

ONE

The wind howled between the buildings like a creature from an arctic nightmare as Lauren peered into the wreck, then turned to the cop beside her. ‘He’s dead.’

The cop gestured to the rescue squad. They’d all known, of course; when half the man’s head was missing it didn’t take a medical expert to figure it out. But waiting for a paramedic’s say-so was just one way in which the services worked together, and Lauren liked it like that. This sense of professional courtesy was the same reason why she didn’t get back into the ambulance but stayed out in the cold with the fire officers – who kept their hoses charged in case the crashed car burst into flames – and the general duties cops who were there to guide the patchy 2am traffic past the scene.

Lauren shifted from foot to foot, chin tucked inside her parka and hands deep in her pockets. Sydney winters weren’t that bad really, but tonight that wind worked its way down her neck and up

her trouser legs and eventually blew straight through her as if she wasn't even there. She left the lee of the ambulance and tried the shelter of the police rescue vehicle, then finally stood right up close to the fire truck, which was putting out heat from its pump-running engine.

Still, she ached from shivering by the time the police lifted the dead driver out onto the body bag and the government contractor's white van pulled into view. Freed from the possible need to transport the body, she said a quick goodbye and floored the ambulance over to Gilly's all-night café on Broadway.

With the precious coffee steaming in the holder between the seats and the heater whirring at top speed under the dash, she then backstreeted her way over to stand-by at Paddington station. This was the lot of the officer working single for the shift – you were prime choice if a body ever had to be transported and you got sent all over to fill in spaces when crews were busy. She didn't mind being one-out; it was better than working with some officer who was all pissed off about being dragged in from the western suburbs. Best of all, of course, was working with Joe Vandermeer, her shift partner for the last two years, but he'd called in sick tonight.

She kept the wheel straight with her knee for a moment so she could press her hands to the heater vents. With a bit of luck she'd get to stay at Paddo for a while, dozing in the warmth of the station, though the way the radio had been going off she doubted–

A man bolted from an alley on her left and she

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grabbed for the wheel and hit the brakes. A thought flashed through her head – *this won't look good coming so soon after the accident with the bus, hitting a pedestrian, oh Jesus stop stop STOP* – as the weight and momentum of the ambulance kept it moving forward, but then the man was out of the way and running down the street. With her stomach at the back of her throat and the smell of spilled coffee in the air, Lauren hit the button to drop the window and yell at him, but then a second man shot from the alley entrance. He skidded into the gutter and fell over.

'Pair of idiots,' Lauren said, shaky from the fright. Hazard lights blinked as a car was unlocked down the street and the first man leapt inside. He took off, no lights. Lauren flicked on her high beams but couldn't make out the numberplate. The second man struggled to his feet and onto the footpath. Lauren assessed his stance and actions, then picked up the microphone. 'Thirty-four.'

'Thirty-four, go ahead,' Control said.

'I'm in Smithy's Lane in Surry Hills, needing back-up, please. Looks like I have a patient: a male with shoulder injury.'

'Don't know when I'll have somebody free,' Control said. 'I'll send the boys in blue your way in the meantime.'

'Appreciate it. I think this guy was up to no good,' Lauren said.

She drove to the side of the road, her stomach taking its time to settle. The young man sank back against the wall, his face contorted and his right arm clutched to his side. She pulled on gloves then got

out with the torch in one hand and portable radio in the other. 'You okay?'

He was crying. She saw he was more a boy than a man. 'Don't call the coppers.'

'They might turn up.'

'Shit.' He pushed off the wall and started to stumble away.

'You need your shoulder checked,' she said. 'It looks dislocated, and it can keep popping out if you don't get it treated properly.'

'It does it all the time.'

She followed him. 'Let me help you.'

He muttered something she didn't catch. She glanced around for her back-up. 'What's the problem?' she said. 'Don't want to get busted for chasing that guy? You trying to mug him or something?'

'I wasn't chasing him,' he said. 'We were running away.'

'From what?'

He nodded back towards the alley. 'I'm not getting involved.'

He increased the pace of his shuffle. Lauren watched him go. To try to physically stop him was asking for a smack in the head. He was of sound mind, more or less; he could refuse treatment if that was what he wanted.

She went back to the alley. It was dark and the light from her torch was a narrow beam. She flashed it along the walls then on the ground, and spotted a man lying on the asphalt.

She played the beam over the motionless body. There was blood on his head. She glanced up and

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down the street but there was no sign of the cops. The area was empty, the glow of the orange streetlights cold and alien. She shivered in her parka. If she'd taken the body from the prang she'd be sitting in the morgue having a cuppa now instead of worrying about her safety in some piss-stinky alley. She shone the torch around the alley again, then started in.

Close up she saw two things: she knew who he was, and he was dead. Stewart Blake was a former schoolteacher, a convicted paedophile and murderer of a twelve-year-old girl, and his photo had been all over the news since his recent release from jail. Now his mouth hung open, and his pupils were fixed and dilated. The back and left side of his head were beaten in and dark blood pooled around him. Somebody had taken their revenge.

Lauren crouched for a token pulse check, then heard a slight noise further down the alley.

She whipped the torch beam around that way. The alley was silent. Cat, passer-by, killer, or another victim, not yet dead? Lauren crept along the cracked asphalt, torch out in front as if it could protect her.

The alley turned a corner. Lauren hesitated between a broken streetlight and the wall and shone her torch into the darkness. On her right a skip bin overflowed with builder's rubble, and beyond that a dented car with no windows, no wheels and no numberplate was up on broken concrete blocks. She listened, shining the light along the car's chassis, squinting at the dark shape that seemed to be hunkered down beyond it, then a groan from close by made her skin prickle.

She edged along the skip. The torch beam lit up two blood-spattered sneakers, then jeaned legs. When she peered around the corner of the skip she saw a man slumped against the wall, his hands clutching his chest. His eyes were squeezed shut against the torchlight but she recognised him just the same.

‘Thomas?’ Her stomach went into freefall.
‘Thomas?’

He moaned.

She kicked his shoe. ‘Open your eyes.’

‘Lauren?’ Like he didn’t know it was her. He cracked one eye open. ‘Help me.’

His brown hair was shorter than when she’d last seen him, five years ago, but his Austrian accent was as strong as ever. There were specks and smears of blood on his hands but none on the shirt he was grabbing. ‘Open your eyes,’ she said again.

‘Pain.’

‘Bullshit.’

He grimaced. His forehead was shiny with sweat.
‘Chest pain.’

In the distance a siren wailed.

His fingers pulled at the cloth of his blue shirt.
‘Can’t breathe.’

‘Get up.’

‘Heavy weight here.’ He clenched a fist over the centre of his chest.

Was it Lauren’s imagination or was he going pale? And it was a cold night to be so sweaty. He was describing all the right symptoms for cardiac pain.

‘Man chased me.’ Thomas rubbed the side of his jaw. ‘Pain here too now.’

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Lauren was torn. He really did seem to be in pain, and she should treat that, but the Thomas Werner she knew was not to be trusted.

‘Once the police get here I’ll help you,’ she said. ‘Okay?’

But his head dropped forward onto his chest and his arms slipped to his sides. She stared at his chest. He wasn’t breathing.

She waited. If he didn’t take a breath for three minutes, she’d know he wasn’t faking.

But if he really was in arrest, each passing minute killed brain cells. Whatever he’d done here, she wanted him to face the consequences. She didn’t want him dying and getting out of it.

She kicked him in the knee with the toe of her boot, then kicked him again, harder. He didn’t move. She swore under her breath, and glanced back at the street where the ambulance was parked, where all her gear was. A fleeting thought suggested she just leave him there – her and Kristi’s and Felise’s lives would be so much the better for him being dead – but she knew what she had to do: confirm the cardiac arrest, call for back-up while running back to the truck and grabbing the defib and drug box and Oxy-Viva, then get back here and start saving the bastard.

She put the torch and portable radio down, squatted beside him and reached for his carotid pulse.

His arms came up and her heart jumped and her mind screamed *I knew it!* but there was no time to scramble away. He knocked her onto her back and threw himself on top of her. He wrenched a handful

of her shirt and parka up under her throat, forcing her chin back, pressing into her neck. 'Go,' he said.

What?

She couldn't breathe or speak. She pushed at his shoulders but he only leaned further into her. She felt her ribs bending under his weight.

'Listen.'

His fist was so hard up against her chin she couldn't even nod. His face and the night behind it and the wall were disappearing in a swarm of white spots.

'You say one word of this and you and Kristi and the kid are in for it. Nod if you understand.'

He loosened his grip a little and she sucked in the cold night air and nodded.

'Even if they lock me up, I have contacts everywhere,' he said in her ear. 'I will get you.'

She could smell his sweat and the blood on his hands. She nodded again. He got off her, then grabbed her shoulders and roughly rolled her over. He pressed her face against the asphalt, his hand spanning the back of her head. 'Don't move.'

He gave her head a final shove then was gone. She heard his feet slap away down the alley. She lay spread-eagled, fighting back tears, the pounding of her heart seeming to reverberate off the asphalt, and her mouth full of the dull, sour taste of anger and hatred and self-reproach.

The siren drew nearer.

If the police found her crying, they'd know something had happened. She struggled onto her hands and knees, then hauled herself up against the skip and

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hung onto the lip, breathing the odours of cut wood and broken plasterboard. She looked down the alley but it was empty. The torch lay on the ground against the wall, its beam shining uselessly under the skip, and she grabbed it and turned it to the abandoned car. Had there really been something – someone – there? Was that who Thomas had said ‘Go’ to? There was nothing there now.

The siren was close. Lauren picked up the radio and stumbled back along the alley. She stuck the torch under her arm and ripped off her gloves, stuffing them into her pocket. She touched her face, feeling for grazes that might make the police wonder. Her cheek was tender but felt intact, not even bruised enough to be noticed. She wiped her eyes on her wrist then shakily shone the light down onto her parka and trousers, brushing off dirt and sawdust. There were no rips, and any blood from Thomas’s hands was invisible on the dark navy fabric. She couldn’t see her shirt collar, but tucked it well down under the parka, then pulled the zip right up to her chin in case any bruising started to emerge on her neck.

The street at the end of the alley was lit with red and blue flashes, and a police car drove into view, its spotlight shining into the alley and momentarily blinding her. She flashed her torch off and on a couple of times, and walked back past the body without looking at it.

‘Thirty-four,’ she said into her radio.

‘Go ahead, Thirty-four,’ Control said.

‘Cancel that ambulance back-up.’ She took

a breath and tried to steady her voice. 'I have one patient code four. Police are on scene now.'

'Copy, Thirty-four. Call me when you're clear.'

She met the officers in the alley's entrance. She knew both by sight but not by name. They were young and blond.

'Body for you.' She was trembling. She shoved her damp hands into the back of her belt for support.

'You okay?'

He knows. But of course he didn't, couldn't. Lauren cleared her throat. 'The dead guy's Stewart Blake.'

'The child-killer?'

She nodded. The shakes were going, a little. This was how to do it. Concentrate on something else. Sooner or later they would ask if she'd seen anything, anyone. It would be okay. Tell the truth, just not the whole truth.

She pointed into the alley with her thumb, and they walked together, the cops with the barrels of their four-cell Maglite torches resting on their shoulders.

At the body the officers stared at the face.

'It's him all right,' the shorter cop said.

'No great loss,' his mate said, shining his torch beam straight into the dead eyes.

'No loss at all.'

The taller cop shone his torch around and down the alley. 'See anything?'

'Two guys ran out, that's why I stopped,' Lauren said. 'Young one, a prostitute by the look, ran down the street, and an older one jumped in a car and took off.'

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‘See the model, the plates?’

She shook her head.

‘Hang around for the Ds, give a description of the men?’

She stuck her hands in her pockets. ‘Sure.’

The officer looked at his shorter partner who was still staring at the body. ‘Call it in, would ya?’

Lauren pressed her back against the ambulance while the police set up around the crime scene. She finished what was left of her coffee but kept the empty cup in her hand, something to hold onto. Her throat was sore but she’d climbed into the ambulance and checked her face and neck in the mirror, on the pretext of getting something out of her eye, and she knew she looked okay.

Five detectives, recognisable by their civilian clothes, stood on the footpath talking, then one came her way. ‘Lauren, is it? What station’re you at?’

She nodded. ‘Lauren Yates, from The Rocks.’

The man scribbled in a notebook. ‘I’m Detective Lance Fredriks. The officers said you saw two men running away?’

Lauren told the story. The detective’s eyes never left her and she felt self-conscious about her words and the way they came out of her mouth. Did lies look different from the truth? When she described the young man as a little taller than her, about twenty, with dark hair and a limp, could the detective spot the misdirection? The last thing she wanted was for the young man to be found, because he might have

seen Thomas or the dark shape, and then the police would come back to her with their eyes and their questions once more.

The other man who'd run out of the alley was easier; she said what she'd seen, which was close to nothing. Older, heavier, with a car. No way he'd be found, or come forward.

'You saw nothing else?'

'Not a thing,' she said, crumpling the cup in her hand.

The rest was the usual: come to the station in the morning for the formal statement; I'll be in touch if there's anything else. Lauren nodded and smiled.

'Thanks,' the detective said.

'No worries.'

Five months later, on a bright morning in early summer, the Coroner declared Stewart Blake's death a homicide carried out by persons unknown. The unsolved case would be relegated to a file drawer somewhere, to be taken out by an officer now and again, the pages flipped through, the cover signed and dated, then shoved back into the dark once more.

Her uniform damp with sweat, Lauren walked from the Glebe Coroner's Court past the media crews. She wanted to forget the whole thing, forget the way that one lie led to another, then another, and next thing you were holding the Bible and swearing and hoping like hell you could remember the notes you'd scribbled on the Gilly's paper serviette as soon as you'd left the scene about how you'd described the

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men you saw, because lies were harder to remember than truth. She'd studied those words for half an hour that morning then burned the paper in the bathroom, flushing the charred remnant and opening the window afterwards and watching the smoke blow out.

Felise had come in, nose wrinkled. 'Max's dad smokes in the bathroom too.'

'I wasn't smoking,' Lauren had said, reaching for the brush, smoothing it over the thin silky hair on Felise's narrow head. 'I think the smoke came in from outside. Somebody must have a fire in their garden.'

Felise wanted to climb onto the toilet to look. They'd stood there, Felise's thin hot arm around Lauren's neck, her breath warm against her cheek. Lauren had watched her niece's wide blue eyes move as her gaze roamed the neighbourhood. 'What can you see?' she'd said.

'The whole wide world.'

Lauren had hugged her close.

How could Thomas even contemplate hurting her?

How could he call her 'the kid', as if she was just *some kid*, and not the centre of the world?

She could almost feel the slight body in her arms again now as she stood at the lights, almost hear Felise's giggles over the noise of the traffic rushing along Parramatta Road.

The kid.

The light turned green and she strode across the street, sure of herself again.

★

Detective Ella Marconi turned to the next page in the print-out and rested her forehead in her hand. Across the room Detective Murray Shakespeare was fiddling with the aerial of an ancient radio he'd dug up from somewhere, and the staticky whine of its poor reception made Ella grit her teeth.

Murray swung the aerial in a wide arc. 'Stupid thing.'

'Do we really need music?'

'Sit in here all day reading these lists, drive anyone nuts.' There was a quick blat of sound and he stopped the aerial short, feeling for the spot on the airwaves.

Ella tried to focus on the page before her. Her eyes blurred and the numbers ran into each other. She felt surrounded, leaned in upon, by the stacks of print-outs looming on the desk beside her. Of all the things she'd imagined she'd get to do in the Homicide Squad, searching for three specific phone numbers in a list of thousands had been strangely missing.

'—*Eagers think he's doing?*' a voice shouted from the radio and Murray fumbled for the volume. '*Zero tolerance is what's needed in this country, not the namby-pamby softly-softly approach. Next thing, Eagers and his cronies in State parliament will be offering to hold the hands of the criminals, offering them counselling to help them deal with the traumatic experiences they had as dealers.*'

'We might need something to listen to but that's not it,' Ella said. 'The Family Man's rantings are more than I can stand.'

But Murray held the aerial perfectly still.

'*This drug amnesty will do nothing for our country's*

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youth,' the voice barked. *'All it does is get rid of some higher dealers for long enough for the ambitious small-timers, the ones who've just been given immunity from prosecution, to move up the ladder and take their places.'*

'Turn it off,' Ella said.

Murray turned the volume down till the words became indistinct. 'He's got a point.'

'I think it's a good idea,' Ella said.

'You don't think he's right about the ambitious small-time dealer?'

'Better that we do something than nothing.'

'Not if it makes the situation worse,' Murray said.

'How can it be worse? Look what's happened in just the last few months with ice. If we can get information on some of the importers, find out how they're getting it into the country, there's not only some bad guys locked up but also some channels they can no longer use.'

Murray shook his head. 'We need to lock them all up, big or small. Freely giving people immunity like this is just wrong. It's like waving the big white flag: "Do what you want – we don't care."'

'As if getting the small guys off the street won't then allow even smaller ones to come up,' Ella said. 'At least this way we strike some bigger blows.'

Murray switched the radio off and sat down. Ella turned to the next page of numbers and bent closer to it, but still her concentration wandered. The bustling Homicide office was three floors down and they were stuck up here in a file room dusty with disuse. Their boss, Detective Sergeant Kirk Kuiper,

had said he'd call if he needed them. She leaned over and picked up the phone, listened to the dial tone, and put the handset down. Murray watched, then sighed.

They took a break twenty minutes later. Murray stood staring out the window, his coffee steaming the glass. Ella got out her mobile and dialled Detective Dennis Orchard. They'd trained together at Newtown, centuries ago it felt like, then worked at Hunters Hill while dreaming of Homicide. Dennis got his transfer a few years ago, leaving her pissed off and certain that her application was being stonewalled by an evil cabal working with then-Assistant Commissioner Frank Shakespeare, who she'd once inadvertently told to get the fuck out of her crime scene. (Not that she'd ever admit to Murray the hold she believed his father had over her career.) But earlier in the year Dennis had brought her in to work the Phillips case with him, and it had finally felt like the first step in the right direction.

The bad thing was that it could also mean a quick slide backwards.

'No news?' she said when Dennis answered.

'They'll call you before they call me,' he said.

'Sometimes my reception's crap up here.'

'Oh sure,' he said, a smile in his voice. 'I'll send a carrier pigeon if they call me first and I can't reach you, okay?'

She put the phone away. Murray was looking at her. She shook her head.

She'd run through the incident in her mind a thousand times, a thousand times a thousand, seeing

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the kidnapper outlined against the background of sky and trees, gun aimed at Chris and Sophie Phillips who were curled up together on the grass. Ella remembered her sprint across the slope, her own gun out. Her voice shouting 'Drop it! Drop it!' and then the moment of knowing she had no choice, the kidnapper was about to shoot, and she'd held her breath and pulled the trigger. There was the noise, the recoil, and the sight of the kidnapper falling to the ground. And then she'd reached the couple, sobbing with their arms around each other, and the beautiful, perfect and safe little child between them.

She rubbed her forehead, shielding the dampness in her eyes in case Murray was looking.

She'd thought about that child, Lachlan Phillips, a lot, and talked about the case at length with Dennis, and read her copy of the statement she'd given to the Critical Incident Team detectives so often the pages were soft and creased. She always came up with the belief that she was one hundred per cent justified in the shooting, but still couldn't be sure the Team's verdict would go her way. Even with the broom of Strike Force Gold having swept more than a few officers out of the job, clearing sufficient space in the various squads for fresh blood – including her and Murray – to step into temporary secondments, she knew that a poor report from the Team would see her shipped straight back to the suburbs. Even an average report, combined with an average performance during her secondment, could see her gone.

What she needed was a great case. Something open and shut – something with clearly defined

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good and bad guys, strong solid witnesses, textbook evidence and a good hearty sentence at the end. Something she could get stuck into, proving that she did have skills, that she knew how to work a case and was worthy of a permanent spot.

She stared at the phone.

TWO

Lauren caught the bus from the Coroner's Court through the city to The Rocks and walked up the top end of George Street to the ambulance station. The roller door was up and her work partner, Joe Vandermeer, stood on the footpath talking to a group of tourists. Laughter rose as she neared them. Joe posed, smiling, by the ambulance and two of the group took pictures. They thanked him in Scottish accents before wandering off.

Joe smiled at Lauren. 'Look at you. New boots, new belt, new tie.'

'Got to be spiffy on court day.' She yanked the tie off.

'How'd it go?'

'Fine,' she said. 'Got to change my shirt though.'

'Court always makes me sweaty too.' He followed her inside. 'They sent a guy over from Randwick but he went home sick about half an hour ago,' he said through the locker room door.

Lauren threw her grimy shirt into her locker and

pulled on a fresh crisp one. She did up the buttons, avoiding herself in the mirror. 'Were you busy?'

'Nah. Nothing interesting either.'

She pushed open the door. 'Good. I don't want you running round doing fun things without me.'

He grinned at her. 'I told Control that. I said he had to hold the good stuff for this afternoon.'

The phone rang. Joe lunged for it. 'Rocks, Joe.' He bent over a scrap of paper. 'Okay, yep, gotcha. Ta.' He put down the phone and gave Lauren a double thumbs up. 'Man's crying in Woolloomooloo.'

'What man?'

'Some man,' he said. 'I don't know. The neighbour called it in, said she can hear this guy through the wall, crying.'

'Call this good stuff?' Lauren grabbed her bag and the keys and followed Joe to the ambulance. 'They ever think to knock on the door, ask him if he's okay?'

'They call, we haul, that's all.' Joe got into the passenger side.

'It's crap.' Lauren slammed her door. 'Imagine this guy's face when we turn up. I vote that after we talk to him, we talk to this neighbour.'

She started the engine and drove out of the station. Joe hit the remote to close the roller door. Lauren turned on the lights and siren and pushed into the traffic on George Street.

'I don't know if it's that urgent,' Joe said.

'They call it, I floor it, that's all.'

'That doesn't rhyme,' Joe said. 'Are you okay?'

'Because I can't rhyme?' She punched the horn to

change the siren from wail to yelp as she approached a red light.

‘You’re all antsy.’ He looked out at the traffic. ‘Clear this side.’

Lauren accelerated through. ‘Court.’

‘I know what you mean,’ he said. ‘Whenever I’m up there in that box I feel like I’m the one in trouble. I feel I have to be so careful with my words, that the lawyers are waiting for me to make a mistake and then they’ll get me.’ His hands seized and mock-strangled his own throat.

‘The families of the dead guy’s victims were there,’ Lauren said.

‘Oh.’ Joe dropped his hands. ‘You’re clear this side.’

Lauren had watched the faces of the people in the courtroom as she described how she’d found Blake’s body. There was one woman, about the same age as Lauren, whose right eye twitched while Lauren told how she’d checked for a pulse, as if she couldn’t imagine touching the man’s flesh herself. Or maybe she could, and thought about more than just touching it. Maybe she imagined the satisfaction of bringing down the unrecovered blunt object, of feeling the skull crack and sink deeper with each wet blow.

The fact that so many of the victims had come to court more than twenty years after Blake had assaulted them was evidence of his effect on their lives. Thinking about that, and seeing that woman’s twitch and the lined faces of the older people that were probably the victims’ parents, had made her feel that Thomas had done something of a community service. She’d

read somewhere that people like Blake could not be rehabilitated. Whether or not he deserved to die, children deserved protection. Nobody could argue with that.

‘Bus,’ Joe said.

‘I can see it.’

She wondered, though, why Thomas had done it. He hadn’t grown up here, couldn’t have been a victim of Blake’s.

‘Clear this side,’ Joe said.

Thomas and Kristi had been together almost a year, and Lauren had been glad when he disappeared soon after the car accident. He’d eventually written from Austria to say he’d been deported for overstaying his visa, how that meant he couldn’t come out again, he was so sorry, but by then Kristi had been clean for a couple of months and able to recognise their relationship for the disaster it had been. She’d sat in the neonatal ward cradling Felise and shaking her head over the man who wanted nothing to do with his daughter. It was no surprise to Lauren. Kristi, when pregnant and out of her head, had been foggy to say the least, so hadn’t noticed how Thomas always changed the subject when the topic of the baby came up, how he looked at her growing belly with distaste. Lauren, however, had seen, and remembered, and stewed.

‘Next left,’ Joe said. ‘Number four ten, flat seven.’

She had to put it all behind her now, stop thinking about it. The case was over, if not entirely closed; the cops didn’t give two hoots who’d done it, and they had enough work without spending more time

looking; and Thomas had probably been back in Austria for months anyway. She'd protected her sister and that was all that mattered. After losing Brendan nine years ago, she knew that for the rest of her life she'd do whatever was necessary to keep Kristi safe from harm. Everything was fine. She and Kristi and Felise were free and clear.

She wriggled back in the seat a little, sat up straighter. 'Four ten?'

'Yep. There it is.' Joe pointed, and Lauren switched the lights and siren off and parked in a no standing zone.

They met at the ambulance's side door, pulling out equipment. 'Bets?' Lauren said.

'Break-up with his girlfriend.' Joe slung the Oxy-Viva over his shoulder.

Lauren twisted the portable radio into its clip on her belt. 'I'm going with the utter hopelessness of life.'

Joe laughed and started up the stairs. Lauren followed, the monitor and drug box stretching her arms from their sockets. 'Coffee at Gilly's says I'm right.'

Joe reached the third-floor landing and knocked on the door. Afternoon sunlight streamed in the landing window and made the delicate hairs on the back of his neck glow. Lauren, looking up at him and climbing the last few steps to where he stood ready to knock again, felt a rush of happiness.

'Hello?' The voice was muffled by the closed door.

'Ambulance,' Joe called. 'Is everything okay?'

'I'm stuck.'

‘On the floor?’

There was no answer. Joe looked at Lauren. She pulled a face, the radar in the depths of her brain starting to ping. Joe leaned close to the door. ‘You there?’

‘It’s my head.’

The voice sounded like the speaker had changed position in the flat. Lauren whispered, ‘Let’s go back down.’

But Joe was reaching for the door handle. ‘He’s confused. Probably fallen, got himself a head injury.’ He raised his voice. ‘Sir? Do you need some help?’

Lauren looked at the other doors on the landing. ‘I’ll get Control to ring the caller back, see if they know anything about him.’ She put down the monitor and drug box and raised the portable radio. ‘Thirty-four.’

‘Thirty-four, go ahead,’ Control answered.

Joe opened the door and in a flash a man lunged out and grabbed him. Lauren saw the blade of the knife, the wild red eyes and the stubbled chin, caught the smell of his unwashed body.

‘Don’t,’ the man said, looking at her. She saw his decayed teeth when he spoke. *An ice addict.*

She moved slowly, raising her other hand to take the radio aerial between two fingers, showing him she wasn’t going to transmit. Before releasing the body of the radio she slid her hand along it and flicked the volume to zero. Control would call her again in a minute or so and she didn’t want the man to hear. If he made her say that everything was fine, forget she called, no help would come their way for

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an hour or more. If Control got no reply, they would realise something was up and send help.

Or she could throw it, she could throw it really hard and startle him.

Her eyes met Joe's and read the silent message there. Joe was ex-Navy, trained in who knew what. She would do what he said. She lowered the radio to the floor beside the equipment, the sweat on her fingers making the aerial slippery.

'Come here,' the man said.

She walked slowly, shooting a glance at the closed door of the next flat. Maybe somebody would look out of the peephole and see what was going on. Maybe the person who'd called them – people loved to watch paramedics doing stuff. Or maybe somebody would trip over all the gear left on the stairs and realise something was wrong.

The man backed into his flat, dragging Joe with him. The knife pressed into Joe's neck. Lauren could see where it obstructed his jugular, making the vein bulge above the blade. It made her own throat and neck sore to see it, a physical reminder of Thomas's attack in the alley. She was shaking.

'Now,' the man snapped.

Joe's eyes flicked madly from Lauren down the stairs, back to Lauren, back down the stairs. She shook her head slightly. They had a better chance if they stayed together. If she ran for it, who knew what the man might do to him?

She stepped inside the flat.

'Shut the door.'

She did as he said.

‘Lock it.’

There was no way to pretend to lock the door and leave easy access for the police who would hopefully arrive soon. She turned the deadlock. At least the door itself felt flimsy.

The man adjusted his grip around Joe’s neck. Joe’s face was turning red and he made calming motions with his hands down by his sides. Lauren drew in a shaky breath.

‘What’s your name?’ she said.

‘That’s privileged,’ the man snapped. He wore blue football shorts and a faded Nirvana T-shirt. She could smell the rot on his breath.

‘I’m Lauren and that’s Joe.’

‘Shut up.’

She glanced around the small room without turning her head. The floor was covered with cracked and dirty linoleum. The only furniture was a pair of blue plastic milk crates. Aluminium foil was taped over the glass of the windows, blocking the alien death rays or mind-reading impulses or whatever he was fixated on. All but one window were closed. Lauren could hear the traffic on the street below through the small gap at the bottom of the open one.

A tiny kitchen area opened off the far end of the room, empty takeaway containers covering the bench and spilling onto the floor. To her left was another doorway, leading to a bedroom and bathroom she guessed. The place stank of rotting food and blocked drains.

She met Joe’s eyes again. The man’s arm was high up under his chin and it was clear he couldn’t speak.

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Lauren swallowed. 'Did the voices tell you to do this?'

'Voices.' The man hauled Joe backwards across the room to the wall and pressed against it.

'I'm just wondering why you're doing this,' Lauren said. 'What you want us to do.'

The man's red eyes flicked about the room. 'Are you with them?'

'Joe and I are from the ambulance service,' Lauren said. 'We're here to help you.'

'How did you get the message? Did it come down from them?'

'Your neighbour rang us on the telephone.'

The man's eyes blazed. 'God will get you, you know.'

'Why don't you let Joe go?' Lauren said.

Somewhere outside a siren wailed. The man seemed to grow another ten centimetres at the sound. 'Devils!'

This was bad. You couldn't reason with a person who'd lost touch so completely with logic and reality.

Lauren wished Joe was free and they could talk about what to do. His face above the man's arm was turning purplish. He was blinking at Lauren. Some kind of code? Or just dry eyes?

The siren grew fainter and disappeared in the noise of the city.

'Please let Joe go,' she said again. 'Let him go, and we'll just walk out the door and leave you alone.'

The man clacked his teeth together and peered towards the window.

Lauren took half a step forward. 'If you need to

look out there, you can't do it while holding onto Joe.'

The man appeared to think about this. He took his arm from Joe's neck and Lauren saw the knife had cut the skin. Blood trickled down onto the collar of his crisp white shirt. The man stepped to one side, the point of the knife at Joe's chest. 'Take off your shirt. Let me see the wires.'

'There are no wires.' Joe's voice was croaky. He cleared his throat.

'Let me see!'

Joe started unbuttoning.

'You too,' the man said to Lauren. When she hesitated he faked a stab at Joe and she held up her hands then grasped her buttons.

'See?' Joe said. 'No wires.'

'Sit down. There. Back to back.'

In her bra and uniform trousers Lauren sat on the cracked lino. The man grabbed a wide roll of silver gaffer tape and bound their hands behind them, then wrapped the tape around both their bodies. His proximity made her skin crawl, and she smelled his acrid sweat. Her heart kicked harder in her chest and the tape pulled at her skin. Drops of nervous sweat ran down her sides and she wondered how much it would take to defeat the tape's stickiness.

The man went to the window and peered out.

Joe's back was warm and damp against Lauren's. 'You okay?' he whispered.

The man looked around. She pressed against Joe and didn't speak. When the man turned his back she whispered, 'What are we going to do?'

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'You should've run away.'

She moved her shoulder blades against him in an emphatic *no*.

'Devils!' the man shouted out the window.

That should get some attention, Lauren thought.

'Devils, all of you!'

That's the way. You tell them!

She felt Joe's fingers slip inside the waistband of her trousers, then out again. She sat still. What was he doing? He tugged at something, then she felt her new belt begin to turn around her body. He was pulling it through the loops. She shifted her weight to help the buckle through each one, while watching the man ducking and weaving by the window. He looked like he was avoiding being shot. Aliens and their laser beams.

Joe stopped pulling on her belt. She felt it tighten for a second then go slack. He'd undone the buckle. His hands twisted and worked between their backs. He pressed the buckle into her hands and she grasped it, feeling pressure against it, realising he was trying to cut through the tape around his wrists with the buckle's tongue. She felt the turning of his forearms against hers, felt the skin becoming slicker with the sweat of his efforts.

The man pulled a milk crate to the window and hunched down onto it, staring outside. Lauren hoped he'd forgotten about them. Maybe they'd be free before he remembered.

She wondered what time it was, how long it'd been since she'd called Control. Surely they would have someone on their way to check on them by

now, once they realised they couldn't raise her on the air. Surely this would not be the place of their deaths. But it was too easy to make a mental amalgam of the murder scenes she'd been to – the slumped bodies, the cut throats, the finger marks in the blood, proof of the final struggle.

Joe's back towered over hers, and when she leaned her head back it rested at the nape of his neck. She only did it for a second before realising it would interfere with his arm movements, but was aware even in that short period of time that they fitted together like they were moulded.

The man stood up. 'Devils!' he gasped, looking down at something in the street. The cops?

Lauren felt Joe work faster. The heat between their backs was intense. She could feel sweat beading on her face. She thought of the long blade of the man's knife. A patient had once described how it felt to be stabbed, how you felt a blow like a punch rather than the sharp pain of the knife going in and out.

The man was muttering, making thrusting movements with the knife. Lauren tried to swallow. Her mouth and throat were dry. The air was hot to breathe. She and Joe didn't deserve this. They only wanted to help. She wasn't a religious person, and she didn't believe in karma, but she wondered now if being stuck here with this psycho was what she got for letting Thomas go free then lying about it in court.

No. She wouldn't think that way. She *knew* life didn't work that way. How many good people had she seen hurt or killed just from being in the wrong place

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at the wrong time? What about drink-drivers (*like Kristi* – but she shied away from that thought) – how many had she seen stumbling out of wrecks without a scratch on them while the family coming the other way lay screaming in their mashed car? She needed no more proof than that to understand that they were here simply because they happened to be on duty and nearby when somebody happened to call. She shut her eyes. *They call, we fall. That's all.*

A siren sounded a short half-wail outside. Lauren pictured a cop making somebody move their damned car. How would this work? Cops kick the door down and stream on in? She strained for sounds of bodies massing in the stairwell, the soft shuffle of black boots and body armour, the smell of leather belts and gun oil and rescue.

The man's attention was caught by something across the street, higher than them. He crouched, then darted to the side, then slammed the foil-covered window shut. He pressed against the wall facing them, looking at the ceiling and muttering. Lauren hoped he'd spotted police across the street, spying from a window to see what was happening. She hoped they'd seen her and Joe strapped to each other on the floor, knew where in the room they were, how far away the man was, at that moment anyway.

Joe changed angle. His movements felt increasingly desperate. The corners of the buckle dug into Lauren's palms and she could feel the tension of the tape against it, as firm as ever. The tongue was cutting nothing.

The man seized the front of his own shirt and

slashed at it with the knife. 'Devils!' His skin underneath was fish-belly pale in the gloom. The air was growing hotter and harder to breathe. Lauren flexed her biceps, testing the tape on her arms, but her sweat had made no difference.

Joe stopped trying to cut. His fingers took the buckle from her hands, then he put his palms on her lower back, curving around her hips. His skin was warm, his fingers spread wide. She pressed her shoulders against him. He adjusted his hands, as if taking a better grip, then pushed her to the left. Instinct made her resist for an instant then she felt his body going that way too and she let herself fall with him.

They thudded onto their sides on the cracked lino floor.

The man said, 'What?', and a second later a crowd of police in navy jumpsuits crashed through the door. The man went down screaming under a storm of shields and bodies. Lauren let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding. A police officer cut the tape binding her to Joe, then the tape around their wrists, asking, 'Are you okay? Are you hurt?', but Lauren couldn't answer, could only let her head rest on the floor, her eyes on the most beautiful forest of boots and trouser legs.

Two paramedics from Headquarters rushed in, kits swinging from their shoulders. Marcia Dunleavy's face was pale, her eyes wide as she helped Lauren sit up. 'Shit, mate, you okay?'

Lauren pulled at the tape still hanging from her arms, suddenly needing to get it off. 'Got any Hexol?'

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Marcia rummaged through the drug box. 'Here.'

Lauren squirted the alcohol solution along the tape where it stuck to her skin but it did nothing to the adhesive.

'Let me do it.' Marcia pushed Lauren's hands away and started to peel the tape away. Lauren felt like a child being ministered to. She leaned back a little and found Joe's back with her own. The other paramedic, John Hawthorn, was wiping at Joe's neck with a dressing. Lauren felt Joe flinch.

'Sorry,' John said.

Lauren felt for Joe's hand and gripped it as the police hauled the handcuffed and still-screaming man to his feet. The knife lay on the floor by the wall. Officers marched the man past Lauren and she made sure to look him in the face, telling herself he wasn't scary any more. Joe's fingers curled around hers.

A police officer brought their shirts over. The white cotton was stained with dirt from the filthy lino. Lauren couldn't stand the thought of putting it on and dropped it back on the floor. Marcia Dunleavy put her hand on Lauren's arm. 'Sit tight and I'll get a blanket.'

Lauren sat with her arms folded across her chest. She was shivering now, cold even in the stuffy room. Police searched the flat. One dropped the knife in an evidence bag. Lauren could see blood on the blade. She drew in a long shaky breath.

'Okay?' Joe said. He was on his feet. A dressing was taped to his neck. He reached down a hand to her. She took it and stood, weak in the knees. He put an arm around her shoulders, and when Marcia came

back with two white cotton blankets he helped her wrap one around Lauren, then draped the other over himself.

Marcia said, 'I've told the police we're taking you to St Vincent's for a check-up before you'll do statements.'

On the landing Lauren looked across to the neighbour's door. It was open and an old lady was peering out, her dark hooded eyes sharp on them. Lauren nodded, and the woman nodded back.

They walked downstairs as a group. Marcia and John carried their own gear plus the kits Joe and Lauren had taken up. It seemed so long ago to Lauren that they'd come up here, joking about the reason for the man's crying. She could hear voices on the ground floor and pulled the blanket close around her neck and torso. She was aware of the beat of her heart and the movement of air in and out of her lungs. She wanted to go home.

The day had turned cloudy in the time they'd been held, and the gloom of the apartment block's foyer gave Lauren an eerie feeling. She could see onlookers trying to peer through the grimy glass doors, and a TV crew frantically setting up. She felt Marcia gather up a handful of the blanket at her back. 'Ready?' she said.

Lauren nodded.

Outside the air was humid and full of noise. Marcia and John's ambulance, twenty-seven, was parked beside Lauren and Joe's. The hazard lights flashed just out of synch. As the group neared the vehicles the clouds parted and sunshine lit the world. Joe opened

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the side door of twenty-seven for Lauren and held out his hand. 'Your chariot.'

She took his hand and pulled him to her. He smelled of nervous sweat. The blankets slipped partly off and Lauren was aware of the skin of her chest against his.

'How did you know they were there?' she asked.

'Lucky guess.'

She looked up at him.

'I know safeties going off when I hear them,' he said. 'Even through a door.'

'Thank you.'

He kissed the top of her head.

Three ambulances and a supervisor's car were already at St Vincent's Hospital. The officers crowded around as Lauren and Joe climbed out of twenty-seven.

'You okay?'

'Joe, what happened to your neck?'

'Was he a loony?'

'Give them some space,' Marcia shouted, still inside the ambulance.

Joe held the back of Lauren's blanket as they moved towards the doors of the Emergency Department. She liked the feel of his hand so close to her back and let him steer her through the concerned paramedics.

The doors slid back and Joe's fiancée, Claire Bramley, rushed out. She threw her arms around both of them, her RN badge poking the side of Lauren's neck. Her grip was tight. 'I was so scared for you guys.'

Joe shifted her arm from his throat. Claire gasped at the dressing. 'What did that maniac do?'

'It's nothing,' Joe said. 'Doesn't even need stitches.'

Claire pulled the corner of the dressing free but Joe took her hand. 'It'll be healed well before the wedding. You won't look like you're marrying Frankenstein.'

'That's not what I'm worried about.' Claire looked him over, making him raise his arms in his blanket and turn around on the spot. She then turned to Lauren. 'You okay?'

'I am,' Lauren said. 'Thanks to Joe.'

He smiled. 'It was nothing.'

Lauren felt a lump rise in her throat, and Joe went blurry. She clutched the blanket tightly around her. *Don't cry, don't you dare cry!*

'Come on, pilgrim.' Joe nudged her. 'I'm dying for a coffee.'

She followed him through the Emergency Department doors, breathing deep, her throat aching. The doors slid shut behind them and they were alone in the corridor, Claire still outside.

'Lots of sugar, hey?' Joe said. 'Boost the levels.'

'Joe.' It came out squeaky. 'I want to say . . .' But she couldn't say anything.

'It's okay.' He put his arm around her.

She closed her eyes over her tears and rested her head on his shoulder.

'Come on,' he said after a moment. 'Coffee and a sweet biscuit. You'll feel like a million bucks.'

Lauren wiped her face with a corner of the

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blanket as the doors slid open and Claire came in. She stopped short just inside. 'Weren't you going for coffee?'

'On our way right now,' Joe said, and Lauren let herself be steered down the corridor, feeling safe with his arm across her shoulders.