

# Breathe & Release

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ISBN: 0-473-33054-7  
ISBN-13: 978-0-473-33054-5

## Also by the Author

Found, Near Water

One Hundred Days of Noise

Skeletal



## Chapter One

Elisabet woke for the first time one morning. An odd occurrence given she was an adult woman; but while she knew that, she didn't know much else.

She had no memories. There was a lot of knowledge in her head, untethered, but there were no memories to accompany it except for those she'd formed since waking.

They'd been uniformly bad.

Her head hurt. Her legs hurt. Her back ached, and she couldn't rotate her right shoulder at all.

She insisted that the pretty blond nurse who was tending to her bring a mirror so she could waylay her first horrified thought, that she was old. She wasn't, but that was the end of the good news.

She was in a hospital, and judging by the sour looks on some faces and the harried expressions on others, she didn't think it was a good one. A public hospital for sure.

At least in ICU it was one nurse per patient, and Elisabet liked hers. The nurse's hair gleamed and was cut in a short bob. It curled under her chin in a way that made Elisabet shiver with delight. She was pretty, but not in a way that time would treat well. Her chin was weak, and her

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cheeks were shaped from fat not bone.

Machines beeped and churned around Elisabet. Those she was hooked to weren't too bad, she had to tolerate them after all, but she didn't see why she should put up with those attached to the other patients. Their sounds were far more annoying, and she wished they'd all fall silent.

She bet that would keep the nurses busy.

A doctor popped in to see her. He flashed a bright light into Elisabet's eyes by way of welcome, then helped himself to the seat next to her bed so her pretty attendee had to stand.

'How're you feeling?'

'I'm in pain.'

He seemed surprised at that and gestured to the nurse who shook her head.

'I asked to have my morphine reduced,' Elisabet said. 'I was having far too much fun.'

'Can't complain then.'

As though one followed the other. There were billions of people in the world right now, most of them not in pain and not taking morphine. If Elisabet wanted to complain about not being one of them, she felt she had every right.

'Can you tell me your full name?'

She shook her head. Perhaps her lower lip pouted a tad too much, as he further inquired, 'Is that because you can't, or because you don't want to?'

'I don't know my full name. What is it?'

He held up a long finger. *Patience.*

'What about the year? Do you know what year it is?'

Elisabet shook her head, and a memory flashed into her brain of a sweating contestant on *Mastermind* who'd picked a subject he didn't

know as well as he'd thought. Pass. Pass. Pass.

'Who's Prime Minister?'

'David Lange,' she said without even having to think about it. His frown told her that perhaps she should've given it a bit more time, but when she paused nothing else came. Her headache started to grow worse.

She didn't like to lose, especially when the game should be so easy.

The doctor gave up and handed her a journal after a while. 'To help your memory.'

Elisabet wasn't sure what he thought a notebook costing less than two dollars in any halfway decent stationery store would do, but when she asked him he just got excited.

'You can calculate money then,' he said, and handed her some loose change to count out to show him.

After performing a few more simple tests, following a finger, writing traced on her palm, the doctor told her she had a memory problem.

Elisabet personally thought her memory was working just fine, thank you very much. She could remember every detail of everything she'd done since she woke up that morning.

Her doctor seemed to think there was another thirty-eight years' worth of memories prior to that which would come in handy. Honestly, the way her head was pounding she didn't know where they were going to fit in.

Trying to squeeze fourteen thousand days in on top of the memories she'd formed that day was just asking for trouble.

There was an annoying man in the rehab area. He kept crying and said, 'I can't do it, I can't do it,' then made a series of grunts as he tried anyway.

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He swung his legs forward, placing his feet carefully on the ground, then moved his arms along the parallel bars that kept him upright.

Honestly, you'd think his parents were zombies the way he shambled along. Zombies who didn't instil the right measure of manhood in their son, the cry baby, thought Elisabet.

*She* didn't cry out, and there was a furious bolt of pain ripping through her body with every step, too. Not to mention that her left arm wasn't any too steady or reliable at the moment. Something to do with the side of her head that was caved in. She'd send a polite request out to the muscle 'need a little help here' and sometimes it was as obliging as a niece coddling up in hopes of an inheritance cheque, and sometimes it just sulked in its room with its headphones on.

She wasn't very impressed with any of the other people who were here, actually. There just wasn't a very high class of injured body at the hospital. They just didn't take any pride in themselves. It was as though they didn't think it was important to look their best at every moment.

Since Elisabet judged everybody based on their personal appearance she presumed everyone else did, too. Therefore, she tried to maintain an immaculate facade. She was let down at that moment by the large patches of hair that were shaved off her head and the yellowing lumps down the left side of her face, but she was doing the best with what she had.

Anyway, hair would grow and lumps would flatten. Her face was fairly good looking aside from those immediate concerns. Smooth and unblemished, then lumpy, then smooth and unblemished again.

Not like the man who'd come in to visit her that day. Elisabet's *husband*. Well, she'd be the



judge of that. His face looked like someone took a picture of a handsome man, then screwed it up and flattened it out. Creases everywhere.

She'd been a bit concerned there were so many lines on his face that it may actually have been due to injury, but when she mentioned that to him he'd screwed his face up and created even more, so whatever'd gone on was obviously self-inflicted.

That was an awkward meeting.

'Elisabet. This is Graeme, your husband.'

It was the pretty nurse who introduced him. Elisabet had been moved out of ICU into a separate room on the wing, but her nurse had luckily followed along. Elisabet no longer had her undivided attention, but she had enough to be getting on with.

She nodded and held out her hand because that was what you do, wasn't it? He'd launched himself at her instead and started crying. Crying, and clutching at her back, her waist, her head.

Elisabet waved her arms until the nurse tapped him on the shoulder and suggested he lay off for a while. Or, 'I think you should take it slowly for a while,' as she put it. 'She's had a nasty accident, and her memory is playing up.'

'This is Kristen. Your daughter,' he said.

'Step-daughter,' she corrected immediately, and glared with such resentment that Elisabet gave her a smile of appreciation in return. Nice attitude.

'That's not true, honey,' her husband said. Elisabet scowled at him in unison with Kristen. 'She's your adoptive mother, remember?'

There was a muttered sentence, which may've translated into 'When it suits,' but Elisabet couldn't be sure.

Kristen stood by the window. She was so

small her elbows couldn't rest comfortably on the old wooden window mouldings. If her dark blonde hair wasn't so lank she could've added at least an inch in height, but it looked as though a beanie had been hastily whipped off at the door.

'I'll leave you alone to get reacquainted,' the nurse said as she walked out of the room. Elisabet looked about for the call button in case she needed to fetch her back, sharpish.

'I was so worried about you,' her husband said as he sat on the side of the bed. It was too narrow for him to do it comfortably, and it knocked her off balance, but he didn't seem to notice. She levered the sheets up so she could move farther away and sat with her back against the metal headboard.

'Mmmmmm,' Elisabet responded when it seemed he needed something from her. 'Were you?'

'Oh yes. I know we've been separated for a while now, but you know I still care for you.' He reached out and tapped her nose with the knuckle of his forefinger.

'Oh, thank God,' she said as his words registered. She'd been wondering what on earth she was doing with the idiot, but a separation explained a few things.

Kristen snorted.

'I know you're having a bit of trouble remembering things at the moment,' he said and stretched out his hand to brush at Elisabet's fringe. She jerked back even though the movement caused her headache to worsen. 'But don't worry. I'll be here if you need to know anything.'

'We're not meant to tell her, Dad. The doctor said to let her remember on her own.'

He shot her a look and Kristen moved

farther down the wall, away from him. Elisabet raised her eyebrows and studied the two of them. Kristen was scared of him, or nervous at any rate. Elisabet wondered if she should be nervous, too. There was no harm in being careful.

Kristen pulled her phone out and started playing with it.

'You can't use that in here,' Graeme said. 'It mucks up the machines.'

'That's a load of rubbish,' she responded. 'They only leave those signs up because they want to control their patients. She's not even hooked up to anything,' she said, the disappointment clear in her voice.

'She's the cat's mother,' Elisabet chimed in as the old phrase entered her head.

They both stared at her. She had nothing more to add.

'Take it outside if you're going to use it,' Graeme continued. 'We don't need to get kicked out; we just arrived.'

'Whatever,' Kristen said, but left the room. Elisabet could hear her clomp down the hallway. The linoleum did nothing to disguise any sounds of movement. It was chosen for ease of cleaning, not for sound dilution.

'So,' Graeme said as he turned and stretched his legs out on the bed beside Elisabet. 'Just the two of us.'

She didn't know why that phrase should send a shiver of fear down her spine, but it did.

## Chapter Two

Lillian couldn't see.

That was the sole thought in her head when she came to.

She tried to move. She tried to turn. She wanted to be able to roll over onto her back so she'd know where she was in relation to the curtains.

She couldn't.

She tried to move her hands and feel her face; it felt like there was something obstructing it.

She couldn't.

Her arms were tied behind her back.

When Lillian made the connection she sat bolt upright. Her shoulders had a dull ache from where they were pulled unnaturally backwards. When she tried to lift one then the other the ache intensified.

'Hello?' She called out. Loud, but not so loud the neighbours would complain. 'Hello, is anyone there?'

For a second she thought that maybe Greg had put her in this position. Once, a few years back, they'd talked about role-play and BDSM. They'd even talked about a threesome. When Lillian sobered up she'd put the kibosh on that quickly enough, but maybe her headache was

from a hangover and she'd agreed to something a bit weird?

'Greg?'

There was a snort. A human snort. Lillian's head whipped around to the source of the sound, and the resulting clang was internally generated.

'Who's there?'

Silence answered her.

She tried to move her hands again. She tried to manoeuvre them up behind her, to pull at the back of her neck where material was gathered. The ache intensified into a strain, and Lillian dropped them back down. It was a long time since she'd been twenty and bendy.

She recalled that when Joanne Lees was cable tied in the outback of Australia she'd managed to get her hands around to the front by slipping them under her rear end.

Lillian tried it, but perhaps Joanne hadn't spent twenty years growing her arse while sitting on the couch watching TV. Or perhaps she was a contortionist. Whatever the reason, Lillian couldn't begin to get them underneath her, let alone all the way through to the front.

'Who's there?' She asked again into the pitch black.

Again no answer, but there was the sound of something moving. A tinkle of metal against stone. A sound that she couldn't place, but which grew fear in her belly like a foetus; cells doubling, doubling.

She scooted back on her knees until her feet found the cold brick of a wall. Her bare feet?

She could feel clothing on her body. Lillian remembered a yellow sundress that she'd put on; *broderie anglaise* front and back.

When was that? Today? A week ago?

She pressed her body back into the wall, then

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slid to the side so her weight fell on her ample hip rather than her bony knees.

‘Don’t move. Stay where you are.’

The voice was relayed through a distortion device. Like an evil version of Stephen Hawking springing out of the silence. It was loud, it crackled, and it scared the shit out of Lillian. She stopped moving.

There were footsteps. They moved toward her at first, then headed away. Up, up, and away. There must be a staircase leading out of this place. The coldness of the wall compared to the remembered heat of the day made Lillian think of a basement, a cellar, an icehouse.

Something buried deep in the ground. The cold ground.

The fear boiled over, rushing up and out, and her weight fell back against the wall as she started to sob. Quiet at first, then as the fear gathered steam her sobs grew into a scream.

She must’ve passed out, or improbably fallen asleep. When Lillian woke up she was shivering from the cold. Her arms started to prickle all over from the restricted blood flow, and her lower back was screaming at her in a way that she’d usually have to oversleep for a couple of hours to ignite.

Lillian tried to roll into different positions; each new relief brought a new discomfort. There were swelling bumps, spreading bruises, and furious bone deep itches that made her want to smash her head until she was unconscious to escape.

After a while she settled for a position where she was sitting cross-legged and leant the front of her right shoulder against the wall.

Whatever fabric was fixed over Lillian’s allowed air to flow inwards, but the restricted

airflow out caused a warm fog in front of her face. Her condensed breath dampened her forehead, her cheeks, and her chin where they touched the bag. They were the only parts of her that were warm.

She rolled her wrists against each other as much as she could. There was a thin strip tying them together, not rope nor tape. When Lillian pulled one in the wrong direction she heard a tiny little snick and saw at once in her mind what it was. A plastic tie.

They encircled each wrist, then interlocked together. She could remember playing with them as a child, fascinated by stationery that lingered in a way that her enchantment with a Barbie doll or a Cabbage Patch Kid didn't.

What Lillian recalled best about them was how they could be pulled one way, and one way only. Tiny little ledges that sloped in one direction to let the slots of the tie strap through, but obstructed their return. To get these suckers off, she'd need to cut them.

She tried to pull them loose anyway. The thought of such tiny little pieces of plastic holding her as securely as chains made her frantic. She pulled and pulled. The pain fell away in the face of her devotion to be free, free.

When Lillian stopped, panting her hot sticky breath into the moist bag over her head, she could feel a trickle of moisture run down over her knuckles. She tried to think it was sweat, but it was too thick, its progress too slow. She'd torn her wrists until blood flowed.

She started to sob again, quiet and desperate this time. No shrieks. No screams. Just a lengthy low-grade moan mixed with tears and snot.

When Lillian heard the sound of a chair sliding back, she started and got to her feet.

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‘Who’s there?’ She shouted, her voice still thick from crying. ‘Help me. Can you help me?’

Her legs protested bearing her weight. Her wrists throbbed with all the pain that she’d blotted out. Her shoulders swung with the change in position and gave forth a sinewy ache.

Lillian walked forward, toward the sound. Her mind yelled at her that she should be backing away, get away, away goddamnit, but she stepped forward, ignoring the call.

‘I’m a mother, my kids will be missing me,’ she lied. ‘Please let me go. I need to pick them up from school.’

No answer. No more sounds. Lillian stepped forward again, and again. ‘Please. I won’t tell anyone what happened. I don’t know who you are. You can just let me go and I can pick up my children. They’ll be so scared waiting all alone outside school. Please let me go.’

There was a low laugh in response. Laughing at her desperation? Her imaginary family?

She tried to take another step, but her foot hit something hard a split second before her face did. Cold metal banged against the front of her tooth where her mouth was open to try to plead again. She collided hard enough that her tooth was tilted backwards and her mouth filled with the metallic warmth of blood.

‘Please, let me go,’ Lillian whispered. ‘I won’t tell anybody.’

That low laugh again, then the sound of footsteps leading up, and away.

She screamed then. Screamed out promises, entreaties, and empty, empty threats.

When she couldn’t scream anymore, she leant her head forward against the metal bars and prayed to a God she didn’t believe in to rescue her. Rescue her before it was too late.



\* \* \*

Lillian fell asleep again at some point. Without the ability to see she couldn't tell the passage of time. The frantic thoughts that were scrambling through her brain left her without any way to judge how long she'd been awake, let alone know how long she'd spent asleep.

Her left arm had gone numb from where she'd lain on it. As she twisted her protesting body into a sitting position it sprang into life with ever more intensive bout of pins and needles until Lillian wished she'd stayed where she was. Better a dead arm than a live one writhing in pain.

Her headache had receded a bit. Her mouth was dry and gummed up with spit. Her throat felt like she'd swallowed acid and burned it raw. She craved a drink of water.

She could see the Pump bottle that she cheaply refilled every day rather than waste her resources on a new one. It made her feel like she was exercising when she walked from her parked car into her office and took sips of water through the feeding nozzle. *Look at me, look here, I've walked so far I need to rehydrate!*

A tiny flood of spit rode into her mouth at the thought of lifting it to her lips and pulling at it for a sweet mouthful of cool, clear, Christchurch water. The best water in the world. Flooding up from massive underground aquifers clean and crisp.

Lillian knelt on the floor to shift from her stiff backside. As she did so, she felt a wave of dizziness. Without a reference point to hold onto she couldn't work out where her body was.

It made her feel like she had the worst hangover, the type where all her senses were turned up loud to counteract the sedation poured

down her throat the night before so she couldn't perform the simplest of manoeuvres without concentrating all her attention.

She curled into a little ball. Once each piece of her was pressing against another piece of her Lillian managed to work out her sense of where her body was located. She tensed each muscle in turn to alert her to their position in space.

When she felt she had a handle on it she rolled over and up to her knees again. The dizziness returned, but in a slow wave this time that reminded her of morning sickness. Rolling up her body in waves. She curled into a ball again. Tight, tighter, tightest.

'Lillian,' she whispered. 'Your name is Lillian and you're in a bit of trouble at the moment, but you're going to work it out. You're going to get through this, then won't you have a story to tell at all those pointless parties that Greg drags you to?'

That's all it was. A horrible situation on its way to becoming an anecdote.

The dizziness washed over her again and she retched up sour spit inside the bag. It dribbled down and pooled into the fabric where her cheek met her ear.

The smell was appalling. She felt the urge to retch again. Lillian balled her hands into fists and pulled her wrists apart to ignite the pain. The plastic pulled at the sores she'd created earlier until it felt as though they'd been burned with oil.

Her nausea receded, and she rocked herself back and forth on the cold floor until the pain dimmed down as well.

'Oh fuck Lillian, you're in so much trouble,' she whispered, then giggled at the understatement. She'd learned long ago to avoid playing the drama queen.

\* \* \*

With hours to think about it, Lillian still hadn't worked out how she'd ended up wherever she was. Waiting in the darkness, unsure of whether there was somebody there or not, passing into sleep at the drop of a hat, then back into wakefulness without any clearly defined line.

As much as her present was a blurred line, so too was her past. She could think of a dozen mornings starting a dozen ways, but not the morning before she ended up here.

She could think of a dozen times she'd gone to sleep, but Lillian couldn't pinpoint the one prior to this.

Her headache had receded further still, and now the main source of the pain could be felt. There was a tight lump on the right side behind her ear.

Without the ability to explore it with her hands she'd had to settle for rolling it lightly on the floor to discover the limits of the wound. There was a definite egg there, and it flamed with pain even when lightly resting on the floor, but that was all she could tell.

Still, Lillian had the image of a blow being struck. Maybe from a memory, maybe just the memory from a thousand different movies.

What would be happening now at home? She couldn't think what day it would be, but she knew it had to have been at least one day since she was taken? Stolen? Abducted?

What would Greg be thinking? He would've noticed by now, no matter what state he was in. Even if she'd woken up here on a Sunday and he'd spent the whole day asleep and recovering from the excesses of a Saturday night, a trick that Lillian deeply envied and hated him doing in

equal measure, he surely would've noticed that she wasn't home by now.

She could picture him sitting on the couch with his hand shoved down the front of his jeans cradling his crotch, scratching and rearranging himself.

He'd wonder what to make himself for tea. He'd wonder if he had enough money to order in a pizza or only enough change to wander down to the corner Fish 'n' Chip shop and get a couple of battered sausages and a scoop.

Surely he'd notice that Lillian wasn't about to tell him off and try to force him into scoffing down a slightly healthier stir-fry. Surely he'd notice when she didn't force him to change the channel to watch a nice Sunday night drama, rather than just an endless parade of sports. Surely he'd notice when he crawled into bed and she wasn't there to be poked at and lain on.

Sure, he would notice, but how long would it be before he actually got around to doing something? Calling someone. Would Greg even bring himself to call the police if he knew for definite that Lillian was in trouble? He'd been pissed at them since a drug dog raid on his high school uncovered his stash of weed and failed to sniff out his dealer's locker. They'd forced him to go through a program that ate up half of his school holidays.

Christ. What if Greg was dead? What if Greg was in another room down here? What if his corpse was lying next to her, on the other side of the bars?

Lillian groaned and knocked her head back against the wall a few times. Why couldn't she remember? What use was her brain if it couldn't even fathom the sequence of events that led to her being held captive in an underground cell with

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her arms tied behind her and a sick-filled bag plastered against her face?

What use was her brain if it couldn't even figure out how to get her hands or her head free?