

## Prologue

“I think I must have scared the shit out of her,” Azrael joked to himself as he opened the van door and smelt the stench coming from the dark brown stain on the back of the girl’s jeans. He laughed, even though he couldn’t be sure if she had defecated from fear or because she lost control of her bowels from his accidental overuse of the stun gun. He’d only needed to hit the woman for a second or two to disable her, but his nerves got the better of him, and he kept shocking her for a good thirty seconds, just to be sure. He could smell burning flesh as he picked up the woman and dumped her in the van. This was his first abduction, and so far the plan was working.

Azrael looked at his victim lying face down on the floor of his white Toyota HiAce. Conveniently, the commercial van had no back seats or windows. As long as the police didn’t pull him over, and she didn’t wake up, no one would be able to see the sprawled petite twenty-something brunette. He wondered whether, when he bought this van five years ago, he had subconsciously known he would end up using it for this type of adventure.

He had picked up the girl from the university grounds around the corner from his house. It was luck, really. He’d been driving past and saw the woman walking by herself, and since there was no one around, Azrael went in for the kill, so to speak.

There had been no traffic nearby when he drove past the woman the first time, or when he doubled back. He stopped and asked her for directions. She leaned into the window to answer him, and a short squeak came out of her mouth as she was hit on the side of the neck with the stun gun. The woman silently convulsed and then dropped to the ground, whimpering in the fetal position and twitching occasionally. Azrael whistled as he casually got out, walked around, and opened the side door. “In you go, love,” he said as he picked her up and dumped her onto the floor of the van.

He drove around town, looking for a place to take her. He couldn’t take her to his one-bedroom apartment. If the neighbours didn’t see him carry her in, they’d certainly notice when he took her out again. He’d have to cut her up so she’d fit in the wheelie bin outside, but the bins were only collected on Mondays, and since it was Tuesday she’d have to sit around for a week. At the very least, he was sure the seventy-year-old woman who lived in the apartment next to him would be nosey enough to rummage through garbage to find out where an offensive smell was coming from.

Azrael decided to take his victim out to The Common, thousands of acres of City Council-owned bushland about an hour from his apartment. Burnt-out cars were regularly found dumped there. Kids often stole them to go bush-bashing, setting them on fire when they were done. By the time he got there it was nearly 7:00 p.m. Luckily it was spring, so the weather was warm enough for him to wear shorts, a t-shirt, and dirty old Converse sneakers. Springtime also meant the sun went down at about six, so it was dark by the time he got there. The moon was full, so Azrael had no problems seeing where he was going when he turned his lights off. As he drove through the bushland he was happy to note there were no cars on fire tonight. This meant there would be no unexpected interruptions from the local fire brigade.

He settled on a location a few kilometres into the property, where he figured he’d be most hidden. He shut off the van and listened. All he could hear were cicadas clicking outside his window and some muffled whimpers from the back of the van. *Ooh, she’s awake*, Azrael thought excitedly. He stepped out of the van and looked back towards the clearing he had just driven through. The van was concealed well enough by the dense scrub. He leaned back into the driver’s door to grab the map from the dash and to turn on the light above the rear-view mirror. *We are here*, he thought as he pointed at the middle of the map. *If we go by foot into the bush a few hundred metres, no one will find her.*

Azrael walked around the front of the van to the passenger door and pulled out a small backpack that was stuffed underneath the seat. He had been planning this for weeks and had

hidden the bag, which contained a hunting knife, zip ties, blue latex gloves, and various other items he might need on his adventure. He took out three zip ties and looped them together to make a chain. He would put an outer ring around each of his victim's wrists and tighten them to make handcuffs. Azrael put on the latex gloves and zipped up the backpack then shut the driver's door and pulled the bag onto his back.

As he opened the side door, the woman started to stir. He quickly dragged her towards him by the leg and turned her over onto her stomach. He pulled both of her arms behind her as he attached the makeshift handcuffs.

"Let go of me," the woman shrieked once she realised what was happening.

"You didn't have to shit yourself, madam," he said in his husky voice. "I'm not that scary."

"W-who, who are you?" she stammered. "What do you want from me?"

"Never mind who I am. You and I are going to have some fun out here tonight," he said playfully as he dragged the woman by her upper arm out of the van and onto the ground. She landed with a thud. She screamed as he yanked her up onto her feet. "Stand up and start walking. Don't bother screaming — no one can hear you."

About ten minutes later, Azrael had pushed her, kicking and screaming, further into the bushes. Once they had reached a suitable location, he kicked the woman's feet out from underneath her. She crumpled in a heap on the ground and sobbed, "Please don't hurt me." He unhooked one arm of his backpack, twisted the bag around in front of him, and took out the hunting knife. The blade was about thirty centimetres long, and when the woman saw the moonlight gleaming on it, she lost it and started shrieking hysterically.

Azrael became impatient with her screaming and yelled, "Shut up," before kicking her in the face. The woman stopped screaming, and he could see her right eye already starting to swell. She lay with tears silently streaming down her face. He slid the backpack off his arm and dumped it onto the ground beside her, then bent down and pushed the girl onto her back, crushing her hands, which were still bound behind her. He took the knife and held it to the girl's throat, putting just enough pressure on it to make a small cut. "Are you going to behave yourself?" he asked as he watched blood trickle in a thin red line just below her ear.

When she didn't answer, Azrael knelt down beside her and slowly used the knife to cut her white singlet. She shivered as he cut each strap just above her shoulder and again as he made a single long slash down the right side of the singlet. He pulled the top out from underneath her, scrunched it up, and put it to his nose. He breathed in the scent of her berry body wash and became aroused. He crawled over her until he was straddling her upper thighs. He was still holding the knife in his right hand but didn't have any trouble using it to steady himself as he put his hands down on the ground on either side of her shoulders to keep his balance. He leaned in to rub his face on her chest and let his lips rest between her breasts. She recoiled from his touch, and he could feel the friction from his five o'clock shadow scratching at her skin like razors. Suddenly, he turned his head to the right a little and bit down on her breast, just above where her lacy white bra was covering her nipple. He twisted his head and tore away a small chunk of flesh. She let out a blood-curdling scream and started to buck fiercely beneath him.

He sat up and looked down at the bite-sized hole in the woman's breast. He followed the blood trail down her stomach, onto his groin, and up the front of his shirt. He started to chew on the chunk of tissue, savouring the taste. Just as he moved his knife hand towards his face, so he could wipe away the blood dripping from his mouth with the back of his hand, the girl bucked her hips up and knocked him off sideways. She raised her right leg up to her chest and kicked him in the stomach, which forced him off her. The shock of the woman's defence made Azrael gasp. It rammed the piece of flesh he had bitten off towards the back of his throat, and he started to choke.

He dropped the knife, lay on his side, and clutched at his neck. The woman used this second of freedom to clamber to her feet and run away through the trees. By the time she had taken her first

step, Azrael had coughed hard enough to dislodge the flesh from his throat and spat it onto the ground. He grunted as he got to his feet and

gave chase.

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*He's coming.* Emily found it impossible to avoid branches whipping her in the face as she ran with her hands still cable-tied behind her. She had only been running for a few seconds before she could hear her attacker's breaths behind her. *Run! He can't catch you,* she thought urgently. Fear gripped her, and she moved faster than she had ever run before. There was a sharp sting in her wrists as he grabbed the centre of the zip-tie chain that was holding her arms together and yanked her backwards. She was pulled into the air, and just as she thought her shoulders would pop out of their sockets, the middle zip tie snapped. Her arms flew out to her sides just in time for her to land with a thump on her back. Her attacker tripped, fell forward on top of her, and knocked the wind out of her. They both lay for a second, his head near her feet, gasping for breath.

"Gotcha, you little bitch," he said breathlessly.

His weight crushed the air out of her lungs. Pain seared through her limbs, one by one, as he pressed down on them while he turned his body around until he straddled her again. Then his strong hands were on her throat. She could feel his wild eyes burn into her soul as he started to squeeze the life out of her. She coughed and choked as she struggled underneath him. Emily scratched desperately at his hands. He wouldn't let go. She reached out in search of anything that could help her and found a rock the size of her hand. She stretched out her arm and tried to grab it with her fingertips but couldn't get it into her grasp. She had just started to feel light-headed from the lack of oxygen from the short, quick breaths she took when her attacker readjusted his grip. *Come on, you can't die out here. Not like this,* she thought as she tried once more to pick up the rock.

Emily stretched her whole body as far as it could go and rolled the rock towards herself with her fingertips. She eventually got it close enough to pick up. She grabbed the rock in her right hand and beat him repeatedly in the temple. She felt her attacker's warm blood trickle down her arm as he lost consciousness. His full weight fell on top of her as she strained to get out from underneath him. Emily grunted as she pushed him off her and slowly got to her feet. She stood there for a few seconds, bent over with her hands resting on her knees, and tried to catch her breath. In between gasps, she saw her attacker start to stir. Emily stood up immediately and started to run through the dark bushes.

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Azrael woke to a pounding inside his head. The left side of his face felt hot and swollen. When he touched his temple, he could feel the warm blood oozing through his gloved fingers. *Shit,* he thought as he started to get up. *Where'd the little bitch get to?* He was dizzy as he got to his feet and had to stand still for nearly a minute to get his bearings. Once the nausea subsided, he looked around in the moonlight to find the girl's trail. He noticed some flattened and broken branches on a bush in front of him and figured she must have damaged them as she took off. He started to follow the trail.

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Emily wandered hysterically. She ran into bushes and tripped over roots for what seemed like hours. She eventually collapsed, exhausted; she couldn't stop sobbing. Once on the ground, she thought, *Slow, deep breaths. Calm down, he can't find you. You are going to be okay.* She looked around for a bush or a fallen tree to hide behind until daylight, when she hoped she'd be able to

find her way out of the maze of trees and scrub. She crawled on her hands and knees for another ten minutes and then unexpectedly heard something in the distance. Her heart fluttered as she tried to keep down the rising panic. She kept low to the ground as she crept slowly towards the noises and hid behind a cluster of bushes.

While keeping concealed, she poked her head out from behind a bush and listened intently. She heard laughter and the sound of empty beer cans clinking as they were thrown to the ground. Her stomach lurched as she saw a group of teenagers in the shadows. She crept over to some bushes nearer to them to get a better look. There must be six of them, four boys and two girls, standing around an old red V8 Commodore. Judging by the smashed rear quarter glass, it was stolen. She peeked through the scrub and saw two more later model Commodores sitting back a few hundred metres. Suddenly a fireball erupted around the stolen car, and they all started running towards the getaway cars. *Shit, they're leaving! I have to get their attention*, she thought as she ran out of the bushes, directly towards the group. "Help me!" she shrieked. "Help me, I've been abducted, let me come with you!"

She was a horrid sight: blood poured from cuts to her face, neck, and chest. Bruises had formed on her eye, cheek, and wrists. She was wearing only her stained jeans and bra, with no shoes, and was covered in dirt and clotting blood. Her wrists still had zip ties around them, and her hair was full of leaves and clumps of dirt. The teenagers didn't hear her, and by the time she had reached the burning car, they were in their getaway cars with the engines running. She ran towards the closest Commodore. The driver had just turned on its headlights, and it started to turn away from the flaming wreck.

Suddenly, the Commodore's headlights swept back in her direction. The car stopped as if it was trying to figure out whether what it was seeing was real. It slowly started moving towards her. The car stopped about ten metres away, and a blonde guy with a southern cross tattoo down one leg got out of the passenger side and came over to her. "Are you okay? Who are you?" the boy asked. He could not have been more than seventeen.

"Please take me with you, he's coming!" Emily screamed as she limped towards him. "Please."

The boy looked frightened as he stared wildly around. He focused back on her and said,

“Quick, get in the car!”

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“Fuck!” Azrael yelled. Exhausted from running, he stopped and gathered his wits. *I’m never going to find her*, he thought after searching for what seemed like an eternity. He looked down at the torn and bloodied latex gloves on his hands and thought, *Fuck this shit, I’m out of here*. He turned around and headed back towards the van.

As Azrael got to the van, he saw an orange glow from the top of some trees a few kilometres away. *Great, the Furies will be here soon. Just what I need*. About twenty minutes later, as he pulled onto the main road after leaving the gates, Azrael saw three fire trucks with sirens and lights blaring turn off into The Common.