

Prologue



Light was breaking on the horizon as she ran along a dirt driveway, trying not to trip or stumble in the potholes. She reached the wire gate panting and paused to look in both directions. She could see an endless straight bitumen road with fields of wheat on either side, canopied by a vast universe of distant stars. It wouldn't take him long to notice she had escaped, to find her again in this dry, flat landscape.

Hurry up. Choose.

She chose the west and ran away from the rising sun, hoping to stay hidden in the twilight shadows. Her feet were soft and bare but adrenaline prevented her from feeling any pain from the rough stones. She heard the sound of a familiar car engine starting and pushed to run faster.

Headlights came from behind and she threw herself into the tall grass on the side of the road. As she expected, it was him. She watched the car drive by. The window was down, his elbow resting on the door, and she could see his eyes scanning the fields for movement. Cold, hard eyes. She crouched as low as possible, heart pounding, waiting and praying for the car to pass.

When the headlights had faded into nothing, she crept back out onto the road. She looked again in each direction, knowing she couldn't return to where she had run from, nor go in the direction

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the car had taken. Enormous paddocks of long grass lay on either side, gently swaying in the early morning breeze, but to one side she could just make out the silhouette of trees on the horizon. At least it would give her a place to rest for a moment, think of the next move. She made up her mind and bolted towards the foliage.

The grass whipped against her legs as she fled across the paddock, and eventually she tumbled down a steep dirt bank, landing hard in mud. She found her footing, wiping the sweat off her forehead, and looked around with all the fear and exhaustion of day-long hunted prey. She could just make out dirt slopes on either side dipping down sharply into water.

A log that had fallen across the mud stretched into the creek. She crawled along it, careful not to slip into the stream, and leaned down to cup some water into her parched mouth. Hesitant at first, careful not to make a sound, then gulping more hastily. Something plopped into the creek nearby breaking her focus on drinking, making her gasp and jump. A turtle or a fish perhaps. She was paralysed by fear.

Retreating back from the log, she dragged herself up to her feet and continued along the creek bed, climbing over fallen timber and squelching through deep sludge to get away. To where, she did not know. Just away. As far away as she could possibly get from the hell that lurked behind. She ran as far as she could along the muddy creek bank until she collapsed exhausted in a small clearing. Her chest rose and fell, sucking in the cool morning air which felt sharp in her lungs, as adrenaline pounded through her veins. She knew fear, and she knew dread, but this was nothing short of utter terror.

Two eagles circled high overhead as she lay outstretched on her back in a damp green clearing, too physically exhausted to move.

The sweet smell of melaleuca blossoms reminded her of the warm lemon and honey drink her mum made when she had a sore throat. Her throat hurt now. Everything hurt. She rubbed her forehead, squinted against the ever-brightening sunlight and rolled to one side to break the glare. The soles of her feet throbbed and her legs were red raw from the grass lashing them.

Someone was playing a piano. At first she thought she was hallucinating, but no, there was music on the breeze. It reminded her of the church her mum always watched on television. Someone was close by. She would allow herself a few more breaths to muster the energy needed to climb the hill that lay between her and the source of the music before making a dash to safety. Such a sweet melody had to indicate a haven.

The gentle sway of melaleucas filled her vision with their soft creamy petals blossoming cloud-like from trunks of gnarled-up layers of bark. Then the sound of a twig snapping jolted her upright. Her heart gave a sudden primal thump.

‘I knew I couldn’t trust you.’ A hoarse, deep voice came from behind. He loomed overhead. Cold eyes. ‘I wanted to trust you. You know, I tried so hard to trust you.’ She could see the mark on his neck from where she’d scratched him that morning. A thin red line oozed tiny bubbles of blood.

She moved her hands to shield her face. ‘Please don’t. I’ll be better this time. I promise.’

His eyes stared back at her. ‘I’ve already given you too many chances. You betrayed me.’

Before the scream could escape her mouth, the boulder came crashing down.



Chapter 1

Tuesday 8 February 2000

She loved the crisp morning air of the countryside. Running felt easy when the air was cool and dry. Morning jogs in the city with its dense humidity felt like running in a bulletproof vest but here in Goorungah Renee glided through the streets. The sun poked its way above the horizon and the streetlights flickered off. Her ankles felt good. Her left ankle was still healing from when she had been pushed over by some guy at a domestic. She wondered what kind of work lay ahead for her now she was back in the country.

She reached the most elevated point of her route, affording a view across the sprawling country township. It was so quiet. A few trucks had passed her, carrying supplies for further out west, but she still hadn't seen another person. The country town slept.

Houses stretched across the plains. Slightly grander ones lay to the east, Snob's Knob as the locals called it. But they weren't really mansions. No one with any real money would stay in a place like Goorungah. The more modest dwellings lay to the west; they were more likely to be public housing. And then a little bit of everything in between, including her mother's house right down there, smack in the middle, just off Main Street. Despite the differences, it was the same as in the city, any city for that matter – rich sides and poor sides.

Her favourite part of the run was coming up. It was a long gentle slope back down into town. The thin layer of perspiration made the air feel cooler on her skin. She had been running for almost an hour. On her first day back, three days ago, she'd mapped out a path to do every morning during her rural secondment – a ten-kilometre route around the perimeter of town, enough to keep her fit for her return to Brisbane. She slowed to a walk, checking her watch. Fifty-five minutes.

She would need to pick up her pace to see results.

'Careful of them snakes.'

Renee jumped and looked around, searching for the owner of the deep raspy voice.

'I've seen three come past here in the last month.' An old man was sitting alone in his garage surrounded by dust and tools and random bits of steel and rusty farm machinery.

'What colour?' Renee stopped outside the fence, hands on hips, still panting, sweat dripping from her forehead. He looked hard at her and she knew the answer. 'Brown?' The most venomous. That's one of the few things she knew about her dad. His totem. His Lore deemed that the brown snake would protect anyone from that nation and never harm them. She liked to think that this protection extended to her, despite knowing so little about traditional ways.

The old man nodded. 'It's dry. They're coming up for water. There was one right here sunnin itself yesterday.' He picked up his walking stick and pointed to a bare patch of dirt in the front yard. 'Right there.'

She looked around. The place looked dishevelled. He looked dishevelled with his messy thin grey hair and leathery sunburned

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forearms poking out of his rolled-up, crumpled flannelette shirt sleeves. ‘You take care of yourself, hey?’ She wondered if he lived alone. If a man like him was bitten by a brown snake with no one to call an ambulance, he’d die in a matter of minutes.

‘Don’t you worry about me, love. I shot the bastard. *You* be careful running on those back roads, especially in the dark. Never know what you might come up against.’

Renee nodded, feeling a strange vacuum in her stomach. She should be thankful for the warning, but his brutal watchfulness told her otherwise.

Her mother’s house was a simple worker’s cottage, located just around the corner from Main Street behind the Criterion Hotel, one of the old pubs. Goorungah was no exception to any other small town in regional Queensland in that it had one pub per five hundred people. So in Goorungah there were three pubs plus the RSL, which Renee had noticed was becoming increasingly popular among the elderly residents since its recent installation of centralised heating and cooling. And five new poker machines.

She eased the gate open, wincing as it screeched on its hinges in protest. Renee had hated her mother’s house when she was younger, with its large overgrown garden and loose timber panelling. The school kids would tease her that she lived in a creepy old ghost house. Her first day of primary school, after her mum had dropped her off, she’d stood in the playground looking around at the other kids waiting to see who would suggest the first game ... They all played together but no one asked her to join in, not the girl who lived in the ghost house. But now she liked it. The place had character. The tall pines

gave it shade and privacy, and the wooden floors kept the interior cool in the harsh outback summer.

Any luck her mother would still be asleep and stay asleep long enough for her to tend to a few outside chores before her second day of work at the station. She sat for a moment on the front steps, removing her shoes and socks, thinking about how much she wanted a drink but she couldn't bring herself to go inside to the kitchen sink and risk waking her mother. She turned on the tap in the front yard and ran the water for a moment, letting all the dirt flush through, then cupped her hand beneath to form a pool of water. Those blissful gulps were the most enjoyable reward for running. She splashed water over her face and dampened her hair. It was going to be a scorcher.

A saucer beneath the tap filled with water. Her mother must have put it there for the birds. She thought of the old man's warning about the snakes. Such a shame that the creeks were drying and they had to leave their natural habitat for water, but even more of a shame if she stood on one and it bit her on the arse. She flipped the saucer over with her toe and let the water wash over her feet. Sorry, snakes. You'll have to go hydrate someplace else.

She raked the leaves from the front lawn, swept out the garage and driveway, and took the mats down from the clothesline. They had been so filthy. Her mother had once kept the inside of the place spick and span, but when she had arrived home three days earlier on Saturday, there was a thin layer of grime over everything. Renee had spent most of the weekend washing clothes and cleaning the house. She should have visited more often. Oh, the guilt. Had she really not noticed that things had deteriorated

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so much or was it wilful blindness? She reached into the kitchen to grab the bucket of leftover scraps and ventured out the back to her least enjoyable chore.

When Renee was a kid, the backyard had been filled with her mother's vegetable patches, neat rows of carrots and lettuce, but they were long gone now. Too much maintenance. However, her mother would be darned before she'd ever get rid of those bloody chooks. They clucked quietly away in their little hen house, their fat little tummies all feathery and fluffed up. Actually, the chooks were kind of cute. It was the rooster with his cocky mohawk and long sharp claws that she didn't like. Big Red. She had already had two failed attempts at collecting the eggs and had fallen asleep devising a new strategy last night.

As she approached, the rooster stuck out its chest and strutted back and forth along the wire cage, taunting Renee, as if to say 'These are *my* hens'. Renee undid the latch of the small square door in the roof and threw half the scraps into one corner, and watched as the three hens scrambled in a frantic flurry.

Peck. Peck. Peck.

Big Red stood back. That's okay, she'd expected this. She knew he was simply being a nice guy. 'I know you're a real man, Big Red, letting the ladies go first.' She stepped a little closer. He lifted himself higher, pushing his chest out. 'I'm going to put your share over here in this corner.' As calmly as possible, Renee threw the remainder of the scraps into the other end of the cage as Big Red scratched his claws in the dirt. Then he strutted over slowly to where she had dropped the scraps. Renee moved back, and he snapped at the pungent vegetable peels, looked around, and then went down for a second peck. She stepped back further, out of his

vision, and delicately placed her hand on the cage door, turning the handle, pulling it open and crouching over to crawl in. Big Red, falling in nicely with her ploy, continued pecking away in a hungry frenzy; the hens had slowed down, pecking more calmly now, finding their fill. She crawled further in, as quietly as possible, and reached the back of the cage where the nests were lined up in wooden boxes.

Brruk.

Three pearly eggs, one in each box, lay cosied up in nests of straw. Good work, girls!

Brruk.

She picked up the first one, stretched out the bottom of her shirt and placed the egg in her makeshift carrying vessel. She hurried to collect the remaining two and placed them in her shirt. She turned.

BRRRRRRRUKK!!!

Big Red came at her, a storm of feathers whirling. Claws in mid-air, evil beady eyes, screeching and scratching at her. She turned her back to him, shielding her face, one hand holding the edge of her shirt carrying the eggs, the other scrambling for the latch. She burst out of the cage, slammed the door shut, then turned back to confront his hostility.

‘You little punk.’

Brruk.

Laughter erupted from the back patio. She looked back to see her mother standing in a faded nightie in the morning sun holding her stomach, doubled over in amusement.

‘It’s not funny, Mum!’

‘Sorry, darling. But it kind of is ...’

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Renee frowned, as her mother tried to breathe and gain composure. 'Well, how the bloody hell do you do it?' Miss Chook Whisperer.

'Big Red knows I'm his friend. We understand each other.' She started to heave with laughter again. 'Sorry, darling. How are the eggs?'

Renee looked down into her shirt. 'Yeah, they're fine.' She'd almost twisted her sore ankle again trying to protect their delicate shells. It was a miracle they were still intact.

'Good. Come inside, I'll put the kettle on.'

'I'll just grab a shower.'

Renee had never got out of the habit of speedy showers. If you have ever lived through a drought, you know the art of a quick shower. Most people would be surprised at how thoroughly you can wash your body in sixty seconds. She could hear her mother out in the kitchen banging around pans and cutlery and cringed at the thought of her injuring herself.

The bathroom filled with a warm soapy fog and she allowed herself a moment to stretch her neck under the water flow. The shower head was better here at her mother's house. Better than the one back home in her cheap little rented apartment that poured rather than sprayed. One small saving grace to being back in Goorungah. Maybe it would be good to have a short break in the country, get fit and focussed, and then by the time a carer came along, she'd not only leave her mother behind with a clear conscience but be in better shape than when she arrived.

She towel dried her short curly hair, and took a moment to look at her face in the mirror. She was vain enough to admit she was pleased she looked no older than her twenty-eight years. She watched what she ate, worked out regularly and her skin care routine albeit simple

(soap and cream) was consistent so that her skin was always clear and smooth and her muscles were lean and defined. The only thing she couldn't control was the melancholic gaze that stared back. She frowned to shake the self-pity, wrapped the towel around her body and returned to the bedroom, the one she'd grown up in. She had come to visit her mother for weekends but it felt strange being back in her childhood room knowing she would be staying for a lot longer than that. On previous visits, Renee would purposefully only bring a small backpack so she had an easy excuse for returning to the city. She opened the wardrobe, half expecting to see her high school uniforms hung neatly along the rack, and pulled out a clean blue ironed shirt and dark navy slacks. Back to uniformed policing – the compromise she had made to be close to her mother. The only job available in town had seen her drop her hard-earned detective rank back down to constable. So much for the ten years she'd spent working in the city to earn that status. Now she was back in Goorungah on secondment. She threaded her belt, placed her gun in its holster and looked in the mirror. Just a few weeks, Renee. You can do this.

'Here, Mum, let me do that.' Renee reached for the loaf of bread. Her mother was struggling to untwine the wire tag and open the bag. 'I don't know why you insist on buying this crap. And you're a nurse.'

'I *used* to be a nurse. Besides, I like white bread. I can digest it better. And I don't get all the pesky little seeds stuck in my teeth.'

Renee turned to put the bread in the toaster, rolling her eyes. 'Have a seat, Mum. I can take care of this.'

'Why don't you grow your hair a little? It's so beautiful when it's long and curly,' her mother said, ignoring her request to sit, reaching out to touch her face.

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‘I like it short. It’s more manageable,’ Renee said, shaking her mother’s hands away and turning back to the toaster, which was dirty and covered in stains. The tray was filled with crumbs and Renee remembered the cockroach she’d seen scurrying down the hall the night before. She picked up a pen from the mug on the table that held everything from letter openers and hair combs to the odd receipt, and scrawled ‘roach bait’ on the ever-growing list of things to buy and do that was stuck to the fridge.

‘Such a practical daughter I’ve raised.’ Her mother sat down at the table, pulling her fluffy dressing gown around her wire-thin frame. She looked smaller these days. So frail. And her hair had thinned.

‘Did I hear you up last night?’ Renee asked. It was impossible to do anything in that house without being noticed. The wooden floorboards creaked at the slightest movement. Renee’s aptitude for stealth police operations was no doubt a result of years of perfecting the ability to move through the house without making a sound to escape and enjoy midnight teenage escapades.

‘Wasn’t me. Slept like a baby for the first time in weeks, thanks to that morphine.’ Renee looked hard at her mother. ‘Oh, and the joy of having my beautiful daughter back home with me.’

Renee smiled. ‘Don’t get used to it, Mum.’

‘What? You or the morphine?’ Val snapped back.

‘You know what I mean.’ The toaster popped and Renee smeared the toast with butter and honey then sliced it into four pieces the way Val insisted. ‘Here you go, a meal fit for a nine-year-old destined for diabetes.’

Her mother grinned, clumsily taking one piece in her twisted arthritic hands. Renee returned to the bench, then cracked two eggs in a pan.

‘You sure you don’t want an egg?’

‘No.’

‘Even after all the trouble I went through this morning collecting them for you?’

Her mother looked up, seeming a bit guilty this time, no doubt reflecting on her outburst of laughter at her daughter’s distress, and now Renee couldn’t help laughing.

‘*See, Renee!* It was funny, you agree now, don’t you?’

‘Yeah, Mum. But, seriously, why do you still have those chooks? They’re just extra work and they stink.’

‘They don’t stink.’

‘They ...’ Renee stopped. Don’t argue.

‘They’re my pets. I like them. They keep me company.’

‘Hah! Bullshit, Mum. It’s because you’re a tight-arse and you don’t want to spend money on eggs.’

Val went quiet and looked down at her toast. Her knuckles had gotten worse, so gnarled and knobbly. Her wrists were twisted and her hands looked squashed, as though they’d been wrapped in bandages like the Chinese once did to make the feet of women smaller. Renee thought of bird claws when she looked at them. Honey was smeared across her mother’s face. ‘I’m sorry, Mum.’ Val looked so little and sad. Not the formidable woman who had raised her and taught her never to take shit from anyone. Renee thought of a photo she’d once seen of Val at her age. In it, she’s standing on the beach with a group of similarly vibrant young women lined up in flared jeans and white thongs. Val stood tall in the middle with her lustrous blonde hair and sun-kissed skin, blue eyes sparkling with excitement. ‘What’s on today?’ Renee plated up her eggs and joined her mother at

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the table with a fresh pot of tea to share. 'You gonna go have a flutter at the pokies?'

'No, because I'm a tight-arse. Tight-arses don't gamble.'

'Come on, Mum.' Renee poured the scalding tea into her mother's cup. 'You know I appreciate everything you've done for me.' As it came out, Renee wasn't sure if she really meant it. If Val had just listened to her doctor and put her name on that waiting list, Renee would be knee-deep in a new case rather than working as a constable back in Goorungah.

Her mother took a sip of tea and Renee started on her eggs, after covering them with a good dousing of Worcestershire sauce. Her life in the city seemed so far away. In the city she had her own place in the inner suburbs, an easy ten-minute bike ride to work at headquarters. Her apartment was nothing fancy, but it was hers and she loved it, frustratingly weak shower pressure and all. The pub next door meant that it was always noisy, but she'd grown used to the smashing of glass bottles as they got emptied out of the dumpster each morning. She had been raised in a house next to a pub, after all.

'Renee, do you think I like this set-up any more than you?' Val asked, picking up on her silence. 'I don't want you to have to sacrifice your career for me.'

'Look, Mum, it won't be much longer. I got a message from social services yesterday. We're third in line for the next carer.'

'That's what they always say, Renee. They don't give a rat's arse about us country folk. I saw it time and time again when I was nursing at the hospital. Folk on waiting lists for caregivers for years! That's where I'd be now if I didn't have you, you know? Over there in the old people's wing.'

Renee knew it was true. They'd been 'third in line' for months now, but no use admitting her own doubts to Val. One of them had to stay strong. 'I'm not going anywhere, Mum. Not until we can sort out a carer for you. It'll be good for me to have a break from the city. I'm going to get fit and healthy and enjoy this country air.' She wished her mother wouldn't test her like this. Val knew how much she wanted to return to the city.

She took another sip. The tea would help her adjust to the heat. She had become acclimatised to Brisbane's coastal humidity in the past ten years. This scorching dry heat now felt uncomfortably foreign. She could handle it for a few weeks, a few months if she absolutely had to. Please let it not be for so long. She imagined all the cases she would miss. Her desire to become a cop had become a sore topic over the years. Renee never knew why it was so hard for her mother to appreciate her desire to enter law enforcement. Val was a nurse after all – a similarly practical, community-oriented occupation. But she had always told Renee that she expected more adventure from her – go to university, travel overseas, see the world, blah blah blah. But Renee wanted structure, a career path, independence and the chance of owning her own home one day. She had considered going to university to study law but that would mean winding up with a massive student loan debt. So she figured she'd become a cop, get paid, get some experience, and then perhaps go into law. Because there was no way Renee was ever putting herself in a financially vulnerable position. She reached across and squeezed her mother's hand and was met with a tight smile and big sad eyes in return.

Chapter 2



The Goorungah Police Station had been built in the 1970s and had a certain blunt ugliness to it. A perimeter of concrete, no trees, just perfectly manicured lawn and a limp Australian flag dripping from the pole out the front. It was in the centre of Main Street opposite the community centre and adjacent to the post office, less than five hundred metres from Val's place.

Renee's chair was too high for the desk but she wasn't staying long enough to bother changing it. She looked around the office, shifting uncomfortably in the starchy, stiff uniform she was no longer used to wearing, wondering how she would fill the hours that lay ahead.

It was Tuesday and her second day working there. She had arrived by seven, keen to escape the house and the expression on her mother's face. Her colleagues' seats were empty. Stacey Appleton, the administration assistant, would be in first after dropping her kids off at school, three noisy ratbags Renee had had the pleasure of meeting briefly yesterday afternoon when they came in after school looking for money from their mum to buy gut rot like Nerds, Whiz Fizz and Gob Stoppers. Renee found herself fascinated by the simplicity of Stacey's life. She cooked cupcakes for her children, competed in the mixed netball competition on Tuesday nights and

spoke incessantly about *Neighbours*. She was an all-round lovely person and Renee couldn't stand her. She wasn't entirely sure why she disliked Stacey so much. Perhaps it was because Stacey would never have played with the kid from the spooky house. The kid with the absent dad. The Aboriginal kid. Stacey was the type of person who could simply be herself in this world, knowing that people would console her when she was sad or scared, laugh at her when she made a joke, let her rest when she was tired, and believe her when she spoke. Life came easily to people like Stacey in a way it never had, and never would, to Renee.

Sergeant Mulligan, who ran the small station, had a medical appointment that morning and said he'd be in late, and if Monday had been anything to go by, Constable Roger Madden would be in around nine.

It was late summer and, although turn-of-the-century exhilaration had well and truly subsided (accompanied by a silent communal sigh that the Y2K millennium bug had not wiped out all the computers), the heat had not yet relented. It was already stifling in the office. The others liked the air conditioning blasting, but she preferred it off – open windows, fans whirring, fresh air. The police station was as ugly on the inside as it was on the outside – an open-plan office with three desks, cold lighting, stark white walls and linoleum flooring. Mulligan had his own office to one side, and there was a small kitchenette and holding cell down the corridor at the back, which also led to the car park. There was nothing endearing about this place. Renee shuddered to think of the brutality that would have occurred inside these walls in years gone by.

Yesterday she had spent the morning with Stacey, setting up her computer and phone. Then she'd had her introductory

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meeting with Mulligan. She'd met him before at community events and a few times when the country cops came into the city for training, but she'd never had an extended one-on-one conversation with him. They had spent half an hour going over the basics – what he wanted her to focus on while she was there (traffic, juvenile crime and domestic violence) and his expectations for general office conduct.

'Do you know your way around town then?' he'd asked, leaning back in his chair. His face was freshly shaven, his boots shiny and his uniform immaculate. Renee guessed her new boss, her *temporary* boss, was in his late fifties. He kept his mousy brown hair neat and short and smelled of sunscreen. He reminded Renee of her high-school maths teacher – he had a formal yet pleasant disposition, as though he were following a strict set of internal life rules. Renee wondered if he was a religious man because he had that certain confidence to him people of faith emanated. She envied those people.

'I grew up here,' Renee had reminded him. He wasn't the first person to treat her like an outsider since her return on Saturday. Gone ten years and suddenly she was no longer considered local, despite at least six trips back a year to check on Val, which you would think had to count for something.

'Right.' Mulligan had nodded and returned to scanning the pages in front of him. Renee, seated across from him, had glanced around the room. There was a framed map of Goorungah on one wall and a whiteboard on the other with a few telephone numbers and names scrawled across it in blue ink. A shiny beige filing cabinet sat in the corner adorned with a vase of artificial flowers, a family photo and a set of handcuffs. Renee had wondered if Stacey

was responsible for the floral arrangement. In the black-and-white family photo, two adults stood in front of a low-set Queenslander. A boy, neatly dressed, socks pulled high, stood between them.

Mulligan had seen the direction of her gaze. 'My parents. The photo was taken when I was a boy.' The way he'd imparted the information so matter-of-factly suggested he was not open to further discussion about personal matters, which was completely fine with her.

'Handsome couple,' she'd said to be polite, even though there was nothing remarkable about them. They stared at the camera stiffly. Only the mother smiled.

Mulligan's eyes had returned to the papers in front of him and Renee sat up a little straighter. 'It says here that you were promoted to detective two years ago ...'

'Correct. I've been mainly assigned to domestic cases in that time – burglaries, home invasions, assaults, homicides ...'

Her boss in the city had sent her staff profile to Mulligan so he could get across her work history. It was a glowing file and she was proud of her achievements. Her physical strength and excellent hand-to-eye coordination, coupled with sharp intellect and low tolerance for bullshit, meant that she rarely got herself into sticky situations, but when she did, she could masterfully manoeuvre herself and those around her to safety. She'd half expected Mulligan to comment on it, but he'd moved on.

'And what were you doing beforehand?' Mulligan squinted as he read.

'I worked general duties for six years, following my initial training at the academy.'

'In Brisbane?'

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‘Yes, mostly Brisbane. But we went all over the southeast region. Spent a little time on the Gold Coast and up around Caboolture. But yes, mainly in the city.’

‘It’s changed a lot over the years ...’ Mulligan would be old enough to have lived through the Fitzgerald Inquiry. He had tapped his pen on the desk while carefully reviewing the papers. ‘Well, it looks like you’ve certainly achieved a lot in your short career. Must be a bit of an anticlimax being back here in little old Goorungah.’ Was this a test of her commitment?

‘I’m just grateful to be here, Sarge.’

‘And you don’t know how long you might be out here ...?’ He’d continued leafing through the files.

‘It depends on personal circumstances.’ Surely her boss had given him the run-down on Val. She didn’t want to have to rehash it. ‘It depends on how well my mother gets on.’

‘Yes, how is Val?’ he’d said, placing the folder aside and looking up. ‘I’m very sorry to hear about her situation.’

‘She’s fine. We’re working on getting a carer. There’s really no other option for us at this stage. So I appreciate you facilitating my secondment.’ She was appreciative to a certain extent – Mulligan and human resources had been negotiating the secondment logistics for weeks but being back in uniform once more after so much work to become a detective felt awful. But it wasn’t forever, just until they could sort out something more permanent for her mother.

‘It may not be as exciting out here as in the city, but we’ll do our best to keep you on track.’

‘Thanks, Sarge. I’m willing to do whatever needs to be done.’

‘We’ve had a lot of burglaries lately. The young ones are getting into drugs – stealing and hocking whatever they can get a hold

of. Mrs Brian was in here just last week – someone had jumped through the window and stolen jewellery when she was down at the chemist filling a script. Took her grandmother’s wedding ring. Wouldn’t even be worth that much, but the sentimental value – immeasurable. Little bastards.’

‘I can follow that up for you,’ Renee had said, reaching into her back pocket for her notebook.

Mulligan had shaken his head.

‘First, I want you to shadow Constable Madden. He’s on traffic patrol this afternoon out near the highway.’ Renee had taken a deep breath at the thought of shadowing a PC and made notes to hide her reaction from Mulligan. ‘I don’t know why everyone thinks it’s okay to roar through this town, like we don’t have little ones crossing the road. It’s the truckies and the city folk on their way further west, thinking they can go at lightning speed with not a care in the world.’ Mulligan got to his feet and went to the map. ‘Right here. Do you know this intersection?’ He’d tapped at the corner of the highway and the road out to the industrial estate. ‘Set up there. I won’t have any of my locals hurt in a car accident. Not on my watch.’ Mulligan was unlike any of her supervisors in the city. Those cops had become hardened to the cold reality of what humans were capable of doing to each other. It never ceased to amaze her how some of them could go home and forget about the job, having glimpsed the underbelly of society, but Mulligan seemed to care. Perhaps he was the type of cop who would seek and deliver justice?

She had left his office with a renewed sense of focus and was met by Stacey and Roger Madden, who insisted she join them for lunch at Alfie’s, the local cafe. There was no getting out of it, so she’d accepted and walked the short distance down Main

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Street, hoping not to bump into her mother on her way to play the pokies. Alfie's hadn't changed since she was a kid. The entire interior remained coated with a thin layer of grease and dust, and the place smelled of burned fat and tomato sauce.

'Sarge said there's been some break and enters lately,' Renee had said to Roger after they'd ordered and found a table. Stacey had spotted 'one of the other mums' out the front of the cafe and appeared deep in conversation, so Renee had figured she'd take advantage of the opportunity to ask Roger a few work-related questions.

'Yeah, a few,' Roger had said, pushing a mouthful to one side, nodding. Burger juice dripped from his chin and he'd made it worse by wiping it with a serviette and spreading it further to the sides of his cheeks. 'Kids hitting the hard stuff way too young. It's sad to see. Not like when we were young, you know? Sneak out with a bottle of Mum's Passion Pop or play goon of fortune under the Hills hoist.' He'd taken another mouthful before finishing the one already in his mouth and Renee had put down her sandwich, hoping her appetite would return once Roger had finished.

'The good old days, hey? So, these kids—'

'I'm sorry to hear about your mum.' Roger had cut her off mid-question, steering the conversation back to the personal. 'You know she helped my wife, Trish, through our first pregnancy.'

'Oh yeah?'

'Couldn't've done it without her – so supportive. Trish still talks about her.' He'd put his burger down. 'We should come around sometime.' Renee had found herself shaking her head. 'Not to stay, just to bring you some food. Trish is a fantastic cook. Does your mum like Vietnamese food?'

Renee loved Vietnamese food and was tempted to accept the offer but really wanted to keep things professional. 'It's okay, really. But thanks. Sarge said he wants us to go on traffic this arvo ...' she'd said, steering the conversation again back to her realm of comfort.

'Oh yeah, he did mention that. How'd your meeting go with him this morning?'

'Fine. He wants me to shadow you.' Renee had imparted the news through gritted teeth, almost hoping Roger wouldn't hear, thinking there may still be a way to wiggle out of the arrangement. 'Just for a few days, I think.'

Roger had paused, tilted his head to one side and studied her a moment. His blue eyes were kind.

He knows, Renee had thought suddenly. He knows that I am finding this hard.

Perhaps she had misjudged him – he was better at reading people than she thought.

'Coolio.'

Renee had cringed. Maybe not.

'I thought you were a detective in the city. I should be shadowing you!' No shit. 'Gee whiz, now I'm a bit nervous.'

After lunch, Stacey had gone back to the office and Roger had taken her ten minutes' west of town to set up the speed camera on the Sturt Highway, as per Mulligan's instructions. They'd parked alongside the road in long dry grass, next to a towering dead gum, its skeletal remains shiny grey against a perfect blue backdrop.

'So, tell me more about this drug problem. Who's running the show?' Renee had asked, lowering her binoculars to look across at Roger.

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‘There’s a bloke here you’re probably going to wish you never heard of.’

Renee had smiled gently, as though Roger were a child, and nodded for him to proceed. She’d been a cop in uniform in the city for eight years! Did they think she was a snowflake?

‘His name’s William Gawlor. Worm. And as the name suggests, he’s a real low-life. He’s behind most of it, although there’s probably a few randoms that swing through as well.’

‘Tell me more about Worm.’ Renee vaguely recalled hearing about him growing up, but it was always whispers and stories cut short with that wide-eyed ‘you know’ look between the adults. She’d heard her mum and a few other adults talking about him when she was a teenager but never thought too much of it back then. Looking back now as an adult, she wondered if that was why her mum had always been so worried about her going out late at night. She had spotted a family of kangaroos resting under the skeleton tree, flicking the flies away with their ears.

‘Spent a bit of time behind bars years ago, but he’s back on it now. We just can’t get enough on him. Nothin sticks.’

‘He lives in town?’

‘Yeah, over behind the squash courts. Trish tells me that she sees him there from time to time chatting with the young ones.’ Roger’s face had reddened. ‘I’ll smash him if he ever goes near my daughter.’

Renee had turned to look at him. She couldn’t imagine him smashing anyone.

Roger had met her gaze briefly, lifted his chin and turned to looked out of the window.

Huh. Like she thought, he could read people.

A semi-trailer had approached, rattling in the distance, and Renee

picked up her binoculars again. 'Look at this bastard coming along.'

Roger had raised the speed camera and held it as the long snake of the truck approached, its roar startling the roos, one of them bounding out onto the road. The monstrosity rushed past, thumping into the roo, sending its body skidding along the roadside, tail and legs bumping and rolling. Renee had closed her eyes.

'140 kilometres,' Roger had said, checking the display. 'Fuckin lunatic.'

That was yesterday. Now Renee sat in the empty office, wondering how the hell she was going to remain sane in the company of Stacey, Roger and Mulligan by day and her mother by night, when the phone on the desk opposite her started to ring.

'Goorungah Police Station, how may I help you?' she asked, standing at Stacey's desk to take the call.

'Yes, hello?' A woman's frantic voice came through the receiver. 'You need to come quickly. I ...' The caller sucked in her breath, as though she was struggling to speak.

Renee picked up a notepad and pen. 'Calm down. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly.'

'I found a woman,' the caller wailed. 'A body. Hm. I don't know. Very badly hurt. Maybe she's dead. I don't know. Ah – down by the creek. Please come quickly.'

Renee pressed the phone closer to her ear. 'I'm sorry, ma'am. Can you please repeat that?'

'A woman's body. It's all bloody. She wasn't moving. I don't know if she's alive. Down by the creek.' Renee thought she recognised the caller's voice. There was something familiar about the tone – slightly pompous despite the breathlessness.

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‘You found a woman? Just now?’

‘Yes, what are you doing? Hurry up and come!’ The woman was starting to cry. ‘Whoever did it might still be out there.’

‘I’m on my way, ma’am. Where are you now?’

‘17 Fletchers Drive. Hurry.’ Renee pictured the house in her mind. It was the one at the end of the road along the creek. She had run past it a few times on previous visits, but it wasn’t part of her more recent route.

‘Ma’am, I’m on my way. Are you by yourself?’

‘Yes.’

‘I need you to lock all the doors and stay inside. I’ll be there right away.’

Renee ran down the corridor and out the back to the parking lot. Still no one else had arrived. The navy-blue sedan blinked twice as she pressed the open button on her key. Given she had been the last person to drive it after patrolling with Roger the day before, the air conditioning was off and the rear-view mirror was in place. She turned the key in the ignition, wound down the windows and sped through town, grabbing the radio to call an ambulance – the operator assured her they would be out immediately – then to call Mulligan. No response. She remembered he had a medical appointment that morning.

‘Sarge, I’ve got a call-out to Fletchers Drive. A woman’s called in. Says she’s found a woman by the creek, a body. Maybe deceased. I’m going now. Meet me there. Number seventeen – house at the end.’