

Nest.

Birdsong pauses as the car door slams, waiting, assessing the threat as it wanders into their midst. It: a woman, tall with dark searching eyes casting over the scrub. The tiny birds flit away as she steps toward the creeping vine, darting through gaps big enough only for them and the insects that wisp beneath the heavy growth. The birds here are used to the constant flashing of cars, fast shiny beasts that roar past but never deviate, never stop. But now this one is here, black and reflecting sharp light from its sleek, hard skin, and from it one of those rare giants with eyes like an owls', looking into the bush, into their home.

A warning call, high and shrill—she's not leaving, she's moving toward the nest.

I'm not here for you, she says, as if she understands them.

At the edge of the mass of leaves she crouches, the thick tangle of vine that's poured over the fence, concealing all beneath it and grown thick, dense. Flowers, purple trumpets wilting in the days' heat. She grasps the outer vines and lifts, as if to peer beneath a rug for something lost.

Through the dusty shadows she sees the ringlock fence, hidden for years behind this living curtain, which she lifts higher, eyes straining against the dark. But even after she sees it, the artificial woven plastic, the formless yet somehow distinct mass enclosed within, she doesn't believe it.

Panic now, a cacophony of alarm. She's too near the babies and not retreating. A gallant male swoops in, a flutter of blue and a loud chirp by her head, demanding her attention—follow me—away from the three precious new lives so carefully coaxed into existence.

Sorry birds, she says quietly. There's about to be a whole lot more of us.

They watch on, despondent, beyond panic as the vine that holds their home is cut and peeled away. Only the woman with those dark eyes seems to notice them; she stands back, arms folded as she watches—others, great white rustling ones—move about, clearing years of growth away from the fence. Finally she spots the nest and halts the demolition.

Three tiny beaks open, mistaking the disturbance for their parents and reach up silently, but are met only with air and sunlight.

She finds a nearby shrub, a prickly one away from the activity, and positions the intricately woven nest carefully in a prong of thorned branches. There you go, she says

gently, and returns to her kind. Every now and then, while she watches the proceedings, she glances at the bush now holding the nest, but in all the hours she's there, she never sees the parents return.

An enduring small town mystery, solved. Local news reporters deliver solemn reports: A young girl, missing for almost a decade, finally returned home. They condole the family, praise the hawk-eyed detective who made the discovery.

They want to interview her, the news stations, radio hosts, every crime podcaster in the country wants to have her. They shove microphones before her face as she leaves the station. Exceptional, they say, exceptional. How did she know? What made her look?

A hunch, she tells her superiors with a futile shrug. Just a hunch.

A raised eyebrow, a sidelong glance. Their scepticism only grows when she tries to explain it. For as long as she can remember she's mused to herself about the perfect place to hide a body. It sounds crazy, she knows, but there's a reason she became a detective. She has a mind for this—able to see in the dark, into the secret world that exists everywhere you look, just below the surface. Watched too much of The X-Files when she was a kid, she jokes, but they don't laugh.

A psych evaluation.

An internal investigation—she must have known something before she pulled over in that innocuous spot on a long, busy road.

Just a feeling. Just a feeling. Just a feeling.

An arrest is made. A known offender. She had to have known something—someone *must* have tipped her off. It was a hunch, just a terrible, terrible hunch. And every time she tries to sleep, all she sees in the blackness is three tiny beaks opening expectantly.

The relief of autumn comes in rain clouds, softening the ground baked dry from summer heat, and the plea is Not Guilty. It's going to court.

Months upon months of preparation, statements and forms. The family is there, watching, waiting, holding each other like monkeys weathering a storm. They squeeze her hand, thank her again, thank you, thank you, thank you for bringing our girl home.

The defence attorney argues an unlawful search—there'd been no warrant. And the judge—an ex-defense lawyer himself—agrees.

Inadmissible.

In the dead of winter it gets thrown out. Acquitted of all charges.

He walks free, and she can't sleep.

Purple flowers paint the inside of her eyelids and linger long after they're open, like burn-in on a screen.

Another investigation—this time the Anti Corruption Commission. How did you know there was a body under that vine?

I didn't, she says, again, again, again. I didn't even know it was someone's home—I thought it was the back of the nature reserve. I got a feeling, I looked, and I was right. I was *right*.

But she was wrong—it was private property, and now he's suing.

The killer is suing *her*.

A miscarriage of justice. She's so tired of hearing those words. She can't go to the grocers without someone stopping her—you're that detective! It's a sin, what they've let him get away with—that's our justice system for you. Faces pinched with dismay.

The most incredible fluke, simultaneously the most spectacular fuckup.

What made you pull over? a colleague asks, his tone curious but careful, soft with solidarity.

She casts her mind back to that day, that road, that decision. She'd driven past a thousand times before.

The vine, she says. It wasn't native. It looked out of place.

He shakes his head. Awe. No wonder you're with Homicide.

Not for long. Her superiors don't want the inquiries, IBAC sniffing around. They're encouraging her to transfer, start fresh somewhere else—or resign, you'll still get a police pension. But it doesn't matter where she goes, those three tiny beaks still open in the dark.

She runs as hard as she can, to exhaust her body, *make* herself sleep, beneath the twisted branches of tea trees and wattles, clusters of yellow pom poms and sweet smelling bursts of cream snow. The finches, hunting invisible insects in the excitement of spring, remind her of the lives she destroyed that day.

Theirs.

Hers.

Running doesn't work, and everywhere she goes she sees beneath the surface.

She sees the couple in the park pretending they aren't having sex under a blanket, families with children nearby. She sees the men at the last payphone in town, the square outlines of mobiles in their pockets; they don't need a phone—it's a drug drop. She sees the bus driver parking at the depo with a young woman still onboard—she's a sex worker.

She sees the men in the club, muscular necks and prison tattoos, brands on their shoulders like Thoroughbreds. They're the made men, rulers of the underworld.

Strobes beat with the music, so loud it feels like it's coming from inside her. Chemical detachment—the taste of freedom rubbed into her gums. I know who you are, his lips brush her jaw as they dance beneath swirling mist, temples beading with sweat. What are you looking for in a place like this? His hands, surprisingly gentle, suitably hard. What are these hands capable of? What have these hands done, and what would they do—for her?

Justice, she tells him, every ounce of her feminine power aimed at him like a missile.

This is a dangerous man, and in a word she commands him.

Coming down, down. One minute soaring, plummeting the next; depletion, cold in morning light. It was a dream, wasn't it? An unhinged indulgence laced with desperation—a fantasy.

The way forward is vanishing. A pariah at work—caused the department so much trouble. It was worth it though, her colleagues say. You gave the family closure.

Yeah, a blood sacrifice—her life for the girl's body.

Privately, bitterly, she wishes she'd never peered under that vine, never gotten out of the car, never pulled over. Why must she be cursed with sight where everyone else is blind? It's a responsibility too great for just one person; and she wonders... what would the world do without her in it, noticing these things?

Nothing. It would keep turning as if she'd never been here.

A call—the Chief wants to see her.

He's dead, she says, a cool stare unwavering. He was stabbed to death in an alleyway last night. No witnesses. No surveillance footage. His body was found in the gutter by a streetsweeper early this morning.

Pressure builds in her ears like she's on a plane taking off, a high pitched whir sings somewhere in her head and her breath catches within her. Was it a targeted attack? she asks, her voice a shadow.

Well, they didn't take his wallet or the cash inside it. What does that tell you?

Flames lick her throat as a strange sense of detachment takes over, a severance from her own being, from the world around her, dumb to all but a singular knowledge: she isn't just a witness to the clandestine dealings of the underworld now—she's part of it.

Birdsong pauses as the car door slams, waiting, assessing the threat as it wanders into their midst. It: a woman, tall with dark searching eyes casting over the scrub. The tiny birds flit away as she steps toward the ringlock fence, beside which a large For Sale sign stands, the leer of an estate agent in the bottom corner.

Dead remnants of the vine still twist around the wire. The ground on the other side, where a small body once lay, is now covered only with fallen leaves, dusty and dry. This was a resting place, the vine a memorial, a tribute, not to the girl but to the man who took her life—a grand testament to his own crime.

That's why she'd noticed—it was deliberate in a place of wilderness. Ego, where nature has none.

Sweat cools on her neck as a gentle breeze lifts her hair, and she watches a finch with blue swatches peer at her from a safe vantage.

The nest.

She goes to the prickly scrub, to the pronged branches where she'd placed it with the three tiny inhabitants inside. It's there, empty. The once carefully woven grass wall warped and thinned, falling apart from time and disuse. A grief, quiet and deep, for the little lives she derailed that day.

It's a curse to have sight for such things; a thousand tiny cuts, sensitive to things most people never notice.

But it is also power.

She walks among them—the sinners and monsters and killers, the ones who play in the wings of society, unchecked, revelling in the shadows.

And they never see her coming.