

A person in a dark coat is walking away from the viewer down a snow-covered path. To the left is a tall, grey industrial building. The sky is overcast and grey. The overall mood is somber and cold.

THE brotherhood

Y.A. ERSKINE

one
dead cop

one
small island

an impact that
will last a lifetime ...

THE brotherhood

Y.A. ERSKINE



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Prologue

11.32 pm

Detective Inspector Richard Moore cast a final, lingering eye over the large brown paper bag on his desk before steadying himself and carefully peeling the tape off with his gloved hands. A lump rose in his throat as he gently removed the dead man's possessions one by one and laid them on the desk before him. A metallic blue and gold chest badge, so shiny it glimmered in the semi-darkness; a thick silver wristwatch, a birthday present from his wife; a plain gold wedding band; a handful of coins, enough to buy a beer after work; a Blistex lip balm and a draft report on the familiar letterhead outlining his impending resignation. Richard scanned the document with a frown before placing it to one side for later contemplation.

He dug further, his fingers closing around a scrap of paper, this one smaller than the first. He unfolded the crumpled white slip: the admin copy of a traffic infringement notice. Ignoring the splotches of blood dotted across it, he glanced at the name of the recipient, a ripple of unease churning over in his guts.

There'll be a logical explanation. There has to be.

He placed it on top of the resignation letter, reached back into the bag and withdrew the final item. Something altogether weightier. A smaller brown exhibit bag. Blood splattered too. Covered in the telltale brown masking tape and white continuity labels.

He turned it over slowly, his eyes skimming the name, seizure date and item description plastered across the label. The ripple of unease crashed and broke over him and a hot tingle of pinpricks crept across his scalp. He read it again in disbelief, murmuring the words out loud, checking to see if he was dreaming.

But it was real.

He threw it on the desk as though it had scalded his fingertips. His eyes flitted from the package to the traffic infringement notice and back again and the bile rose in his throat. His thoughts whirled, a montage of ridiculous and unlikely possibilities all vying for his attention.

What if . . . ?

Perhaps he was just . . .

Maybe somebody else . . .

But he dismissed them as quickly as they'd come. The evidence spoke for itself. There was only one rational explanation.

THE BROTHERHOOD

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and whispered into the semi-darkness.

‘Oh, mate, what the fuck have you done?’

The Probationer

8.37 am

‘VKT to Hotel One-Two. Can you please attend 34 Barrett Street, Glenorchy? All the local units are tied up at the moment and a neighbour has called in a burg in progress at that premises. Two males, dark clothing, one holding what appears to be a jemmy bar, entering through a rear window. Copy?’

Lucy fumbled, twisted the radio from its holster on her hip and almost dropped it in her excitement.

The first job of the day.

Her first burg in progress.

Ever.

Her finger found the transmission button instantly, unlike the last humiliating time she’d gone to respond and had accidentally hit the emergency button instead.

She hesitated, making sure she was on air and, more importantly, that she wasn't going to say something stupid.

'Copy that, VKT. Show us attending.'

'Thanks, One-Two.'

She grinned as she stuck the key in her locker, feeling more than a little chuffed with the faultless exchange. Humming, she grabbed the standard-issue notebook that was sitting on top of the pile of paperwork, chewing gum, Cup-a-Soup packets, fresh exhibit bags and sundry other less interesting items that had mysteriously migrated into her locker, stuffed it in her top pocket, and whacked on her hat before pausing.

Was there time for a quick loo stop before heading out?

Probably not.

The burg could be a goer in which case a pee could mean the difference between snaffling a crook or coming away empty-handed.

Deciding against it, she slammed the door shut, grabbed her briefcase, the leather still shiny and unmarked, and made for the sergeant's office to collect her offside. It was the first time in the whole month she'd been policing that she'd been partnered to work a full shift with the sarge, and what better way to start than a juicy burg. She almost skipped from joy at the thought. But as she rounded the end of the corridor, her steps slowed. The door to the light, airy office was firmly shut, an oddity in itself, and judging by the clipped, rising tones of the two male voices, a major argument was unfolding on the other side of the door.

She stopped short just outside it wondering what to do next. To interrupt or not to interrupt? The politics involved in issues of rank were still new to her and not only new, but complex. It *could* be viewed as being really poor form to interrupt the sarge, but on the other hand, it *was* a burg in progress, something that couldn't afford any delays. She pressed one ear closer to the door, waiting for a lull in the argument.

'Don't *mate* me. I'm ashamed to call you a mate. What's more, you're a fucking disgrace to the uniform. You're not fit to wear it!'

John White's clipped tones startled her and she almost jumped back in surprise. In the month she'd known the sarge, he'd seemed like such a casual, fun-loving, even-keeled sort of guy. Nothing was too much trouble and everyone, including himself, was potentially the butt of his next joke. She'd *never* heard him pissed off before and was intrigued. Who was copping it and what on earth had they done to provoke such a roar? One thing was for sure: she was glad it wasn't her in the firing line. Sensing that the argument was probably about to take off again, she seized her chance, cleared her throat and tapped gently on the door.

'What?' John yelled.

'Ah, Sarge . . . sorry to interrupt, but we've got a burg in progress in Glenorchy.'

There was a palpable silence from behind the door before she heard him again, this time, his tone softer. 'Get your gear and get the keys to my car, Lucy. I'll meet you in the car park in a second.'

‘Right, Sarge,’ she said, toying momentarily with the idea of hanging around to see who the disgrace to the uniform was. But then again, she reasoned, if the sarge was pissed off, there was no point being the next one to cop a bollocking. So she spun around and made for the lift to the garage. She’d find out who it was before the end of the day anyway. If Lucy had learnt one thing during her short policing career, it was that nothing that happened on or off the job was sacred. Every. Single. Little. Thing – from promotions to injuries to affairs and more was prime fodder for gossip and despite the fact that everybody *thought* they had secrets, it was rarely the case in this big, extended, slightly fucked-up sort of family she was coming to know as the police service.

By the time John White jumped in the driver’s seat and tore out of the Hobart police station into the crisp morning air, Lucy had forgotten all about the argument and was more concerned about focusing on the burg itself. She wanted to get it right. *Needed* to get it right. A day with the sarge was her chance to impress. Not that she had much to impress him with at this stage. But nevertheless, the last thing she wanted was to leave him with the impression that she was a halfwit who should never have been let loose from the academy.

Anyone could tell, just from spending five minutes with the guy, that the sarge was one of those people whose respect decent, hardworking career-oriented people naturally craved. He was the all-round good guy, the legend

in his own lunch box. And from the little she'd seen so far, people fought to get on his shift, fought to have him backing them up when the shit hit the fan and fought to have him sitting next to them at the bar after work cracking jokes and taking the piss out of all and sundry, including himself.

Lucy was determined to show him that she had what it took, that she'd make a damn good copper, given half the chance. In fact, as she glanced over at his serious face, fixated on the damp, clogged streets, she realised she'd never wanted to impress someone so much in her entire twenty-one years – not her schoolteachers, her uni professors, her mother, or even the Spanish guy in her third-year Romantic Poetry lectures, the one she'd spent an entire year gazing at longingly, unable to approach for fear of making a total fool of herself.

And as she recited the precise nature of the call to John and the exact address they were heading to, she paid careful attention to his every action. He flicked on the red and blues, hung a quick left out of Bathurst Street and planted his foot, weaving effortlessly in and out of the busy morning traffic that wound its way lazily north along the Brooker like a fat python with a sun hangover.

As he concentrated silently on the road, she glanced out the window at the scenery that rushed by, smiling at the midsummer dusting of snow atop Mount Wellington. It made occasional overnight appearances during January but would be long gone by lunchtime, leaving a clear, perfect, if slightly chilly day in its wake.

Lucy turned back to the road as the car jolted beneath her. She let out a little ‘whoa’ as the sarge mounted a traffic island and thrust the sedan headlong into a busy intersection, pausing to ensure the traffic on both the left and the right was stationary at their greens before inching through his red light with caution.

‘No sirens, Sarge?’ she asked, wondering if it’d make their ride a bit safer.

‘Don’t want to let them know we’re coming, now do we?’ he said with a wink.

Lucy cursed herself. *Stupid idiot. Of course you’re not going to.*

She looked across, expecting to see him rolling his eyes at her stupidity, but instead, he stared ahead, focused intently on the peak-hour traffic around them: the battered taxi to the left trying to keep pace, the bus belching puffs of black smoke all the way out to the northern suburbs, a truck crawling in the right lane and a motorcyclist who’d spotted the police lights and was sticking to the speed limit for once in his short life.

‘Sorry, Sarge. That was dumb,’ she said and grimaced.

‘Nothing’s dumb, Lucy. You’re new. You’ve got heaps to learn and let me tell you, no one is going to crucify you for graduating from the academy without having all the answers. If anything, your learning only begins once you graduate and hit the ground.’

‘Still . . .’

‘Pfft. It’s no biggie,’ he said, waving a dismissive hand.

She heaved a little sigh at his understanding, before grabbing for the Jesus strap as he mounted another island and forced his way through yet another clogged intersection.

‘You watch,’ he said, expertly manoeuvring around the B-double truck that was still defiantly chugging along in the right lane. ‘We’ll get there after all this, and there’ll be no burg.’

‘What do you mean, Sarge? Didn’t the neighbour say . . . ?’

‘Yep. That was the call, but you’ll find, once you’ve been around the traps a few months, that things aren’t always what they seem, Lucy. The neighbour could be a mental patient, a bored kid having a bit of a laugh, or it could be something entirely innocent, like the home owners locking themselves out. *Never* assume the caller is right. Take it all with a grain of salt and keep an open mind until you actually arrive and assess the scene for yourself. Got it?’

She nodded and they fell into a comfortable silence again as he turned his attention back to the road and she tuned in briefly to the annoying prattle of the breakfast show radio hosts. As the male host started his morning prank call, a segment she always found irritating and pointless, she drifted off, thinking *less* about crazy DJ Eddie, his fake American accent and the housewife he insisted on belittling on air and *more* about the sarge’s words of wisdom. She was greedy for any little skerrick of knowledge or advice about the job that she felt so utterly unprepared for. Some of her course mates might

have marched cockily across the parade ground on graduation day and thrown their hats in the air, confident they had the knowledge to set the policing world on fire, but Lucy's hat toss had been a little more cautious, a little more subdued, fearful even. She might have done her time at the academy, but now, out here in the real world, in the full critical view of the public, she shuddered with nerves, second-guessing every thought, every answer, every statement, every action.

All the more reason why the sarge's sentiments were so reassuring.

She was beginning to realise that academy training bore no resemblance to real life. The practical scenarios they'd gone through for their final exams were, upon reflection, nothing short of ridiculous. One of the academy instructors in a bad wig swinging a golf club in one hand and a beer in the other at the back of the accommodation block for the drunk and disorderly scene; two instructors fighting beside their mock car accident by the parade ground, complete with giggles and hair pulling; a ring-in from the previous course passed out by the bottom of the classroom stairs and the course sergeant ripping his clothes off, waving his arms about and yelling at the sky. It all fell depressingly short of reality. She was finding, after only a month on the front line, that the real world was an entirely different animal altogether.

She'd already seen that drunks didn't necessarily stop swinging when they were asked, motorists didn't stop fighting when police arrived on the scene, the comatose didn't miraculously get up once you uttered the magic

words and mental patients did not want to be your friend. Ever.

In fact, Lucy was finding the public completely unpredictable and entirely disconcerting.

In the *real* world, the public stared, all the time, their eyes boring holes through her uniform and her very soul; some were cold, some hostile, some accusing, some resentful, some curious, but all staring, nonetheless. They stared when she walked down the street, no matter how much she pulled back her shoulders and tried to look confident, upright and more than ready to tackle the world's problems. They stared when she stopped next to them at the traffic lights. They stared when she pulled up at jobs, grabbed her hat from the back seat and tried not to trip over her own feet as she strode up a driveway, hands shaking so badly with nerves she was sure they could smell her raw fear from a mile away. They even stared when she trotted up the mall to grab a sandwich at lunchtime. It was *that* particular stare that Lucy found most annoying. It was the 'you should be out saving the world, chasing the shoplifters, berating the lazy arrogant pieces of scum who lounge around here spitting, littering and mouthing off instead of swanning around shoving a fucking sandwich in your gob' stare.

One month into the job and university-educated, polite, courteous, conservative Lucy Howard, who had rarely sworn a day in her life, felt like turning around to the next person who stared at her and screaming, 'What? What the *fuck* are you looking at and what the *fuck* do you want from me?'

‘You’ll get used to it eventually,’ the sarge had said with a casual shrug when she’d asked how on earth he endured it.

But deep down, she wasn’t so sure. She’d spent her last few years at uni masquerading as the proverbial grey man. Despite her high-distinction average, a fact she found a little embarrassing, Lucy enjoyed being more on the incognito side. Average height, average build, average Levi’s jeans and nondescript T-shirts were her signature look as she’d floated anonymously around the Sandy Bay campus during her three-year English Lit degree, never drawing attention to herself in any way, shape or form. And every day as she bit down into her salad sandwich and sucked on her orange juice in the ref, head stuck nose-deep in one of the many great literary classics on her reading list, she could swear that no one else among the chatting, laughing, shrieking crowd around her was aware of her existence. She could have been a ghost. And that was just the way she liked it.

To be suddenly thrust into the spotlight was uncomfortable and a little irritating and, despite the sarge’s reassurances, she’d begun to question whether or not she was up for this career. Had she, as her parents clearly thought and proceeded to inform her at least ten times a day, made a God-awful mistake? Should she have stayed in the warm, safe, fuzzy environment that was academia? Honours, PhD, researcher, tutor, lecturer, professor?

She almost stifled a yawn just thinking about the path of predictability and safety.

No. This was where she wanted to be: with the solid, dependable bear of a sergeant beside her, the wind whistling by the car, the pull of the twists and turns as he left the Brooker behind and burnt up the backstreets, and the blood coursing through her veins at the thought of what awaited them at the address. For once in her life, it was the *not* knowing that was heady and exciting, liberating and passionate even, and oh so different from her normal, perfectly ordered existence.

‘Nearly there,’ he said, flicking off the lights and slowing the car a few houses before number thirty-four. ‘Let comms know we’re here.’

She reached for the radio, her hands shaking at the thought of speaking into it in front of him. Would she forget a letter of the phonetic alphabet, stumble, pause? Forget the name of the street they were in? Forget, God forbid, her own call sign? There were so many things that could go wrong the second she pressed the transmission button. But since there was no avoiding it, she slammed it in and mustered her most confident voice.

‘VKT from Hotel One-Two, show us . . . show us off at the scene.’

Without waiting for the reply, she placed the radio carefully in the pouch on her belt, fiddling with it to ensure it was in the right spot and hadn’t twisted around too far. Some days she marvelled that there was any room on the belt given all the other bloody accoutrements she was supposed to haul around like a pack mule. First-aid kit, torch, OC spray, ASP baton and firearm, just to name a few. She’d giggled to herself on the first day, thinking

she'd have to stack on some weight and get rid of her waist altogether if she was going to have any chance at carrying the lot.

'Right. Follow me,' the sarge instructed, unclipping his seatbelt. 'Watch my lead and wait for my call.'

But just as she grabbed the doorhandle, she heard a ringtone and stopped. He snatched at the mobile on the dash, and she couldn't help but notice the look of pure, burning anger flashing across his face as he glanced at the number, switched it off and threw it in the centre console.

'Everything all right?' she asked timidly.

'Fine,' he snapped, clearly agitated, but giving nothing else away. 'Follow me.'

She let it slide, knowing it was none of her business anyway and trailed along behind him watching and learning as she went. She liked the fact that he was a big guy. Not fat big, but solid big. It made her feel safe. Some of her course mates were total wieners and she wondered how they'd ever hold their own if they didn't eventually bulk up. But then again, that was the politically correct order of the day. No longer was the job restricted to big, burly blokes. Now everyone could have a crack; she herself was living, breathing evidence of that. Of course, there were a few dinosaurs around the traps who resented her sort and everything they represented, but it simply made her want to try harder to prove them wrong.

'Fucking front bums,' she'd heard muttered on more than one occasion as she strode through the station attempting to look confident and in control.

‘Yeah, fuckin’ uni grads,’ another had sneered in her direction. ‘The fuckin’ department thinks that if they start employing these upstart cunts, we’ll be able to call ourselves a “profession”. Why the fuck bother? What’s wrong with being a good, solid job, for fuck’s sake?’

As much as she’d tried to ignore it, it got under her skin. She might not have possessed the standard-issue penis, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t become a good copper, given time. At least the sarge was doing a decent job at pretending to have a little faith in her. That was what mattered.

‘Right,’ he whispered. ‘Stick by me and we’ll do a lap of the house first. Let me know if you see any movement or anything out of the ordinary.’

And before she could answer, he was off, creeping through the foliage towards the side gate. He opened it with one soft push and they crept to the rear of the house. She noted the back door and beside it, the open window. Her heart thumped in her ears and her hand drifted subconsciously to her firearm.

The neighbour had been right.

The sarge made straight for it and peered cautiously over the ledge. Lucy waited behind him, her stomach somersaulting with nerves. From inside the house she heard footsteps. The squeak of floorboards. Hushed voices. The odd clang or clunk of metal on metal.

After a few seconds he motioned to her and they retreated in silence towards the front of the house.

‘Anything?’ she whispered.

‘Yep. It’s Darren Rowley and his little brother. Darren’s

just turned seventeen and has a shitload of priors for this sort of thing. Looks like we've got ourselves a burg in progress, after all,' he said.

'What do we do now, Sarge?' Lucy asked.

'Go back near the car so they won't hear you. Tell comms what we've got. Request backup. I'll take the back as they're more likely to come out the way they went in and you cover the front. Turn your radio right down so it doesn't give you away. As soon as the others arrive, send someone out the back to me and we'll go in. Got it?'

She nodded, awed by his confidence and command. His plan made sense. It was simple and straight to the point, much like the man himself from what she could tell. Wait for help, flush out the baddies and lock them up. Being kids, they'd only get a rap on the knuckles anyway, or worse, a diversionary conference, but the thought of busting them made her skin tingle with excitement.

Skulking back towards the car, she reached for her radio and called back on as the sarge crept back through the gate and down the garden path.

'VKT from Hotel One-Two?'

'Hotel One-Two?'

She paused. *Think of the words. What are you saying exactly, Lucy? Take a deep breath.*

'Ah, Hotel One-Two, I can confirm we have a burg in progress here. Two males in the house. Can we have some backup here please, asap?'

But before the comms operator could reply, another unit cut in over the airwaves.

‘VKT, this is Hotel One-Three. We’re about three minutes away. Show us assisting that unit.’

She recognised Cameron Walsh’s voice instantly and smiled. ‘Copy that, One-Three, thanks very much,’ Lucy said, stuffing the radio into its pouch and turning it back down so its crackle was muted.

It took a second for her to realise that she was grinning inanely at the thought of the backup. She knew it was wrong, not to mention completely ridiculous, but she was well on the way to developing a serious case of unrequited lust with regard to half of the unit’s crew.

When she’d initially been introduced to Cam on her first day out, she’d found herself blushing for no good reason, unable to string two intelligent words together.

‘Nice to meet you,’ he’d said with a firm, no-bullshit handshake. ‘Lucy, right?’

‘Ah . . . yeah. Um . . . I’m looking forward to working with you.’

She’d kicked herself, knowing she was in absolutely no danger of bowling him over with her intellect. *Say something funny, something witty*, said the voice in her head. But her mind and mouth refused to oblige and she could do no more than continue to shake the warm, soft hand and gaze vacantly into the smiling green eyes. A quick covert glance at his slender, naked ring finger made her smile even more as she continued pumping the hand, never wanting to let it go.

And it was more than just his looks. He might not have had a uni degree, an unforgivable flaw that her mother would have found appalling, but Cam Walsh was turning out to be kind – the type of guy who asked her if she wanted a coffee, took the time to help her fill in the never-ending proforma documents after her first lockup, explained the whole boring routine of prisoner watch and whispered in her ear how best to handle the grumpy old inspector when he was having a shit of a day.

Cam was quickly becoming her knight in shining armour.

As the month had passed, Lucy had found herself hanging pathetically on his every word, waiting for him to walk into every room she inhabited, and even, on more than one occasion, found herself dawdling past the men's locker room before and after shift change hoping desperately to catch a glimpse of him in a state of undress. Any state of undress would do just fine. The jackpot, she thought, would be to catch him freshly showered with a towel slung casually around his hips. But so far, the door to the inner sanctum had remained firmly shut and she'd had to rely on her imagination.

And rely on it she did. Almost every night since that first handshake, Lucy had climbed into her lonely single bed with its starched pastel-coloured sheets, thrown to the floor the stuffed animals her father had insisted on buying her over the years – *because all girls love stuffed animals* – closed her eyes and imagined Cam beside her. Sometimes he was in his clean, crisp blue uniform. Sometimes, it was a Mossimo T-shirt, like the one she'd

seen him wearing into work one day. Sometimes he was naked, gloriously, softly, intimately naked, and she could almost feel the curves of his body beside her, behind her spooning and sometimes on top of her, pressing her into the mattress with his full weight, his insistent hands running through her hair, down her cheeks, her shoulders and finally, coming to rest on her full breasts.

Night after night in the darkness, her back arched as she ran her own hands leisurely across them, imagining his mouth on hers, his hands lightly caressing her nipples. She imagined his smell, the hint of alluring aftershave that had lingered in the air as she followed behind him to read out one morning, and as her hands moved to stroke her thighs, they slowly became his. He'd be gentle, of course, but perhaps not so delicate as the single finger she slid deep inside herself, the one that made her gasp out his name in a whisper so her mother wouldn't hear in the next room. And as it flicked rhythmically in and out, in and out, up and down, under the cover of the pastel sheets, Lucy found herself panting, rubbing, gasping and finally, exploding in an internal burst of fireworks at the thought of Cameron Walsh fucking her senseless.

And it surprised her.

She'd never been much of a masturbator, courtesy of the overly punitive conscience her strict Catholic mother had carefully begun cultivating in her the second she'd popped out of the womb, but that had changed the second she met *him*. Every time she came, the film of perspiration on her brow, breasts and between her legs was heavily laced with a large dose of Catholic guilt. But

nevertheless, night after night, she found herself returning to her happy place under the sheets.

But as much as she yearned for his touch, she knew, somewhat depressingly, that it could only ever be a fantasy. She'd been explicitly warned on day one by a well-meaning female sergeant about becoming the station bike, and knew that screwing the crew was a recipe for disaster. Plus, she was well aware of the other painful reality of the situation, of the fact that gods like Cam slept with models, basketball cheerleaders, perfectly made-up beauticians with nail extensions and, failing that, rail-thin blonde sluts with big boobs, poured into tight clothing and hanging out at the trendiest night-clubs. Gods like Cam most definitely did not sleep with decidedly average, perpetually self-conscious nerds like Lucy Howard.

She sighed, shook her head wistfully and made for the front of the house content with the knowledge that at least she'd see him in approximately two and a half minutes, even though it'd be nothing more than a quick smile, a nod and bugger-all acknowledgement above that of a colleague who had a job to do.

With another dramatic sigh, Lucy made for the cover of a dense row of photinias, their brilliant fiery red leaves masking the road from the solid brown front door. As she crouched and waited, her mind wandered once more. Perhaps she shouldn't necessarily write off a chance at Cam. Granted, the standard-issue police uniform didn't

do any favours for the female form, but perhaps if she started running again, lost a few kilos, forked out for a decent haircut instead of the straggly brown mess that spent the working days tucked up in a tight granny-like bun and made a bit of an effort to learn how to make small talk, she might be in with a chance. But before the thought had even finished forming, her mother's voice drifted, as it always did, through the deepest reaches of her mind.

Why don't you do something with your hair, Lucy?

Why do you have to pull it all back like that? It makes your face look hard.

Why do you leave it out and hanging all over your face? It looks scruffy.

Why don't you make an effort to dress nicely for once?

If you stopped eating so much junk food and paid some attention to your body, you might actually be attractive.

But you never have any willpower, do you, Lucy?

You're so lazy, Lucy.

You're so self-absorbed, Lucy.

You'll never amount to anything worthwhile, despite the time and money your father and I have invested in you.

She looked down at herself and sighed again. Who was she kidding? Cam would never be interested in someone like her.

On her hip, the radio let out a barely audible crackle, like a fart. She giggled softly and reached to switch it down even further before realising it was already at

minimum volume. Probably just the backup getting close and calling off. Hopefully it hadn't given her away. The air was still, apart from a hint of breeze gently rustling through the photinias and the hum of the highway traffic somewhere off in the distance.

Then she heard a shout. She couldn't pick the voice, but it was definitely male and almost certainly came from the back of the house. Her mouth went dry and a wave of adrenaline crashed across her from head to toe.

It was on.

And backup still hadn't arrived.

Oh, fuck.

Without thinking, she sprang from her hiding place, legs almost collapsing beneath her and headed for the side gate. But before she could reach it, the front door flew open, banging heavily on its hinges as a stick-thin boy burst from the opening and ran blindly in her direction.

She turned towards the boy, panting slightly and was so focused on him that she barely heard and then instantly forgot the second shout which sounded less like a shout and more like a dog on a run having the very life strangled from its scrawny neck.

The boy was the sole object on her radar. Thin, young, dark, quick as a greyhound. She crossed the yard, willing her legs not to give out from underneath her. Three steps, two steps, one, and she was somehow on top of him. There'd been no time to scream at him to stop. No time to put a hand on her baton. No time to do anything but act with the basest animal instinct.

As their bodies collided, she felt a fist slam hard into her gut. She let out a great ‘oof’ as a dull, heavy pain ricocheted through her midsection. She gasped for breath, scrambled for the arm that had delivered the blow and pinned it to the ground. As she did, his other fist crashed into her cheek, snapping her neck sideways with a sickening crack. She heard a grunt of pain.

Her own?

Ignoring the flash of fire that engulfed the side of her face, she slammed a knee down hard onto the flailing fist, only to find herself upturned and rolling over and over and over with him in the dirt and dust of the front yard. As they tumbled, he snarled, she grunted, he fought, she struggled to resist and at the very point when she knew she was about to be spent and in serious danger for her life should he make a move on any of the items that swung from her belt, digging painfully into her back, her tummy and her hips, a sudden, last furious burst of energy gave Lucy the advantage. As he sank his sharp white teeth into her wrist, she yelped. Her right arm rose from the jumbled fighting mess, almost of its own volition, and came crashing back down to earth, slamming straight into his face.

The thrashing stopped and the boy went limp beneath her.

She paused, her own breaths ragged and laboured, expecting him to move, but there was nothing.

Oh, shit, I’ve killed him, she thought.

But almost as quickly as the thought came to her, it vanished, overridden by the surge of adrenaline that

gushed through her veins. On second thoughts, she'd be glad if she had killed the little oxygen thief. How *dare* he punch her? Fucking prick. But with another glance at the motionless body in its dusty black trackpants and tattered blue singlet, she noted, with a fleeting pang of regret tempered with relief, the rise and fall of his chest. He was only winded. He'd live to thief and fight another day.

With one last almighty heave, she rolled him over, surprised at the weight, given his scrawny frame. She reefed both hands out from underneath him, held them together with her own shaking hands and clamped the handcuffs down hard until they bit into the skin around both of his wrists.

Good, she thought with satisfaction. Hope they bloody well hurt. That'll teach you to run.

She rolled away from him and sat heaving and gasping in shock, taking stock of the situation. It was her first *real* lockup. And despite the fire in her face, the dull ache flooding her gut and the piercing hot pain in her wrist, Lucy was elated. Proud. The sarge would be impressed. Not to mention Cam, who probably wouldn't be far away now. Her thoughts turned back to the sarge and she reached for the radio to let him know she was okay.

'Sarge, it's Lucy. I've got one in custody out the front,' she said, still wheezing.

But there was silence.

Puzzled, she tried again. 'Sarge, it's Lucy, I'm out the front. Can you come around?'

Still nothing.

‘Sarge?’

A moment of panic flickered through her mind before she thought to check the radio screen. Perhaps the bloody thing had switched to the wrong channel in the heat of the fight.

But no. Channel thirty-six. It was right. And yet there was still that silence. More silence. Deafening silence.

‘Everything all right out there, Hotel One-Two?’ came the cheery, unruffled voice of the comms operator, signalling that her radio was in fine working order.

‘Ah, yeah, I think so, base,’ she stammered. ‘I’ve got one in custody.’

She glanced over at the boy who gave a little groan, but still appeared to be sleeping beside her. ‘How far away is the other unit, please?’

‘We’re there now.’

Lucy heard the divvy van before she saw it, as it screeched into the end of the street and pulled up ten metres in front of her. Cam jumped gracefully from the passenger seat and grinned as he walked towards her. His offsider Kurt wasn’t far behind him.

‘Good work, Lucy. Not bad for your first burg in progress, eh?’ Cam said with a nod towards the cuffed boy.

She stuttered, suddenly self-conscious at the dirt on her face, the ripped holes in the knees of her dark blue trousers and the general state of chaos that greeted him.

‘Thanks, Cam. Um, I can’t get hold of the sarge on the radio. He was out the back. Thought they’d probably come out the back door.’

A frown crossed his perfect features. 'Kurt, put numb nuts in the van and wait. Lucy and I will go check the sarge.'

Cam's frown stirred something in her and the boy was instantly forgotten. Something churned deep down in her gut, rather like the feeling she got when she woke up in the morning and before she even opened her eyes she knew that something was wrong. Something bad and unresolved that had happened the previous day. Something that she would have to face up to in the cold hard light of day.

Even though she'd intended to walk, to impress Cam with her calmness, her authority of the situation, the feeling of dread was growing inside her, gestating and pushing against her ribs, lungs and up into her mouth. Her walk became a jog, the pain in her body long forgotten. And as the feeling pushed and stretched, invading her organs, her jog became a sprint. She tore through the side gate, Cam close behind, and rounded the corner, back to the original gaping window, stopping in her tracks at the sight.

There before her was the sarge, sprawled face up on the uneven terracotta pavers which constituted the back doorstep, eyes open, legs splayed, one palm facing upwards. He reminded her of a dirty rag that had been bundled up and tossed to the ground.

She froze, her gaze fixed, unable to move so much as a step closer. Somewhere in the back of her mind she was vaguely aware of Cam's footsteps which were still some metres behind her, but he didn't matter. Not now.

The sarge's eyes were staring up at the cloudless blue summer sky, but she knew instinctively that they weren't seeing a thing. The look on his face cast her back to the first morgue visit all those months ago with her academy course buddies. They'd huddled at the fridge door nervously, giggling and daring each other to be the first to enter and check out a real dead body. She'd gone in eventually, carried along in the stream of course mates, and had stood, mesmerised at the cold, white lifeless body on the metal trolley. The biker who'd taken on a Commodore and lost. He hadn't looked too bad, compared to some of the others they'd been forced to gawk at later on, but Lucy had never forgotten his eyes. Open, fixed and accusing.

Just like the sarge.

She tried to look away but couldn't. He'd had such warm, fun-loving blue eyes in life, but they'd been transformed by death. They were angry and accusing. Accusing her? Of not helping, perhaps? Of letting him down? She trembled as her gaze flicked to his chest and to the mottled red pool that was spreading and threatening to consume what remained of his light blue shirt. The pool had ebbed away from his body onto the pavers, forming a macabre web around his right-hand side. Finally, she noted a blood-soaked hand, limp on his chest, his gold wedding band, spattered crimson but still glinting in the sunlight.

Cam's footsteps caught up with her, but she only vaguely heard him round the corner.

'Oh, fuck,' he muttered, his own eyes wide as he

processed the scene before them. And then, oblivious to the blood, he knelt beside the sarge, checking for breath, a heartbeat, anything to indicate that this was not happening.

Lucy could only watch, too stunned to even speak. *It's too late*, she wanted to cry out, but the words wouldn't form.

Just look at his eyes, Cam. It's too late.

'Call for a fucking ambulance, Lucy. Now!' he screamed. She hesitated, terrified at the shriek in his voice, the utter lack of control.

She reached for the radio on her belt and it occurred to her that the fart of a transmission she'd heard earlier might have been the sarge calling for help. She gulped, sickened at the thought, and fumbled with the transmission button.

'VKT, this is Hotel One-Two, we need an ambulance *now*. An officer . . . he's . . . he's . . . it looks like he's been stabbed,' she stammered.

The response was calm, the comms operator hearing the panic in her voice. 'This is VKT, we're ringing the ambos now. Lucy, do you have your mobile on you?'

'Yes, ah . . . yes,' she responded, fumbling in her top pocket. 'I'll call you asap.'

She slipped the radio back in the holster, scrabbled in her top pocket for the slimline mobile, dropped it, cried out and grabbed at it again, all the while keeping one eye on Cam who performed a frantic, rhythmic CPR on the lifeless body on the terracotta pavers. As he rocked harder and faster above the sarge counting out each

sickening compression, she noted the look of determination on his face, the pursed lips, the focused eyes, the strand of hair falling across his forehead and sticking to the beads of perspiration. But above all, she noted the single tear silently rolling down his pale cheek and felt her own tears beginning to well.

Get it together, Lucy, she thought. She took a deep breath and with shaky fingers, unlocked the keypad and scrolled down to the radio room's direct line.

'Inspector Ralph Stewart. Is that you, Lucy?'

She gulped again, tried to remain calm. 'Yes, sir.'

'All right, take a deep breath and tell me what's going on out there. I need to know everything,' he said calmly.

'It's the sarge, sir. I don't know how it happened; I was out the front of the house with one in custody and . . . and . . . he's out the back and . . . and . . . somehow, it looks like he's been stabbed.' She was acutely aware of the tremor in her voice. It was punctuated by the wail of a siren in the distance. A distance that she knew was too great to be of any assistance to the man lying before her.

'All right. Listen to me, Lucy. Is the sarge conscious?'

'N . . . n . . . n . . . no.'

A pause.

'Does he appear to be breathing?'

She dropped the phone from her ear and screamed the question to Cam, even though she knew full well what the answer would be. He turned to her, his own chest heaving from exhaustion, his hands and forearms splattered with blood, his face a mess of tears, shock and resignation, and shook his head slowly.

She swallowed back a sob and put the phone to her ear, her hand still shaking. 'No, sir, he's not breathing. Cam's done CPR on him, but . . . I don't think . . .'

She couldn't bring herself to finish the sentence and the inspector on the other end of the phone fell silent at her assessment. Somewhere in the distance she heard the steady hum of the traffic, closer by, a lawnmower, closer still, the laughter of children and a bouncing ball against a concrete driveway. The wail of the ambulance siren then cut across the suburban sounds and reached a crescendo before stopping abruptly. Doors opened and slammed shut and hurried footsteps and hushed voices approached from the side gate.

'The ambos have just arrived, sir,' she said quickly.

There was yet another pause on the other end of the line. 'Right. Wait there. Preserve the scene to the best of your ability. That means you don't let anyone in or out, no neighbours, no media, no home owners, no one, Lucy; I don't care who they are. I'm sending CIB and Forensics to you asap. Follow their lead when they arrive. Just sit tight, Lucy – they'll be there shortly, kiddo.'

Moving as though she was in a dream, she locked the keypad out of habit and slid the small silver phone back into her top pocket, all the while watching the montage of fluoro green and navy blue before her as the ambos methodically went about their business, taking over from Cam, unpacking, cutting, listening, pumping, and finally, begging.

As she looked on helplessly, she felt Cam's presence beside her. He stared straight ahead in horror, shoulders

slumped, hands and uniform splashed with red. A light breeze danced through the backyard carrying the vile, coppery smell past her nose and making her stomach churn. Then came the distant wail of yet another siren, sending another shiver racing through her.

As she looked back towards the sarge, her entire head began shaking uncontrollably. She knew next to nothing about the man lying before her. Had known him only a month, but in that blink of time, he'd shown her the true meaning of camaraderie.

'If you ever leave, that's the thing you'll miss most,' Cam had said to her on her first day. 'I had a bit of time out of the job a few years ago when things got rough and I didn't think I could hack doing it anymore, but it wasn't long before I realised that these guys are my family. Your shift is your family, Lucy. We stick together, look after one another. Even when everyone else in the world lets you down, you know you can rely on us.'

And it was true. From day one the sarge had treated her like a daughter, or little sister. There'd been no questions asked. Just genuine acceptance, guidance and support. And as the ambos continued their futile bid to revive him, she struggled to recall what she knew of the man himself. He was in his thirties, married, two kids – boys, maybe – and had been thinking about going for promotion to the rank of inspector. But he'd changed his mind at the last minute.

'Nothing beats the rush of being on the front line, Lucy,' he'd said with a smile and a cheeky wink. 'It was a

nice thought, and the money would have been great, but there's no point being stuck driving a desk for the rest of my career. And besides, I can't keep an eye on you lot if I'm over in the admin building.'

And he was right. From what she'd seen, the sarge'd had a gift. He knew how to talk to people. It didn't matter if you were an old lady needing reassurance, a psycho needing guidance or a crook needing to hear the truth. He'd done the rounds, all right – CIB, Prosecution, Drug Squad and so many other part-time roles she wondered how he had time to breathe – but at the end of the day, he always came back to the front line, aware of where his talents lay. Talents that now lay bleeding out onto the pavers before their very eyes. Talents that would never again be passed down to another generation of keen young connies.

Despite her tears, Lucy caught the furtive look that the two ambos before her exchanged. Their rhythm slowed, their hands gradually pulled away from him and they slumped back onto their haunches, defeated.

She wanted to scream at them, *You're supposed to save him*, but the words wouldn't come. Anyway, it wasn't their fault the sarge was dead. It was hers.

If only I'd taken that pee before we left, they might have been gone by the time we got here . . .

If only I'd insisted on staying out the back with him . . .

If only I'd had my radio up, I might have heard him call for help . . .

If only I'd been quicker locking the other one up . . .

The wailing of the sirens mingled in harmony as they grew closer and closer. It was the last sound she remembered as her knees buckled beneath her and she crashed to the ground; her last thought, that she'd let everyone down.