ONE

‘There’s not much to it,’ Station Officer Ken Butterworth said. ‘Plant room, muster room, lounge through there, little kitchen off the side. Locker room and bathrooms along this way, and here’s your locker key.’
Paramedic Georgie Riley folded her sweaty palm around it. ‘Thanks.’
‘So. Welcome to The Rocks.’ Butterworth glanced at his watch. ‘I don’t know where she is.’
‘You don’t have to stay,’ Georgie said.
‘If a case comes in I’ll go out with you.’
‘I’ll find my way around.’
‘But what sort of a start to a first day is that?’
She smiled. ‘How was your night?’
‘Eighteen jobs, including a SIDS, a cardiac arrest on a bus, and a nightclub brawl with five stabbed.’ He covered a yawn.
‘Go home,’ she said. ‘Really, I’ll be fine.’
‘It’s no problem.’ He checked his watch again. ‘I’m sure she won’t be long.’
And in the meantime there’s no way you’re going to leave me alone.
Georgie looked at the board where the keys hung. ‘Which one will we be in?’
‘Thirty-three,’ Butterworth said.
She took the keys down. ‘May as well begin checking.’
‘Sure, sure,’ he said. ‘That’s good.’
The traffic coming off the Harbour Bridge overhead filled the plant room with a continuous hum. Georgie unlocked the ambulance and shoved her bag between the front seats, then opened the side door into the back and climbed up. Through the tinted window she saw Butterworth frowning in the muster room doorway. Matt would tell her he was frowning because her partner was late, and that she was paranoid to be thinking what she was thinking, and would then remind her about the discussion they’d had about being reasonable – but Matt hadn’t been bullied and shafted and betrayed.

She flopped into the seat beside the stretcher and yanked open one of the drug drawers. Cannulas lay rubber-banded together in size groupings, and syringes in their sealed plastic packets were jammed into two narrow compartments. She tidied the stack of alcohol swabs, straightened the boxes of adrenaline and dextrose and atropine, and checked the expiry dates of the six ampoules of local anaesthetic lined up against the side.
She was neither surprised nor startled when Butterworth popped his head through the door.
‘Is it the same layout as you had?’ he asked.
The ambulance service was one big network of who you’d trained with, who you’d worked with, who you knew. Butter-worth looked a similar age to her Woolford boss, Ross Oakes.
‘You’ve never been out there?’ Georgie replied.
‘I have.’ He scratched at a boot scuff low down on the wall. ‘But I’ve never looked closely in the drug drawers. Pass me an alky-wipe?’
She handed over a swab and watched him scrub at the black mark. She should ask him if he knew Ross. It was an innocent question, and, as they were talking about the region, it would be a natural one as well. She cleared her throat, but just then there was a flash of movement beyond the windscreen
and the driver’s door was yanked open.
‘Sorry, Ken,’a woman said. ‘Bloody trains.’A workbag sailed in and landed on Georgie’s.
Georgie took a deep breath. If she’s a mate of Ross’s, I’ll never pass this assessment.
Ken said, ‘Freya, this is your new partner, Georgina Riley. Georgina, this is Freya Craig.’
The woman looked into the back and Georgie’s heart skipped a beat. The hair was longer and darker, the face had filled out a little, but it was definitely her. In the same instant she saw surprise and dismay cross the woman’s face.
Dismay?
‘Hi,’ Georgie said.
‘George!’ Freya squeezed between the front seats into the back of the ambulance and grabbed Georgie in a hug. ‘How the hell have you been?’
Georgie resisted the urge to push her away. ‘Good.’ Dismay?
Freya pointed back and forth between them and said to Butterworth, ‘Schoolfriends.’ She crossed her first and second fingers. ‘Like this.’
For a while, Georgie thought. Until you disappeared without even saying goodbye and had me thinking you’d been murdered too.
‘Enjoy your reunion.’ Butterworth stepped down from the truck.
Freya said, ‘I didn’t know you were in the job. How long?’

‘Nine years.’
‘Eleven for me.’ She came in for a hug again but Georgie leaned back. She wanted to see her eyes. She wanted to be looking straight at her when she asked the question that had festered in her mind for nineteen years.
‘Freya –’
Freya cut in. ‘Talk about coincidences, hey?’ She grinned, a wild look. ‘All that time and here we are.’
The station phone rang and Butterworth answered.
‘That’ll be us.’ Freya scrambled into the driver’s seat.
After this job, Georgie thought. Another hour wouldn’t kill her. She closed the back and went to get the details from their boss.
‘Person fallen into the harbour,’ he said.
Georgie’s skin prickled.
‘Sure you’ll be okay with it?’
He knows.
She took the scrap of paper from his hand. ‘Of course.’
‘The past haunts the present,’said Detective Sergeant Paul Galea.
Like I need reminding of that. Just sitting there in Galea’s office, Detective Ella Marconi could feel the effects of her own recent past. She’d passed all the physical and psych tests and was fine, though she’d lost muscle mass and her shirt sat differently across her back. But once shot, she’d realised, you were never the same again, especially when you’d thought you were going to die. Things got clearer. You saw for certain what was important.
‘Time passes,’ Galea went on, arms resting on a closed file on his desk, a newspaper folded at his elbow, ‘but the unsolved homicide never goes away. Unsolved, mind you, not cold. How can it be cold when the victim’s family still lives it every day?’
Ella nodded.
‘The good thing is that people with knowledge still live it too, and these people sometimes get religion, get divorced, get off drugs. They lose someone close and get an inkling of how it might feel. Their knowledge becomes a burden. Sometimes they tip us off; sometimes you knock on their door and they spill their guts.’
‘I understand.’
‘At the same time, however, the bad guys too have grown older. Their lives are settled; they have jobs, families – more to lose.’ Galea’s gaze became intense. ‘Investigations into old cases open up old wounds, and sometimes people are driven to commit new crimes to protect what they now have.’
Just give me the file.

‘In 1990, seventeen-year-old Tim Pieters was found dead in Pennant Hills.’ Galea finally handed the file over. ‘Pieters’s cousin is in state parliament now, and had a bit of a chin-wag with the minister last week. There’s this too.’He slid over the newspaper and Ella saw the article next to Pieters’s photo above the fold – the cousin was opening a sports hall at Tim Pieters’s old school that afternoon. ‘Wander along there and see what strikes you. Just take it easy getting back onto the horse.’

Ella looked down at the photos in the file. Pieters, smiling in a high school photo. Then dead on the ground, leaves on his face.

I’ll get back onto the horse all right.

Ella made a coffee and sat at a vacant desk in the empty Unsolved office. Everyone else was out on their own cases. The air was cool and still. Computers hummed, and Galea talked with someone down the corridor. She’d heard about his welcome speech: The past haunts the present. It was a wonder he didn’t have it framed on the wall. Of course the past haunted the bloody present. Police work revolved around that fact. So did life itself.

She opened the file to Tim Pieters’s school photo again. He’d had short brown hair, tanned skin and a wide smile. His grey school shirt was buttoned to the neck under a darker grey tie with gold diagonal stripes and the emblem of Macquarie Secondary College. They had a moment, looking into each other’s eyes. I’ve been to the brink, she told him. You went over and I can’t help that, but I can find who is to blame. I know what’s important, and it’s you.

She put her cup aside and got out an A4 pad. The first pages of the file were a bald summary of the facts. Early in the morning on Sunday, 21 October 1990, a girl walking her dog in the bush near Pennant Hills Park had stumbled across Tim Pieters’s body. She’d run to the nearest house, five hundred metres away, and the occupant had called the ambulance. They’d arrived and requested police. General Duties attended first, then asked for detectives and Crime Scene.

A search of his clothing and the area produced no wallet or other identification, and he went into the system as ‘unknown male’.

Just after eight o’clock Tamara Pieters looked into her son’s room and found it empty. She and her husband John called Tim’s friends, who admitted being out with him the night before but didn’t know where he was now. The Pieters worried for an hour before calling the police. Officers went to their house and asked to see a photo, then broke the news. Formal identification was done at Westmead Morgue by both parents.

Tim was the middle of three children. His older sister, Haydee, had been in her second year at university and still living at home. His younger

brother, Josh, was eleven. John Pieters worked as an architect with a city firm and Tamara Pieters did bookkeeping from an office at home. They described Tim as a good student, a social boy with a large circle of friends, keen to get his P plates and first car. They denied problems with alcohol or drugs. Tim had talked about going to uni when he finished school, though wavered between science and IT as course choices.

Ella turned to the scene photographs. The initial shots showed Tim Pieters lying face down in the undergrowth, dressed in blue jeans, grey sneakers and a white short-sleeved shirt. Various angles illustrated how far he was from the road and how well hidden the body was by the long grass and shrubbery. The girl who'd found him had stated that her dog had been off his leash and had run off into the bushes, and it was when she was trying to catch him that she'd found Pieters. Ella wondered what effect that moment had had on the girl's life.

A series of pictures showed Pieters being rolled onto his back, dead leaves stuck to his face. Ella wondered about the time his body had been dumped there, if it was after the dew had fallen, but reading on she found that the original detectives had noted the morning was dry but that there had been rain in the previous twenty-four hours and the undergrowth was still damp.

The autopsy reported the stomach contents were little more than the dark liquid of gastric juices mixed with alcohol, and stated that the dinner of meat and salad he was known to have eaten at the family barbecue at about six thirty that evening was probably vomited up due to his drinking. He'd been last seen by his friends in the pub at about eleven thirty, and the pathologist estimated time of death between midnight and 2 am.

Blood had pooled in parts of the front of the body not pressed against the ground. As livor mortis could begin within twenty minutes of death and was fixed in a couple of hours, it was believed that Tim had been killed somewhere else then dumped there. Tyre tracks were difficult to ascertain in the loose gravel, but photographs showed marks in the dusty edge between the gravel and the asphalt. One tyre was identified as a Bridgestone, another a Goodyear, both sold in the hundreds of thousands across the country. With neither tyre having distinctive damaged areas or wear patterns, they weren't much help as leads.

There were no injuries to Tim's body except petechial haemorrhages in his eyes; due to this and congestion in his lungs, the cause of death was determined to be suffocation. To kill a healthy young man in that manner with no signs of a struggle suggested incapacitation of some form, and she checked the toxicology screen. His blood alcohol reading was 0. 09 per cent; a lot for anyone, but particularly an underage boy. The report

estimated that such a level would have caused him to have moderate cognitive and motor-skill impairment, making him a vulnerable target, particularly if he'd passed out in the street. His friends had admitted using false IDs to buy beer and spirits at the Highway Hotel in Hornsby that night, as well as at other hotels on different dates.

It was also possible that Tim had known his killer and so had not put up a fight when taken. Ella read that his father, John, had been a suspect for a time, as he'd admitted going out alone to look for Tim late that Saturday night. He'd stated that he was unable to find him or any of his friends and had come home after an hour and a half of driving aimlessly about the area, so aimlessly that he found it hard to recall his exact route. The original detectives had noted that they'd been unable to determine where he'd gone or find any witnesses at all. Even his wife, Tamara, couldn't say for sure what time he'd come home. She'd gone to bed at eleven, before her husband went out, then had woken at three to find him snoring beside her.

Tim's uncle, Alistair McLennan, had also been out that night, caring for a dying cancer patient in Berowra. He'd said in his statement that he hadn't seen either Tim or John after the family barbecue earlier that evening; and the patient's husband had stated that Dr McLennan had arrived at their place at 11. 20 pm and left at one, after his wife's peaceful death just after midnight. McLennan's wife Genevieve stated she'd woken up when he climbed into bed at one thirty.

Ella made notes. Reinterviewing all the family was a given, as was talking to Tim's friends. The boys might have been protecting each other then, but as men now in their thirties, possibly with sons of their own, they might have regrets and feel freer to talk.

Drops of blood had been found at the scene, dotted across leaf litter closer to the road. The leaves had been collected and the blood tested. It was not Tim's – he had no wounds, and a group test had shown the drops to be from somebody who was O positive, while Tim was AB negative. No skin was found under Tim's nails to indicate that he had scratched his attacker. Ella studied the photograph showing the drops' location and tried to imagine somebody suffering an injury while dumping him there. Getting scratched by a twig in the undergrowth wasn't going to cause that sort of flow. Maybe the killer had suffered the injury beforehand, perhaps in grabbing Tim off the street, or on something in the car.

DNA testing was a rare beast in 1990, and unheard of when there was no firm suspect to compare to a sample. There was, however, a note in the file saying that the sample had recently been taken for further analysis. Ella knew that there were officers going back over such cases looking for exactly this – physical evidence that hadn't been tested or samples that

had been too small to use with the old procedures – because now, with the growing DNA database, they could enter a profile and sometimes get a match. She put the file aside and phoned the lab.
‘Not done yet,’ a male voice told her. ‘System’s so clogged.’
She sympathised, she really did, but she needed her result. ‘When, then?’
‘Call again in a week,’ he said.
As soon as she put the phone down it rang.
‘How’s it going?’ Detective Wayne Rhodes said, and her heart skipped at the sound of his voice.
‘Great.’ She told him about the case, then turned to the detectives’ names on the front page of the summary. ‘Do you know Will Tynan and Peter Constantine?’
‘Constantine was a DS when I started at Penrith,’ he said. ‘He was a good guy. He might be retired now. I can’t place Tynan though.’
‘Thanks.’ Ella scribbled a note about tracking Constantine down.
‘Galea do his speech?’
‘Yep. Seems a nice guy.’
‘So . . . how are you feeling?’
‘Fine,’ she said. ‘Perfect. No need to worry.’
He laughed.
‘I know you,’ she said.
‘I know you do,’ he said. ‘You want to meet for lunch?’
‘I’m going out.’ She told him about the newspaper article. ‘It’ll be interesting to see who might be there.’
‘I guess you’d be annoyed if I said be careful.’
‘It’s at a school in broad daylight.’
‘I won’t say it then,’ he said. ‘Have a good one, and I’ll see you tonight.’
‘Absolutely.’
She put the phone down with a smile, then focused on the pages before her.
Georgie was too nervous to reply as Freya bitched nonstop about the nightmare of driving to urgent jobs in the city while swerving the ambulance through the traffic to the Quay. She tried not to notice how the harbour glinted between the ferry terminals, or how she could smell the water in the air, and when Freya turned off the siren and stomped on the brake she made a big effort to keep her voice calm as she told Control they were on scene.
She and Freya piled the Oxy-Viva, cardiac monitor and drug box on the stretcher and followed an excited security guard onto the wharf. She kept her head down, trying to focus on the concrete under her boots, glancing only far enough ahead to see the huddle of people around a figure prone in a pool of water.

This is the city, she told herself, and that was the country. This is a harbour, placid green water, while that was an angry brown river in flood. This woman – she could see already it was a woman: long hair plastered across a narrow face, a beaded necklace brushing the concrete – is out of the water. She is fine. You are fine.

They reached the huddle and Georgie lifted the Viva from the stretcher. The watching crowd edged closer. She crouched in the pool of water beside the woman, who shivered in soaked black jeans and a white T-shirt. She lay on her stomach, propped on her elbows with her face in her hands.

Georgie put a hand on her shoulder. ‘Are you okay?’

The woman flinched at her touch. ‘I almost died.’

‘Do you know what happened?’ Georgie asked.

‘She jumped off the wharf,’ somebody said.

‘I did not,’ the woman snapped. ‘Somebody pushed me.’

‘Are you hurt?’ Georgie asked. ‘Can you tell me your name?’

The woman tried to sit up, grasping Georgie’s arm for support. Her palm was clammy and cold. Her nails dug into Georgie’s skin as she stared past her at the crowd.

‘He pushed me.’

Georgie followed her finger to a shocked-looking man in his sixties, big fingers wrapped around the handles of a stroller from which a three year old in a Batman costume watched the goings-on with interest.

‘Nobody pushed her,’ a man said behind Georgie. ‘I was standing right there, we were all waiting for the ferry to come in, and she just climbed the rail and jumped in.’

‘I did not.’

‘She sank like a fucking stone. Scuse the language. That guy there went in after her. Saved her life.’

Georgie saw a young man in a sodden suit and leaking shoes. His eyes were wide and he clutched the handle of a dry black briefcase with both hands. Freya went to make sure he was okay.

‘That old guy pushed me!’ the woman said again.

Here’s another point of difference, Georgie thought: this one’s a psycho. She took the blanket from the stretcher and wrapped it around the woman. ‘Let’s go up to the hospital and get you checked out, okay?’

‘I want the police.’

‘We’ll have them see you at the hospital.’

‘I want that man arrested. For murder.’

‘Nobody died,’ Georgie said.

‘I could have.’

‘Let me help you to your feet then onto the bed here.’

The woman glared at her. ‘You don’t believe me.’
‘Look at you, you’re shivering.’The young man had left, and Freya was back. Georgie nodded at her to bring the stretcher closer. ‘Let’s get you in the ambulance where it’s nice and warm. What did you say your name was?’
‘Don’t you touch me.’ The woman scrambled to her feet and pulled the blanket tight around herself, eyeing the watching crowd. ‘You’re all in on it together. You saw him push me in and none of you helped.’
Somebody laughed and the woman bristled. ‘I’ll sue the lot of you and then we’ll see who’s laughing.’
Georgie said to Freya in a low voice, ‘Blue ambulance.’
Freya pulled the portable radio from her hip and stepped away to call the cops. It was odd that they weren’t already here, but at least there were more security staff making their way through the onlookers. Georgie saw the woman narrow her eyes at their approach and made her voice warm.
‘Come on, let’s get out of here, eh? Hop up on the stretcher and let’s go to the hospital. We’ll get you out of those wet clothes, find you a cup of coffee and something to eat.’ The woman’s index and second fingers were stained yellow. ‘We’ll scab a smoke from somebody too.’
‘I’m not going anywhere.’
Freya came back and nodded at Georgie.
‘What’s that nod for?’ the woman said. ‘You telling secrets about me?’
‘You want to know?’ Georgie lowered her voice. ‘The police are coming. If you don’t want to deal with them, it’s time to climb up on the stretcher and come to hospital.’
The woman spat at her boot. ‘Pair of bitches.’
Georgie raised an eyebrow at Freya, caught her held-back grin and matched it with one of her own.
The woman stamped her bare foot in the puddle of water. ‘Let them come. They can haul my dead, cold body out of the sea.’
‘Let’s not get stupid here,’ Freya said. ‘Nobody’s dead and nobody’s going to die.’
Georgie saw two security men sneaking along the side of the crowd. She took a step towards the woman to draw her attention. ‘What’s the point of all this bother? We go up to the hospital, we can get everything sorted out from there and let all these people get on with their day.’
The woman spotted the security guards. ‘Don’t you dare.’
‘Come on now. What do you say?’Georgie put on her best wheedling tone while edging closer. ‘Couldn’t you go a cuppa? Life’s too short to stand around here all wet and cold.’

She was almost within grabbing distance. Freya sidled nearer on the other side. The woman backed to the edge of the wharf and put her hands on the railing. Georgie heard the crowd draw its breath.

The woman raised a bare, skinny foot. ‘Come closer and you’ll get one.’

‘Okay, fine.’ Georgie held up her hands. ‘Whatever you want.’They’d wait until the cops turned up and then she’d be their problem.

The crowd let out its breath. Freya put her hands on her hips and the guards looked mildly disappointed. Georgie listened for a siren over the ferry departure announcements and realised she’d forgotten all about her watery fears.

But then the woman stopped glaring at her, clambered over the railing and jumped in.

Georgie rushed to see the white blanket billow out in the green water as the woman sank, her head a dark blob in the centre. Freya stood still with her mouth open. The security guards began to strip off their radios and boots. Georgie swore under her breath and swung herself over the railing. The water was cold. She struggled to keep her eyes open against the sting of the salt. The white of the blanket was a blur below her and she fought to swim deeper as her boots softened her kicks. A stream of bubbles rose up against her cheeks and she made out the vague shape of the woman’s face turned up towards her.

She saw encrusted pylons from the corner of her eye and heard the deep throb of a huge engine somewhere close.

A current pulled her sideways.

She was running out of air. She wasn’t going to make it.

Again.

But then the woman rose up, her face contorted, her hands reaching for Georgie. The blanket tangled round them. Her hand shot through it and scratched Georgie’s face. Georgie tried to catch her wrist and haul the woman upwards. There was more movement beside her, a big dark shape, and she saw the glint of keys on a belt. The security guard grabbed the woman’s upper arms from behind and yanked her away from Georgie. She saw his face for a split second, his cheeks bulging with air, his eyes asking a question that she answered by swimming upwards. He was faster, shooting past. She saw his feet in grey socks kicking hard. The surface was silver from underneath then all golden light when she burst through. The railings were open and hands grabbed for her, pulled on her collar and tore it, seized and slipped off her wet forearms. She gasped and fumbled for a grip along the slimy underedge of the wharf. Beside her, the guard was shoving at the screaming, swearing woman, trying to heave her out of the water while she hit at the hands pulling her up.

Georgie’s eyes burned and streamed from the salt water. Her mouth was full of the thin taste of diesel fuel. She took one hand off the wharf to rub her eyes and nose but her fingers were slick and green with algae.

‘Holy shit,’ Freya said.

Georgie squinted up at Freya’s pale face. ‘I’m okay.’

Freya reached down but Georgie didn’t have the strength to pull herself up. ‘Just give me a minute.’

‘Grab hold anyway.’

Georgie grasped Freya’s hand but kept hold of the wharf as well. The water below her felt bottomless. She looked down to see the blanket drifting in the current, an underwater ghost.

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