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Also a classically trained clarinettist, Emma's musical career has ranged from performing with José Carreras and Dame Kiri Te Kanawa, to busking in the London Underground. She lives in Melbourne and divides her time between writing, performing and teaching.

**And
Fire
Came
Down
Emma
Viskic**

echo

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For Meg and Leni

And fire came down from heaven and devoured them.

REVELATION 20:9

1.

The man cornered Caleb at the lights. Twitching and sniffing, talking in staccato bursts. A skeletal face and pupils like voids.

Caleb gestured to the empty pockets of his running shorts. 'Nothing on me, mate.'

Sniffy kept talking and twitching. Caleb ignored him. Thirty more seconds and he'd be in his flat and under a long, cold shower. It was an hour after sunset, and the day's heat still clung to concrete and asphalt, the pores of his skin. Stupid to have gone for a run, but last night's dreams had slipped into his waking hours again, plucking at his thoughts with their bloodstained fingers.

And now Sniffy was waving a piece of fucking paper in his face.

Caleb tried to skirt around him as the lights turned green, but the guy did a little sideways dance to block his way.

'Piss off,' Caleb said.

Sniffy shoved the paper into his right hand. A receipt of some kind, sweat-stained and crumpled. Something written on the back in thick letters. He held it up to the streetlight.

Caleb

33/45 Martin St Nth Fitzroy

His name, his address. The words were scrawled in lipstick, but there was nothing flirtatious about their jagged letters, the strokes flecked with lumps of flesh-like pink. Something cold slid down his neck.

He looked at Sniffy. 'Where'd you get this?'

Words scuttled from the man's mouth and disappeared into the shadows. Was that a W? And an O? Definitely an M.

'A woman?' Caleb guessed. 'A woman gave it to you?'

Sniffy gestured down the street. 'She said... and I...'

'Slower. What woman?'

'Tall, black...'

Kat.

Fear gripped Caleb's bowels. 'Where is she? Show me.'

Sniffy headed along the street, talking the entire time. A shambling gait like a sleep-deprived toddler. Step, shuffle, step. Past apartment blocks and pizza shops, around a corner into an empty side street. So slow. Why the fuck couldn't he go any faster? Around another corner into an unlit alleyway of rusting corrugated iron and jumbled cobblestones, the stink of stale piss. Caleb came to a halt halfway down it. Dark, no overlooking windows – a good place to get jumped.

Sniffy made his way to the back of the alley, where a thin shape stepped out of the gloom to meet him. Not Kat. Nothing like Kat. The woman's skin was so pale it looked translucent, a startling contrast to her short, dark hair. Black hair – Sniffy had been describing her hair, not her skin. Caleb let out a shuddering breath. Of course it wasn't Kat. She was five thousand kilometres away in Broome, not in a stinking Melbourne alleyway. And if he'd stopped to think for a second, he would have remembered that.

A quick exchange of money between the pair, and Sniffy shuffled away. Just a delivery boy. So who was the woman? She was young, probably early twenties, carrying a brown handbag and wearing a red cotton dress that looked as though it would smell of incense. Dark alley, vulnerable young woman – it had to be some kind of a con. Walk away. But he glanced at the crumpled receipt in his hand.

Caleb

‘How do you know my name and address?’

Red launched into speech, but her face was deep in shadow. It was brighter out on the footpath – he’d be able to see her mouth there. And her hands.

‘Move onto the street,’ he said. ‘It’s too dark in here.’

She shook her head and pressed herself against the wall.

Well, he wasn’t waiting around for someone to walk up behind him with an iron bar.

‘OK,’ he said. ‘Find yourself another mark.’

He turned away, and she darted forward and grabbed his arm. Her trembling hand was slick with sweat. Impossible to fake that kind of fear. Or for him to feel like more of an asshole. She was gesturing urgently, pressing her hands together and pulling them towards herself. A familiar movement, as though she was signing the word ‘help’.

‘You know Auslan?’ he signed.

Red stared at him as though he’d performed a circus trick. Not a signer, then, just someone who’d learned a word. Which meant she probably knew more about him than his name and address.

‘Help?’ he said out loud. ‘You need help?’

A rapid nod. ‘I... and... said you’d help.’

‘Who said I’d help?’

‘...and... you...’

This was hopeless; he’d have to get her to write everything. He reached for his phone, but his hand dug into the empty pocket of his running shorts. Shit: no phone. Just him and his stupid desire to be alone when he ran.

‘Have you got a phone?’ he asked. ‘Something to write with?’

She shook her head and attempted another sign. It was the wrong hand-shape, but it looked a lot like...

‘Do that again,’ he said.

Two fingers against two fingers, a twist of her wrists: ‘family’.

Family? A brother he barely knew and an almost-ex-wife avoiding him in Broome.

‘Anton?’ he asked. ‘Kat?’

More headshaking, more incomprehensible speech. Something about bees? No, that couldn’t be right.

He tried for a gentle tone. ‘Look, I can’t understand you. My flat’s around the corner. Do you want to go there? Or I can take you to the cops.’

Her eyes widened, staring behind him. He spun around. A man was pounding up the alleyway towards them. Thickset, with short, blond hair and a dark swirl of tattoos up his arms and neck. Caleb threw himself backwards and caught the edge of the blow on his forehead. Falling. Down on his knees, head to the cobblestones. Up, get up. He levered himself to his feet. The man was dragging Red away, his arm locked around her neck. No thought, just motion: five steps and a fist to the man’s kidney. Caleb’s knuckles hit solid muscle. The man staggered and dropped Red, swung around. A calculating look as he took in Caleb’s equal height but lack of kilos. His fist clenched. Caleb ducked the punch with reflexes born of a thousand playground fights. Quick, go for the kneecap. An awkward movement, mistimed, but his foot hit the side of the man’s knee with a sickening jolt. Down like a felled tree.

Red. Where was Red? Caleb sprinted to the street. There she was, running towards Alexandra Parade. Good, there’d be people, lights, cars. He ran after her. Fitzroy Police Station was only a few blocks away – he’d get her there and work out what the fuck was going on. She was at the intersection, scanning for a break in the traffic.

‘Stop,’ he called, nearly at her side. ‘It’s safe here.’

Her head whipped around and she stepped back, her eyes focused behind him again. Shit, the blond man was only metres

AND FIRE CAME DOWN

away, charging past him towards Red. She threw up her arms and stumbled backwards off the kerb.

Caleb lunged for her.

A fleeting touch of skin, then a flash of white, the smell of diesel and brake pads. She slammed against the van's bonnet. Into the air. Down.

An endless moment.

People were running. And he ran, too. Red was sprawled on the road, her arms flung wide. Blood. Blood everywhere. Bubbling from her lips and darkening her dress. He'd been here before, seen the spreading pool, smelled its iron sweetness.

Her lips were moving.

'...the be... got the be...'

He made himself touch her cheek. Cold beneath the slick warmth of her blood.

'It's OK. Help's coming.'

Her eyes held his: sea green and rimmed with pale lashes. A fierce brightness that flickered, dulled and faded.

Then nothing.

2.

He made his statement in a soulless grey room at the Fitzroy Police Station. Eyes gritty, a dull ache squeezing his temples. The young policewoman questioning him was a hard read, with rigid lips and a tight jaw. She wasn't too impressed by him, either. She'd been through his statement twice now, querying each sentence, her eyebrows drawing together at his answers. He didn't blame her for her wariness. His image in the two-way mirror looked like it should be on a wanted poster: hollow-cheeked and unshaven, a wildness to his dark hair and eyes. Probably slurring his words too, exhaustion stripping all those years of speech therapy from his tongue.

He was going through the events for the third time when the constable stood without warning. A moment of confusion until she strode to the door. Right, someone knocking. Hopefully someone with a couple of painkillers.

It was a large man with granite-like features and close-cropped hair. Uri Tedesco: friend, life-saver, cop. Caleb had texted him from the station's sticky-handled public phone to explain why he'd stood him up for Friday night drinks, but hadn't asked him to come. A flash of anger that the big man had assumed he'd need help.

Tedesco shot him an unreadable look, then spoke to the constable. The pair of them batted words back and forth, too fast for him to catch. Conversational ping-pong – his least favourite

sport. He stared at the table until Tedesco waved to get his attention and said, 'You're right to go.'

The young cop wasn't looking too happy, but homicide detective trumped constable every time. Particularly a homicide cop who'd had the temerity to kill a bent colleague and stay in the job. Caleb gave her a nod and followed Tedesco through the station.

Outside, the air was like a sick dog's breath.

'You didn't have to come,' Caleb said.

Tedesco's gaze flicked across his bloodied running clothes. 'I was out of beer. Figured there'd be some at your place.'

Caleb showered while Tedesco got started on a beer. A long shower, with plenty of soap. He dressed and hunted for his hearing aids, finally found them under a book in the bedroom. They were small and pale, almost invisible beneath his dark hair. They amplified every unwanted sound and only gave hints of speech, had to be cleaned and replaced and adjusted and paid for. But without them there was nothing – no faint words or murmuring tones, just gaping mouths and guesswork. He never wore them on a run. Never took his phone or his notebook or even a fucking pen. Would Red still be alive if he did? Maybe. Probably.

Tedesco was out on the apartment's shitty balcony, halfway through a stubby of Boag's. Caleb slumped into a chair and opened a beer.

'Not your year,' the detective said.

'No.'

Seven months since he'd stumbled blindly into an investigation that had ended with his best mate murdered and Kat badly injured. Since his business partner had betrayed him. Understatement was one of Tedesco's stronger suits. Caleb took a long drink, then put

the bottle down. Enough. People having very bad years didn't have the luxury of drowning their sorrows, not if they wanted some semblance of a life.

A sudden realisation that it was January and the new year had begun. God.

Caleb nudged the bottle further away. 'What did you find out?'

Tedesco paused, probably consulting his inner censor. 'Not much. No handbag or ID. And no one's reported her missing.'

'She had a handbag. I told them. Did they look for it?'

'Nah, just shrugged and went home.' Tedesco drained his beer and set the bottle on the table. 'You definitely didn't know her? Not an old neighbour or something?'

'No.' He had a fierce memory for faces, but he'd never seen hers. Not in the street or in a shop, not even in a photo. Which meant she wasn't a local.

His phone buzzed in his back pocket. A message from Kat.

—I've checked. No one thinks they know her. You OK? x K

Damn. He'd gone straight to his phone when he got home. Standing in the entrance hall, hands still crusted with blood. It hadn't taken long: one text to his brother, Anton, in Resurrection Bay, and one to Kat. A description of Red and a bloodless version of her death, a plea for them to tell him if they'd sent her. Neither of them had. Kat's ring-around of her family in the Bay had been his last hope.

He resisted the temptation to prolong the exchange, and sent a quick reply.

—Thanks heaps. All good. x C

Tedesco waved. 'Any joy?'

Only the sight of that 'x'. A sympathy kiss, but a kiss nonetheless.

He shook his head, and Tedesco reached for a second beer.

'Guess that's that, then.'

Caleb roused himself. In the seven months he'd known Tedesco,

he'd discovered that the man wasn't a big talker, sharer of secrets or believer in late nights. Caleb probably had one more beer and four more questions before the detective took himself home to bed.

'Have they got any leads on the guy who was chasing her?' Caleb asked.

Tedesco paused for another ethics committee meeting. 'No. No one else noticed him. They'll get her picture onto the news and do another doorknock tomorrow, see if they can jog anyone's memory.'

'That's it? A doorknock and a photo?'

'More than usual for a traffic accident.'

'It wasn't an accident.'

'Mate, half a dozen witnesses, one of them a QC, saw her step in front of that van.'

'So Red just decided to play with traffic on a whim? Her death's got nothing to do with the big bloke chasing her?'

'Red?'

'Better than Jane Doe.'

Tedesco's grey eyes fixed on him. The detective was only a couple of years older than Caleb's thirty-one, but his Sphinx-like expression was aeons old. 'You're a country boy, you ever raise an orphaned animal?'

'I lived in town,' Caleb said. 'The only thing I raised was a rabbit.'

'I was eight the first time I did it. A spring lamb. He slept in my room so I could feed him. Did a good job of fattening him up, too. I called him Toby.' Tedesco tilted his head. 'Reckon you can guess how that story ends.'

Caleb stayed silent.

Tedesco drained his beer to the last couple of inches. 'Let it go, mate. It was a shitty experience, but the more I hear about it, the more I think you were just a mark.'

Tell him about today's break-in? The possible break-in, possibly today. A loose grip on time and specifics these days. There was

no proof that anyone had been in his flat, just a bathroom door left ajar, a sense of stale air disturbed. He'd had the same feeling a few times over the past couple of weeks.

'She knew my name,' he said. 'Knew some signs.'

Tedesco lifted a shoulder. 'Good groundwork on her part. And everyone knows one or two signs.'

Not the people he met. A scant few people in his life knew any Auslan, and only two of them were fluent. His parents hadn't learned a word.

'You don't,' he said.

Tedesco smiled, the look of a smug student catching a teacher in a mistake. He circled a fist in front of his face and then formed a diamond with his thumbs and forefingers.

Caleb choked on a laugh. 'Jesus, where'd you learn that?'

The smirk slipped from Tedesco's face. 'What? Why?'

Ant, it had to be Ant. Who except Caleb's brother would have taught a member of the force to call himself a pig's cunt?

'First lesson.' Caleb slid two fingers across his forearm. 'That's the sign for "cop". Second lesson, don't trust Ant. What were you trying to say?'

'That I -' Tedesco coughed. 'Never mind.' He finished his beer and stood. 'Bedtime.'

Caleb checked the time: 12.14 a.m. Long, long hours to go before dawn. Be a bit pathetic to beg Tedesco to stay and keep the monsters at bay.

He walked the detective to the door and paused with it half open. Red had known she was dying. That look in her eyes: desperation and pain, terror. He'd seen that look before. The memory of it lurked just beneath his thoughts, leaching to the surface in unguarded moments.

'Can you tell me if you find out her name?' he asked.

Tedesco shook his head. 'As my mum'd say - that'd just end in

tears and a nice Sunday roast.’ He slapped Caleb on the shoulder. ‘Take care of yourself. And tell your shit of a brother to watch his back.’

Caleb wandered into the living room. He’d caught Tedesco’s quick frown at his surroundings as they’d walked to the door. It was hard not to see the place through the man’s clinical gaze: the hand-me-down orange furniture and un-vacuumed carpet, the patchy coat of white paint that Caleb had slapped on the walls in a burst of 3 a.m. energy. The thick layer of dust. Only the neat filing cabinets and organised desk saved it from being a hovel, and they didn’t lend much to the ambience.

Trust Works had been shaky in the months after Frankie’s betrayal, with no new clients coming in and plenty of old ones leaving. For some reason companies seemed reluctant to hire a fraud investigator whose business partner had been a lying, drug-addicted criminal. So he’d given up the shiny office and set up in the flat, taken on more quick-turnaround work: background checks and due diligence cases. Jobs that required hours in front of the computer and minimal human contact. Jobs he could do alone. Nothing was lined up for the next few days, though. Just him in the flat with the endless, empty hours.

A familiar darkness uncurled and stretched, ran its well-honed claws down his skull.

Move. Keep moving. He could outrun it if he pushed himself hard enough.

He was doing up his runners when he remembered the piece of paper he’d shoved in his pocket. Red had written his name on some kind of receipt. It could have her credit card details. He picked through the kitchen bin, found his blood-stained shorts beneath the banana skins and coffee grounds. He pulled out the receipt and turned it over. Only a cash payment for a train ticket, but written at the top was the station of origin – Resurrection Bay.

3.

Caleb exited the trees and shielded his face against the glare. The township of Resurrection Bay lay before him: silver roofs wedged between blue-green sea and bush, a dark metastasis of pine plantations spreading towards the west. A feeling of relief at the sight of it. Not his usual response to trips back home, but the air conditioner in his ancient Commodore had given out a few kilometres into the three-and-a-half hour drive. He'd fiddled with the temperature gauge, thumped the dashboard, then, skill set exhausted, wound down the windows. Nine a.m. and sweat was pooling in places that were better left dry.

He checked the fire danger sign as he took the turn-off into town, a fan of warm-hued warnings that ranged from 'moderate' to 'code red'. The needle was set to 'severe', two down from the worst rating. He sped through the outlying strip of struggling hardware stores and empty car yards. The tyre shop had closed since his last visit a couple of months ago, but the fried chicken franchise was still there, rebranded. He double-checked the name in the rear-view mirror: Alaskan Rooster. Was Alaska known for its fried chicken? If so, the Bay's inhabitants were yet to catch on.

He drove straight to his old family home, now his brother's place. Despite Ant's recent burst of home pride, the garden had

succumbed to the heat, with a lawn that was more dirt than grass, and wilting silver birches. The house itself was unchanged: a two-storey blond-brick built by their father. There wasn't a room in the place that Ivan Zelic hadn't plastered and perfected. He'd recarpeted the master bedroom only months before his death four years ago, never mind the terminal prognosis or that his wife had been dead for a decade.

'If your best isn't good enough, try harder.'

It was cooler inside the house, the temperature of a low-to-moderate oven. Caleb dumped his overnight bag in the entrance hall and went through the usual check. No reason to think Ant was using again, but old habits die hard. There was washing powder in the laundry, food in the fridge, a new couch and coffee table. Everything was clean, far cleaner than his own place. No missing electrical goods or furniture. Their mother's old piano was still there, its curlicued paws standing on a dust-free floor. He'd spent hours beneath its keyboard when he was young, the rhythms vibrating through him as she played. He laid a hand on its flank and pressed a low note, felt it purr against his palm. Moving on, things to look at, places to snoop. Upstairs into Ant's room. Messy, but clean. None of the detritus that used to be scattered around Ant's lair like the bones of small animals – syringe caps and burnt spoons, scraps of tinfoil and cottonwool.

A moment to acknowledge the deep fucking relief, then he headed for the car. A town of three thousand – someone had to know Red.

He started near the railway station. The station itself had been unstaffed for years, but with a bit of luck he'd find someone in a nearby house who'd seen Red. With a lot of luck they'd know

her name. He made his way slowly down the block, armed with the artist's impression that he'd screen-grabbed from the online news. There were a lot of doorbells and locked security doors. Since when had people started locking their doors around here? Not too enthusiastic about the trend. Waiting on the doorstep with the sun evaporating his blood, no idea if the bell was working or not.

He was missing a lot of words, too. People mumbling and chewing gum, leaving nothing but their intonation and expression to guide him. He'd turned up the volume on his aids, but no amount of amplification could make muttered sounds clear. It was good practise for him. He'd become slack working with Frankie, relied on her too much to fill in the gaps. Relied on her company too much, as well. Her snarky remarks and dark sense of humour. Her ability to see when he was flagging and give him a swift kick up the arse.

He stopped to wipe the sweat from his forehead and felt the ant-crawl sensation of someone watching him. A quick check revealed a kid doing wheelies on a BMX bike, and a mother dragging a screaming toddler along the footpath. Just twitchy. The streets of his childhood making him slip into old habits, a fist-clenching readiness born of long walks home from the school bus. He'd been the only local kid getting off that particular bus, the words 'Special School' acting like bait to those with a scent for blood.

He headed down the hill towards the shopping strip that ran along the bay, a mismatched collection of bluestone terraces and 1970s bland boxes. There was a hard glare and the stink of rotten seaweed coming off the sand. He turned the corner into Bay Road and stopped: police tape was strung across the footpath, blocking his way. He detoured onto the road. Emergency hoarding covered the newsagents' windows, and two men were installing new glass in Dreamtime Crafts a few doors down – inside was a mess of

splintered wood and broken pottery. A car crash? Hard to see how it could have involved two shops that were metres apart.

A flash of movement in the corner of his eye. An elderly man had come up behind him and was obviously under the impression they were having a conversation. He was pink-skinned and short, wearing summer pyjamas and a fetching Panama hat.

‘...don’t you think?’ Pyjamas said.

‘Sorry, what?’

‘I said that it’s a bloody shame. Where am I gunna get my papers now?’ Each word was a hard little nugget squeezed through cat’s bum lips. An easy read, but not a pleasant one.

‘Do you know what happened?’

‘Kids mucken about, they say.’

‘Kids? Kids did all that?’

‘Teenagers,’ Pyjamas said. ‘Should lock ’em all up.’

That seemed a little excessive, but who was Caleb to argue? He pulled out Red’s picture and went through the motions.

Pyjamas shook his head. ‘What’s the girl done to her hair?’

Caleb stopped with the picture halfway back to his pocket. ‘You mean you know her?’

‘Of course. It’s... What’s the girl done to herself? Used to have lovely long blonde hair. Looks like a bloody dyke now.’

Blonde, of course. Red’s hair had been far too dark for her fair skin and eyebrows. And that hacked style – all the hallmarks of a home-done cut. Not the sort of thing he’d usually miss, but he seemed to be functioning on low-power mode lately. No wonder no one had recognised her. People didn’t look at faces, they looked at markers: the man with the beard, the girl with the glasses. The woman with the long blonde hair.

‘What did you say her name was?’

The cat’s bum squeezed out two syllables, possibly beginning with P. Or M. Or B.

'Sorry, what?'

'Mmmmma.'

Was that 'Paula'? Or maybe 'Mona'? Shit. A strong suspicion that admitting defeat was going to send this conversation down a long and circuitous path.

He pulled out his notebook. 'And how do you spell that?'

'I dunno, like that car she drives, I guess.'

A two-syllable name like a car. Mazda, Holden, Camry. Ah, Portia.

'Portia?'

'Yeah. Weird bloody name if you ask me.'

'How do you know her?'

'That greenie group of hers was hangin' around all last week, planting trees next door. Woke me up with their damn truck so I gave her a piece of me mind. Huffy little thing. Not a bad looker, though.'

'They're an eco group?'

'Nah, Australian. Most of them, anyway. Couple of 'em are pretty dark, might be foreigners. Not fussy either – got a few Abos workin' for them, too.'

Caleb took a moment. 'What do you know about Portia?'

'Oh, she's as white as white that one. No tar brush in that family.'

A shower after this, some antibacterial wash.

'Her surname?'

'Herst, I think.'

Hirst? Hearst? Hurst? He wasn't going to ask.

'Any idea where she lives?'

'Seen her goin' into the old mansion by the river. Lots of money, probably Jews.'

4.

The mansion stood on a small rise overlooking Red Water Creek. A gracious bluestone with wide verandas, the place had stood empty throughout Caleb's childhood, but someone had put some serious money into it recently. It had a new slate roof and iron lacework, and was surrounded by a lush garden that was a shock of green in the hard afternoon light. The plaque next to the wrought-iron gate read: *Hirst*.

Caleb parked outside and detoured to a towering river red gum that stood on the banks of the creek. One of the few scar trees still standing in the area. Its bark was a smooth, dappled white. An ovoid section showed dark against the pale trunk, taller than him and an arm-span wide: the mark where Kat's ancestors had cut away the makings of a canoe centuries ago. 'Old fella,' she'd said when they'd come across it in one of their hormone-fuelled walks as teenagers in search of privacy. Not a random route, he now suspected – she'd been guiding the gubba boy through her history, watching how he placed his oversized feet.

She'd been gone for four months now, had left just as he'd begun to see glimpses of her old self. She'd been hurt because of him. Tortured. Her arm cut and fingers broken, her blood flowing from her veins and pooling on a dusty warehouse floor. All while he'd stood and watched, helpless. But for some unfathomable reason, she didn't seem to blame him. They'd spent the three months after the attack slowly feeling their way back through the

ruins of their past, not quite coming together, but inching closer. And then she'd left. A phone call from a friend, the suggestion of a road trip, and she was gone, leaving him reeling. She sent him chatty emails now, their Friday night arrival so regular that it spoke of a note in her diary. She never mentioned the things he was desperate to know but couldn't bring himself to ask: if her hand still hurt, if she could sculpt yet, if there was any chance for the two of them.

He pressed his palm against the tree, then headed for the house.

A discreet black intercom was set into the bluestone column beside the gate. Intercoms – even worse than doorbells. He pressed the button and waited. Pressed it again. The front door opened and a man in his mid-sixties looked out. Steel-grey hair and rimless glasses, dressed in a neatly ironed shirt and beige slacks. He gave Caleb a thorough up and down, assessing his clothes and income, his threat level. Caleb smiled and waved, added a little stoop for good measure. Too much? No, the man was heading over.

He reached the gate and gave Caleb another examination – eye to eye, but somehow looking down his nose. The short walk had left him slightly breathless.

'Isn't the intercom working?' he asked.

'I'm not sure. I'm looking for someone who knows Portia Hirst.'

A nano-expression crossed the man's face. Anger? Fear?

'I'm her father. Dean Hirst. What do you want?'

A flutter of panic: Caleb hadn't thought past confirming Portia's identity. He wasn't the person to be telling a father his daughter was dead. That was a job for the police, counsellors, a priest.

'My name's Caleb Zelic. I've just got a few questions about Portia.'

He passed his business card through the gate. People usually relaxed when they saw it, trust gained by a sans serif font.

Hirst frowned. 'You'd better come in.'

The house was cool inside, and smelled of wax and money. Hirst led Caleb to a small study that looked like an up-market funeral parlour. The walls were built for artwork, but there was only one painting: Hirst and a younger woman with a teenage boy and toddler, none of them smiling. An echo of Portia in the woman's mouth and green eyes.

Hirst gestured to a chesterfield in a dark corner, but Caleb headed for a pair of stiff-backed chairs by the window. Hirst hesitated then followed, his breathing laboured. He obviously needed the Ventolin inhaler that was in his front pocket, its outline clearly visible, but he wasn't going to use it in front of Caleb. The type of man who associated physical weakness with a moral one. This was going to be a fun conversation.

'What's this all about?' Hirst asked. 'Why are you interested in Portia?'

That was a question best answered with a half-truth.

'She came to see me in Melbourne last night. I think she might be connected to a case I'm working on.'

'Who was she with?'

An odd thing to ask.

'No one.'

'Why did she come to you?'

So Hirst had let him in to quiz him about Portia. And not very subtly. This was a man used to asking direct questions and getting direct answers. Interesting speech patterns, too. Perfectly formed consonants one minute, flattened the next: the framework of a

poor childhood showing beneath a thin veneer of sophistication.

‘I don’t know,’ Caleb said slowly. ‘We didn’t get a chance to speak. Did she talk to you before she left town?’

Hirst lifted a hand. ‘I haven’t seen her for days.’

‘She’s been missing?’

‘She’s flighty. Changes degrees at the drop of a hat, changes jobs, changes homes. Running off for a couple of days is hardly something to be concerned about.’

And yet he’d let Caleb in to question him.

‘Is Portia’s mother around?’

‘We’re divorced, she’s...’ Hirst’s words were lost as he pulled out his phone and frowned at the screen. He was already moving on from their conversation: things to do, people to intimidate.

‘Sorry,’ Caleb said, ‘could you say that again?’

An irritated glance. ‘She lives in Adelaide.’

‘Does Portia work? Study?’

‘She runs around planting trees and...’ Another downwards glance.

‘Sorry, can you look at me when you speak?’

Another flash of emotion crossed Hirst’s face, this one easy to identify – anger.

‘I beg your pardon?’

Frankie’s first rule of interviews: don’t piss off the subject.

Caleb took a breath and said the words. ‘I’m deaf. I need to see your face when you talk.’

Hirst looked at him blankly, then leaned back in his chair. Caleb had the strong impression that his threat level had just been downgraded from ‘moderate’ to ‘non-existent’.

‘Ah well,’ Hirst said. ‘These things are sent to try us.’

Good to know.

Caleb pulled out his notebook. ‘Can you give me a list of Portia’s close friends?’

'I doubt she has any – she's only been here five months.'

'Where'd she move from?'

'Adelaide.'

'Why the move?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'It's unusual, a woman of her age moving from a city to a small town. Why the decision to move?'

Hirst didn't answer.

Caleb waited him out. Most hearing people panicked when they were dropped into silence, throwing words like grappling hooks to pull themselves out. He'd only met a handful of hearies who could last more than five seconds. Hirst lasted seven.

'Boyfriend troubles,' he said, the words strangled.

It was a long way to come to get away from a boyfriend, around six hundred kilometres. Could the blond man in the alley have been Portia's boyfriend? The old, familiar story of misplaced trust?

'Well, if that's all.' Hirst stood, brushing off the legs of his pants.

'Sure. I'll just take a quick look at Portia's room and get out of your way.'

'I have to get back to work.'

Caleb tried the silence trick again, was rewarded after five seconds.

Hirst stood in the doorway while Caleb examined Portia's bedroom. It wasn't what he'd expected from her clothing – no Tibetan prayer flags or smell of incense, just plain white walls and a cream bedspread. The only decoration was a small photo of Portia as a ten-year-old, with an older version of the boy from the downstairs portrait. A handful of textbooks were arranged

alphabetically on the desk next to it: *Economics and You*, *Journalism and Marketing*, *The Smart Way to Sell*. He flicked through them – words so dry they sucked the moisture from his eyeballs. No computer. Nothing much in the desk drawers, just pens and paper, a Myki public transport card. He picked it up. The receipt Portia had written his name and address on had been for a Myki card payment. So whose card had she used if hers was sitting in a drawer? And why had she caught a train? There couldn't be too many Porsche owners in the world who'd choose a four-hour trip in a crammed train over driving their car.

He turned to Hirst. 'Is her car here?'

'No.'

'It's a Porsche?'

Hirst's mouth thinned. 'Her idea of a joke.'

'Red?'

'White.'

There was more white in the wardrobe. Shirts separated from skirts, separated from dresses, all in white, beige and cream. Not a glimpse of loose-weave cotton anywhere.

'Finished,' Hirst said when Caleb closed the wardrobe door. It wasn't a question.

Caleb followed him to the front door but paused on the step. 'Where did Portia learn sign language?'

'Sign language? I have no idea.'

'Not from you?'

'Of course not.' Hirst closed the door.

Caleb drove the four blocks to Ant's place with the fan on full and the windows down, and arrived in a puddle of hot-stink ooze. Inside, straight into the shower. He turned the water to cold and

closed his eyes. That was that. An unsettling twenty-four hours, but he'd discovered who Portia was. She could be buried by her family now, and mourned by people who actually knew her. It didn't matter who'd lent her the train card or the red dress. It didn't matter who'd sent her to him. It didn't matter that he'd seen the light in her eyes flicker and dull to nothing. He'd tell the cops what he knew and get on with his life. With something, anyway.

He was dressing, still damp, when the overhead lights began to flash: someone ringing the doorbell. He opened the door to a woman in her mid-thirties. She had the look of a salesperson about her, with mussed brown hair and a cheap pantsuit, a black briefcase that looked as though it had come free with a budget laptop. Putting her money into the late-model silver Volvo that was parked on the road.

'Hi, I'm...'

Damn, his aids were still in the bathroom; this would be a short conversation.

'Sorry, I'm not interested.'

'No, no.' An expensive smile that matched the car, not the suit. It didn't quite reach her eyes. 'I'm...'

An awkward moment as she juggled her mobile phone and briefcase, then she held out her hand. She had an unexpectedly firm grip. A waft of perfume, something sweet and cloying – jasmine.

She pressed her phone to his chest.

Fire

Pain

Falling

5.

On the floor, muscles spasming. A gasping breath. And another. Jasmine was standing over him, watching him writhe. A man was there too, a bit older, with a thin face and baggy eyes. He was going through the overnight pack Caleb had dumped by the front door.

Move. Get up. He managed to raise his head a few millimetres from the floor.

Baggy-eyes glanced at Caleb with disinterest. 'Nothing,' he said to Jasmine. He dropped the pack and headed down the hallway.

A waft of perfume as Jasmine knelt beside him, still holding her phone. No, not a phone: some kind of stun gun. A fucking powerful one.

She held it up. '...again...?' An expressionless face and hard mouth.

He swallowed and tried to get his tongue to move. 'What?'

'Answer or... stun you again, OK?'

No, not OK. Not OK at all.

He nodded.

'...where... she...?'

'What?'

Jasmine brought the phone closer.

'Wait. Can't. Hear.'

She touched the phone to his chest. Worse this time. A sledgehammer to his heart, ribs crushed and splintered. It took minutes for his brain to switch back on. Hours.

Baggy-eyes was back, looking at his watch. ‘...get a move on.’
Jasmine nodded and turned to Caleb. ‘What did... and...?’
‘Slower. Can’t. Hear.’

No stun this time. They dragged him by his feet to the bathroom at the end of the hallway, his head bumping on the terracotta tiles. Water in the bath. Why was there water? Baggy-eyes hauled him to his knees in front of it and shoved his head down.

Water in his mouth and nose. Flailing panic. Air. He needed air. And up. Coughing, dragging in ragged breaths.

Jasmine was standing next to him, talking. Asking more questions? He twisted towards her, but Baggy-eyes yanked his wrist up his back and pushed his head down again. Trying to brace himself, muscles like over-cooked pasta.

‘Wait. Deaf.’

Underwater. Hadn’t caught a proper breath. Chest aching, pressure building in his head. Getting darker.

And up. A fist in his hair, Jasmine turning his head towards her. She was kneeling beside him, her hazel eyes focused and unblinking; a terrible sense that she could do this for hours. ‘...she give you?’

What had Portia given him?

‘Nothing,’ he said. ‘She wanted help, that’s all.’

‘What help?’

‘Don’t know. Didn’t have time.’

‘What did she give you?’

‘Nothing.’

Jasmine nodded at Baggy-eyes.

‘No. Wait.’

Baggy-eyes hauled him over the edge of the bath and into the water. Longer this time, lungs burning. He was going to inhale. Up again. Coughing, gagging, fire in his throat.

‘Nothing,’ he said quickly. ‘Search the house. Nothing.’

A tiny nod – she believed him, thank fuck. They'd go now.

'...speak to?' she said.

'What?'

Baggy-eyes' grip tightened on his wrist.

'No, wait,' Caleb said. 'Say it again.'

Her eyes narrowed, but she repeated the words. 'Who else did she speak to?'

'Don't know. Didn't have time to talk. Don't know anything.'

'That's right... keep out of it. Understand?'

He nodded.

'...and no cops, or we'll be back... much worse... Understand?'

'Yes.'

'Good.' She patted his cheek and got to her feet.

They were going.

Baggy-eyes pressed his head towards the water. No. He pushed back. A knee in his spine, his wrist wrenched higher. And he was under. Much longer. Too long. Pain in his chest. Going to inhale, going to –