tackers. Boys.’

She nodded and started for the door.

‘You’re not going in there alone, are you?’

‘Stay here,’ she instructed. ‘There’s another car on its way.’

She stepped carefully around the perimeter of the house. Despite the mid-morning sun, a raw, blustery wind whipped through her and she shivered, unsure if it was a reaction to the weather or something else. Out of sight from the neighbour, she drew her weapon, its weight sturdy and reassuring in her hands.

Along the exterior wall, an overflowing bin ripe with the smell of used nappies made her blanch. She held her breath as she edged past to the back doorstep. The door was flung open. Through the half-ajar screen door, she spied an aging but serviceable kitchen: spotless apart from a bowl of something thick and red smashed across the cabinets. Bits of porcelain mixed with gloopy trails of red sauce dripped from the counter, staining the floor tiles and pooling in the grout lines.

She knocked sharply on the open door. ‘Police. Anyone home?’ Her voice rang through the house without a response.

A baby wailed again somewhere inside, a pitiful mewling that caught at her heart. Entering, she followed the noise into a darkened hallway, stepping cautiously along threadbare carpet. She stopped at a door marked ‘Brayden’ in bright-purple stick-on letters. The baby’s cries seemed to have subsided into muffled whimpers.

Her Glock at the ready, she gingerly pressed down the handle and pushed open the door into a darkened room to find a gun barrel pointing directly at her face.

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Adrenaline screamed through her body as she stopped herself just in time from pulling the trigger. Her assailant was a young boy, no more than four or five, and she could see that his weapon was only a toy, a dinky plastic thing. Relief flooded her, sharp and keen, the thudding of her heart loud in her ears. The boy's thin arms trembled as they held the play gun aloft, his expression a concentrated fold of worry and determination.

'It's okay. I'm a police officer. I'm just here to make sure you're okay.'

The baby had started crying again and the boy's eyes darted between Kate and the infant.

'You can put that down, buddy. Everything's going to be all right. Can you tell me where your mum is? It sounds like the bub might need her.'

The boy motioned his head in the direction of the ceiling. 'She's upstairs with Dad. He won't let her come out,' he added, his voice catching.

'Okay, matey. I'm glad you stayed with your baby brother. That's really brave of you. Is his name Brayden? Do you mind if I see if he's okay?'

The boy nodded, finally lowering his makeshift weapon.

Holstering her gun, Kate made for the cot. The baby was red-faced and exhausted with crying, his nappy full and sour with urine. She lifted the infant to her, resting his hot brow to her chest and shushing his cries. The baby whimpered but seemed to settle into her almost immediately, his tiny mouth searching frantically across the surface of her shirt, sensing her milk supply.

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She heard scuffling outside and the sound of voices. Darnley and a female probationary officer, a fresh face she didn't recognise, stood at the entrance to the room. She caught the flicker of doubt on Darnley's face, but ignored it. He shouldn't be surprised to see her here. She had radioed in on arriving at the scene.

She locked eyes with the new officer and gestured to the baby. 'Can you take the kids outside and make up a bottle for the little one? I saw some formula in the kitchen. He's starving.' She placed the now-quiet baby into the officer's rigid arms. At the look of panic in her eyes, Kate added, 'The instructions are on the tin, Constable.'

She waited until the officer had left with the children before joining Darnley in the hallway. 'C'mon. They're upstairs. He's holding her in one of the rooms.'

Darnley looked like he was about to say something but thought better of it. They rounded the corner to a flight of stairs leading up to a landing and two doors. One lay open, showing a small bathroom – powder-blue tiles with white trim. The other door was closed. Muffled grunting and the sounds of exaggerated moaning could be heard from within. Kate met Darnley's eyes as she felt for the door handle. It swung open easily.

* * *

The concrete carpark lay in shadow. A discarded burger wrapper trapped in the gutter moved sluggishly in the breeze. Kate gazed out of the station window at the wiry frame of Jason Velu, swaggering for her benefit, a sneer on his face, for all the world

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like some big-time gangster. Making an exaggerated show of kissing the forehead of his pasty-faced lawyer, who she knew was actually some sort of relative – a distant cousin pulled into service by the bonds of family, or possibly a different kind of hold. Something closer to home like debts or drugs. The man was clearly uncomfortable with Veliu's public demonstration but unable to prevent it.

Veliu had made bail, despite everything they had witnessed inside that house, inside that room. She stared at the intricate tattoo vines that stretched their cobalt tendrils from under his shirt, up the nape of his neck and into the coarse undergrowth of his dirty-blond scalp. She had stared at that tattoo all afternoon in the interview room. It was a statement piece. Another none-too-subtle sign that established his power, his inviolability. He smirked in her direction. Knowing she was watching, he poked his tongue through his forefingers and wriggled it suggestively. She turned away. He'd keep.

Inside, the squad room was mostly empty, the afternoon fast leaching into dusk. Kate caught Skinner's silhouette framed behind the glass walls of his office, pacing the floor, mobile in hand. At least she had achieved her aim there. In Skinner's mind, she had proved herself capable of handling a stressful incident without falling apart. He had taken her aside after the Veliu interview and had a quiet word. He would be approaching HR about reinstating her to full duties, subject to the psychologist's endorsement. She was back in the fold.

The only snag was Darnley. He had been within earshot when Skinner had cornered her and had no doubt heard everything. Her

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mind flew to the aftermath of Veliu's arrest: her dry-retching in a cold sweat in the rear garden, racked with shivers. She had thought that she was alone. She had only spotted Darnley, wordlessly regarding her from the porch, when she had made her way inside.

'Sarge. Could I speak to you for a second?'

Jolted back to the present, Kate turned to find a uniformed constable standing at her desk. She hadn't noticed him stealing up beside her like a shadow.

'Sure, Constable. What's up?'

She recognised the young officer. Somewhere in his mid-twenties, quiet and diffident and with skin that appeared to have only recently recovered from adolescent acne, Constable Anthony Roby was a relatively new recruit to the station. He had helped out peripherally in her last case before maternity leave, but Kate realised that she didn't know much about him.

'It's just about a call-out we got this afternoon. A suspected prowler at a property off Elliot Pass.'

Kate knew the area. Elliot Pass was an isolated road on the southern edge of town that wound its way around dairy paddocks and thick bushland.

'A Mrs Elissa Ricci – she's alone at home with two kids, with the husband away on business – thought she heard noises around five o'clock this morning. Someone moving around in the yard. She didn't do anything about it. She wasn't sure if it was real or whether she'd imagined it. It was her mother ...' Roby paused to check his notes, '... a Mrs Rayna Gardiner who called it in. She got the story out of Mrs Ricci this afternoon and insisted on calling the station.'

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Kate listened patiently, guessing there was more to come.

‘Mrs Ricci’s story is that she thought she heard the back door rattling like someone was trying to get in. But it’s been blowy all day and last night, and she reckons she’s not sure if it was just the wind. She was sitting up in bed feeding the bub at the time and didn’t get up to check. There was no sign of forced entry when we checked this afternoon. The doors and windows looked secure. Nothing was broken or seemed out of place.’

‘Do we know why the mother was so insistent on reporting it? Do they suspect it was someone in particular?’ She watched Roby’s face closely. ‘Did you get the impression that Mrs Ricci is afraid of someone?’

‘She insists there’s no one she can think of who would want to hurt the family.’

‘Okay, so we have a false alarm and an over-protective mother.’

From his expression, it was clear to Kate that Roby held a different opinion.

‘What exactly is worrying you, Constable?’

‘I think she’s lying, Sarge. Her story just doesn’t feel right. She was nervous, you know? Like jumpy. I reckon whoever came around this morning, she knew who it was and she’s afraid.’

Kate assessed the constable. She wondered what it was in his past that fed into his certainty, that made him want to rescue this woman. Had he suffered through an abusive father? Perhaps watching his mother cower and flinch, lie and embellish, learning as a young child to recognise the signs of fear and pain concealed in a woman’s face. Or had it been someone else that he had been unable to protect? A younger sister, maybe?

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‘You’re probably right, Constable. There is likely more to the story than she’s telling us. Probably more than she’s telling her mother, too. But without an offence being committed or something definite to go on ...’ She shrugged her shoulders, leaving the rest unsaid.

Roby nodded, turning away, his disappointment obvious. Kate watched his receding figure, unable to escape a vague unease that she had let the young man down.

3

Friday

‘This is bullshit!’

Geoff didn’t reply but wordlessly observed his wife as she stared transfixed at his mobile screen. Kate was viewing a news article that Geoff had come across while browsing the morning news on his phone at the breakfast table, a habit that Kate detested. She had been in the middle of organising their four-year-old son, Archie’s breakfast – toast with jam, no crusts, cut into squares – when Geoff had stuck the phone in front of her and insisted that she take a look.

THE MINISTER AND HIS LOVER screamed the headline. Kate scrolled down what seemed like an endless stream of words, lurid and sensational, that would no doubt splatter the front pages of all of the day’s newspapers. Her eyes rapidly scanned the article, trying to contain a rising panic with each new sickening sentence.

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The secret life of former Attorney-General Martin Jackson, the darling of the NSW Conservatives, has been exposed in a series of exclusive interviews granted to The Tribune Online by former staffer and alleged lover of the minister, Mr Simon Lahey. The Hon Martin Jackson MP, who served as the NSW Planning Minister and subsequently as Attorney-General before his untimely death three years ago following a heart attack, was widely tipped to take over the leadership from Premier Coulson and head up the party's charge to seek a third term of government.

Mr Lahey alleges that he commenced an affair with Mr Jackson soon after joining his office in 2008 as a young political science graduate in his early twenties. At the time, Mr Jackson was the newly elected Planning Minister, married and with two grown children, Maya, twenty-two, and Lesley, thirty. While never 'exclusive', Mr Lahey alleges that the couple continued their affair off and on up until Mr Jackson's death, and that they shared a unit together in Surry Hills. The property in question is now the subject of legal wrangling between Mr Lahey and the Jackson Estate.

As his executive assistant, Mr Lahey had access to both Mr Jackson's personal and official diaries, and claims to have knowledge of at least two other high-profile relationships sustained by Mr Jackson: a senior police officer in the Northern Region Command who was a childhood friend of Mr Jackson, as well as a well-known developer with property interests along the north coast. In his most explosive revelations, Mr Lahey alleges that Mr Jackson's affair with the said developer coincided with a period when a number of the developer's subdivision proposals were under consideration by the State Planning Department, placing a

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shadow over approvals granted by Mr Jackson during his tenure as Planning Minister.

Mr Jackson's estate includes significant business and property interests in Sydney and the north coast of New South Wales. 'Martin always knew how to spin a deal to his best advantage,' says Mr Lahey.

The revelations could not have come at a worse time for Premier Coulson and the NSW Government, already reeling from multiple MP travel-expenditure scandals and growing calls for an independent enquiry. Mr Lahey refused to be drawn on why he was choosing the present time to make his sensational allegations public, stating only that these questions should be put to the Coulson Government, leading to speculation on how much of Mr Jackson's conduct was known to his Cabinet colleagues at the time, and what, if any, influence had been brought to bear on Mr Lahey to maintain his silence.

In a statement, the premier's office strongly denied any knowledge of wrongdoing by Mr Jackson during his time as the Minister for Planning and denounced in the strongest terms 'the muckraking by a disgruntled staffer of a well-respected, long-serving politician and much-loved family member. In besmirching the good name of Mr Jackson—' the statement reads, '—Mr Lahey is engaging in the lowest form of slander by attacking the personal life of a man who is no longer able to defend himself, and hurting innocent family members in the process, all for the sake of self-publicity and notoriety.'

Mr Lahey has promised to stand by his allegations, which he claims are supported by personal documents in his possession. Mr Jackson's family was unavailable for comment.

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Kate felt nauseous. The porridge she had consumed just minutes before congealing in her belly.

A senior police officer in the Northern Region Command. Arthur Grayling, the ex-chief inspector of Esserton Police Station, now retired. *Kate's father. A childhood friend of Mr Jackson.* Her dad, who had been in love with Martin Jackson his whole life, their relationship carried out in the shadows, brief moments snatched together while they had each supported a wife and family. With the death of Kate's mother to pancreatic cancer, there had been a cementing of sorts. A semi-permanent relationship whenever Martin could escape from Sydney, tucked away at her dad's cottage out of town, where he had moved after selling up the family home. In the end, after a lifetime of false starts, they had only managed a couple of years together before Martin had died without warning, leaving her dad with nothing but the house and garden that Martin had loved, to care for in his memory.

Kate met Geoff's eyes and they shared an unspoken moment of understanding.

Her father's past had come home to roost.

This had been their family's private affair. A schism that Kate carried with her, her loyalties forever torn between her father's happiness and its effect on her mother. It was a subject she rarely broached with Gray. Her parents' relationship was as complicated as it had been fraught. There had been knowledge, hurt and compromise on both sides, but there had also been love, entangled in the thorny briar that had been their life together.

There had been consequences, too. Kate's mother had battled depression and succumbed to her diagnosis of cancer, refusing to

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fight and yielding to the solution that the universe had presented her with. Kate's younger brother, Luke, was holed away in Sydney and permanently estranged from their father. The Jackson family – Martin's wife, Lindsay, and their two daughters, childhood friends of Kate's family – no longer on speaking terms.

Now this article had cracked open the door, exposing their past. Esserton in the Northern Rivers hinterland south of Murwillumbah was still a relatively small community. It had expanded rapidly with the influx of tree-changers seeking a regional lifestyle within driving distance of the Queensland border, but old connections still ran deep. It wouldn't take much for people to put two and two together. Martin Jackson was a local boy. His family still owned property in the area, although none of the Jacksons had lived in Esserton for years. Everyone knew of her father's friendship with Martin. The article had just about painted a red arrow to Gray's door.

'Are you going to give him a call?' Geoff asked.

Kate nodded and reached for her mobile. The call rang out and went to voicemail. She heard her father's measured tone asking the caller to leave a message, and wondered if he was already being inundated by phone calls. Journalists who had tracked him down, seeking comment.

'Dad, it's only me. Call me when you get this.'

'I'm not surprised he's not picking up. Are you going to try Luke?'

Kate made a face. 'Later, maybe.'

Geoff nodded, letting the matter drop.

'C'mon, little man. Let's get you organised.' Leaving Geoff to clear away the breakfast things, Kate followed Archie into

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his room, tiptoeing past the closed door of her sleeping infant daughter.

She helped Archie out of his pyjamas.

‘Mummy, the fire trucks are coming to preschool today.’

‘Really? That sounds exciting.’

‘Yeah, I told you yesterday.’

‘You did too, matey. Mummy’s so silly. I remember now. Will you get to climb in the front, do you think?’

‘Miss Le-noni said maybe, only if we’re good.’

Kate smiled. Archie had yet to work out the pronunciation of his preschool teacher’s name, Leoni. She resisted correcting him because he had grown out of so many of his cute little-boy mannerisms that she wanted to hold onto the ones that still persisted.

‘Well, I guess you’ll have to be extra good today.’ She pecked him lightly on his nose and he responded by scrunching up his face and blowing a raspberry onto her cheek.

She tickled his tummy as he giggled. ‘Quick, let’s get you dressed so you’re not late. Daddy’s going to walk you to preschool with Amy in the pram.’

As she helped her son into his clothes, listening to his prattle with half an ear, she found her mind sliding back to what she had just read, unable to stop her thoughts from picking through the implications.

This was the situation she had always feared. Martin’s public standing meant his relationship with Gray, if discovered, was always at risk of scandal. Her father had always ceded to Martin’s requests for privacy, understanding his fears for his political career

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and the consequences for both of their families. And now it had all caught up with them. Except it was her dad who would have to bear the brunt of the whispers and rumours. Kate had no illusions about the reaction her father's life would illicit from some quarters of their semi-rural community. Gray could look after himself, but worrying about his safety had become a habit. The one thing that this job had taught her was that you didn't need to scratch too hard to find the toxicity that lurked below.

And what about her own career? She wasn't naïve enough to think she could escape unscathed from the gossip and speculation that would consume her family. Her thoughts skittered like a pinball machine. There was also the small issue of the money.

'Owwwww.'

'Sorry, mate. Mummy wasn't concentrating. Sorry!' Kate rubbed her son's throat where she had accidentally snagged his skin on the zipper of his jumper. She kissed him and did his jacket up properly.

Kate's mobile rang just as she had helped Archie into his shoes. For a brief moment she froze, wondering who was at the other end and if she should answer.

She picked up the call and recognised Skinner's voice. He sounded tense and agitated.

'Miles, there's been an incident. I need all hands on deck. Can you come in?'

'On my way, sir.'