

Excerpt from QUIET IN HER BONES by Nalini Singh

My hands tightened on the steering wheel as my father got into the passenger seat.

We didn't speak, my eyes on the unmarked police vehicle up ahead. Driven by Constable Neri, it led us out of the leafy gilded surrounds of the Cul-de-Sac and onto a long and winding road bordered by the dense forests of the Waitākere Ranges Regional Park, with only small hamlets of habitation along the way—and glimpses of breathtaking vistas where the foliage opened up.

Scenic Drive lived up to its name. But only if you weren't expecting pretty and safe.

All that rich green turned parts of the road claustrophobic. It was never searing hot here, not in the cool darkness of the shadows cast by the forest giants. This was a quiet place, a place that whispered that humanity was an intrusion that would be swiftly forgotten once we were gone.

An unexpected flash of white, a large sign at the entrance to a trail, warning that the area was under a rāhui because of kauri dieback disease. No one was permitted to go on those trails, because the disease spread through the forest on the soles of human shoes, bringing a slow death to trees meant to grow far older than my mother would ever be.

I followed the police car knowing that if it stopped anywhere on this road, it'd be a spot I'd driven past hundreds of times.

Passing my mother's grave over and over again.

The unmarked car slowed as it turned a corner and when I followed, I saw flashing lights, road cones, and an orange-vested officer waiting to direct traffic through what had become a single narrow lane.

One of the darkest sections of the road and of the forest.

The land dropped off precipitously to my right, but not into emptiness. Into bush dense and thick and impenetrable to the human eye. Ancient kauri trees, nīkau palms, huge tree ferns, this landscape was theirs.

Constable Neri brought the police vehicle to a stop behind a van and I pulled in behind her. Everyone waited while I got the crutches from the backseat, no one speaking. Armpits snugged into the tops of the walking aids, I nodded, and the cops led us to a part of the road that had no safety barrier against the fall

into the green. I couldn't remember if it ever had.

"The car was found at the foot of this incline," Regan told us. "Nose down."

That fit my father's theory of it sliding off the road and down the steep slope into the devouring forest. I wanted to dispute the idea of my mother driving off the road on a rainy night, such a neat and tidy end to everything, but she *had* drunk too much as long as I could remember, and she *could* be a reckless driver.

Of course, if I were the one writing this story, I'd use those very things to cover up a murder. Cover up a scream.

"Why did no one notice?" my father demanded, an edge to his voice that could've been either shock or fear. Maybe both. "There must've been a trail, broken trees, something!" He was using his "I am the CEO" tone.

That's what my mother used to call it.

*"Yes, Mr. CEO-ji. No, Mr. CEO-ji."*

That honorific *ji* at the end had been the icing on the sarcasm cake. Maybe it had begun in affection, but it had ended in mockery. In truth, I didn't really remember affection between them. Sometimes I remembered a softer voice, less aggressive encounters, but even then, it had been brittle and one fight away from splintering.

My father is a hard man to love. I've never been sure if he even wants love, or if all he wants or needs is obedience. As for returning any affection given, that's a non-event. To Ishaan Rai, his family is his possession. Particularly his wife. I didn't know if my mother was ever happy to be owned, if she began married life compliant and quiet, but the woman I remember hated it with a vengeance.

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