

chapter one

The rain began as the train pulled slowly up the coast, through the small towns and dairy farms. It fell lightly at first, then descended as if a solid mass of water, sweeping across the hillsides of banana palms and bowing the cows' heads where they stood in the lush paddocks.

Every tree sliding by was a marker of the distance stretching between Allie and her mother, stretching thinner with every moment. Taking her further from their small terrace house where her mother would bucket hot water into their outdoor bathtub late at night, glowing mosquito coils scattered around the garden. Where her mother would climb naked out the bedroom window onto the roof to watch the sun rise over the city.

'Sure you don't want a rock cake?' Allie's aunt leaned over the armrest and offered the creased brown paper bag again.

'No. I hate them.' Allie turned to look out the window

and in the reflection, watched crumbs dropping onto her aunt's shirt as she ate.

'Oh? These are pretty good,' said Julia. 'Wouldn't win anything at the Show though. See how the sultanas are mostly near the bottom?' She pointed with a thick finger then held the last of the cake high in the air and twirled it back and forth. 'You know, I used to be a judge at the Show a few years ago. The youngest judge ever, until they discovered I was doing it completely randomly.'

Allie hated her aunt for seeing right into her one moment of doubt and using it to bustle her onto the train. They had been in the kitchen after breakfast, teacups draining on the sink, the table wiped clean between them and Allie ready to leave for school, when Julia started telling her what the policeman had said. There were just words stringing their way through the air, until suddenly Allie couldn't breathe. It was as if the room had filled with water and they were sitting across the table from each other, eyes wide, holding their breath underwater. And somehow she had agreed to pack a bag and get on the train.

'Hey,' Julia's hand was warm on her arm, 'I'm going up to the buffet car. Do you want a sausage roll or something?'

Allie shook her head and kept her eyes fixed on the passing landscape as the train slowed and the paddocks gave way to a town. The rain overflowed in curtains from the gutters of small weatherboard houses and tall weeds grew high and luxuriant against back fences. She imagined her mother holed up in a town like this, sleeping in, then eating Chinese takeaway in her motel room.

Only the week before, her mother had gone to Central station and got on the first train to come along. She told Allie that the old rattler took her west, through the new brick housing estates and high up into the Blue Mountains where she could see out over the red-roofed suburbs of Sydney. That evening, sitting up at the red Formica table in the kitchen, chopping onions for dinner, Mae described how she'd got off at Lithgow to catch a train back to the city, back to Allie. She had stood waiting on the cold platform, breathing the diesel fumes and the smell of coal from the mines while the carriages shunted and groaned beside her and she wished she could get back onto her train and coast down on to the western plains, that great free expanse of land, stretching all the way to the desert.

Julia took her seat again. 'That was Grafton we just went through. I always imagined it a much bigger place. Funny.'

From the corner of her eye, Allie watched her aunt sipping the paper cup of tea. There was nothing of her mother in Julia's long thin nose and rosy cheeks, even though they shared the same blood. Mae was creamy and elegant. Julia was tall and moved like a man and seemed so much older than she was. In Sydney she kept bumping into the furniture and doorways in the tiny house, her work boots loud on the floorboards.

Allie turned away and pressed her forehead hard against the cool glass of the window. The last time she had made the same trip, years ago, it was Mae beside her. Her mother had traced a long finger down the window, along the lines of rain tearing thin in the wind. Allie reached out a hand to do the same. Reflected in the glass was the curved collar

of her school blouse that her mother had ironed on the weekend. She shut her eyes, every muscle in her body resisting the motion of the swaying train as it carried her northwards.

At the small train station, she ran across the platform to the shelter of the tin roof, the raindrops bursting on her hot skin and working their way under her clothes. Julia waited for the guard to pass the big suitcase from the boxcar, the rain plastering her long hair flat to her head.

Allie turned to a man in a blue uniform and shouted over the sound of the rain, 'When's the next train to Sydney?'

'Goin' back so soon?' He had missed some of his whiskers when he shaved. 'Not until the day after tomorrow,' he said. 'No passenger train till then, love.'

'What time does it go?'

'One o'clock.'

Julia was beckoning to her, shielding her eyes from the rain. Allie stepped out from the shelter of the verandah and followed her aunt across the gravel car park, over the puddles and carpet of bruised purple jacaranda flowers.

'Hop in if you like. Get in out of the rain.' Julia lifted their bags into the boot of the car. 'I'll finish loading up.'

Allie sat in the front seat, water still sliding down her skin, and looked over the train tracks at the people hurrying down the main street, under the long rows of palm trees. The first time she saw the palms, she had thrilled to their thin ribbed trunks and wild bursts of fronds. When she and Mae went home to Sydney, she had longed to return

and look up at the line of palm trees and breathe the humid air, thick with sugar from the mills.

Julia slammed the boot and strode around the car. 'We could be in for some serious weather,' she said as she got in and leaned forward to wipe the foggy windscreen with her sleeve. 'The guard reckons there's a cyclone up north. We might catch the tail end of it. What were you talking to the stationmaster about?'

Allie watched the train gliding away. 'I'm going back on Thursday.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean I'm going home.'

'I know you don't want to be here but you can't stay down there on your own. You're fourteen!' Julia's voice softened, 'What was I to do? Really, what was I to do?' She paused. 'You know . . .'

'But she'll come home, Julia. She'll get home and I won't be there! The house will be empty. How will she know where I am?' She saw the little terrace house as it was when Julia had hurried her out to the taxi, the beds stripped and curtains drawn.

'Allie,' Julia turned to look at her, 'I don't think Mae's coming back. The police . . .'

'How do they know?' Her aunt's eyes were suddenly too much like her mother's. 'What would any of you know about her? You haven't seen her for years. She's just taken off to clear her head.' She reached for the doorhandle, but couldn't bear more rain on her skin. 'Tom drives her mad sometimes . . . she always comes back.'

'It's been three nights.'

'I already told you! They had a fight. Even she says it, that she always runs away when things get difficult.'

'I know,' Julia sighed. 'Mae's always run away.'

'And she always comes back!'

Julia kneaded the steering wheel. 'Her clothes were on the seat of the dinghy . . .'

'She always skinny-dips! See, you don't know her at all!'

Julia nodded and started the car. 'Let's just go home and have something to eat . . . eh?'

Allie shook her head and looked out the window as her aunt drove them through town, over the wide brown river and towards the mountains, the rain drumming relentlessly on the roof of the car and stirring the fields of sugar cane, bending the tall stalks in waves. It was the very same rain that had fallen on her mother's skin before Allie was born, the raindrops making an endless circuit from earth to clouds, the same water falling again and again for decades. She touched her tongue to the back of her hand and tried to remember the taste of her mother's skin.

Julia drove with her legs wide and her hand resting on the column shift. The car ground slowly up the steep hairpin bends, each turn revealing the river winding across the floodplain below.

Allie spoke into the silence, 'The police have obviously got no idea what a good swimmer she is.'

Julia nodded. 'You're right. They probably don't . . .' She wound her window down a crack. 'You know, she used to swim up and down the waterhole for hours. She said the eels nipped her. It made me too scared to go in.'

Allie thought of Mae's arms curving neatly into the

water. On unbearably hot summer nights, the two of them would go down to the harbour to swim off one of the industrial wharves. Mae would skip ahead, swinging her towel and shouting, her voice echoing around the dark warehouses shut up for the night, 'To swim! To swim!' Allie would paddle close to the ladder, listening to the waves slapping into the massive wooden piers and watching Mae swim way out into the darkness of the harbour, her pale arms flashing over the black water. Later, they ran home through the narrow streets, the tar road warm and soft under their bare feet and their towels flapping from their shoulders like capes. Allie would wake in the morning and find the sheets and mattress damp from her wet hair and swimming costume.

'She taught me how to swim, you know,' she said to Julia. 'The guy at the pool said she could be a swimming teacher and he'd give her a job.'

'I bet he did!' Julia started to say something else then shook her head. 'Oh, Mae.'

She glared at her aunt. 'So, can you swim as well as her?'

Julia changed gears as they reached the top of the hill. She turned to Allie and shook her head.

It was the same as last time, the dirt road winding into the narrow valley and the forest coming right down to the vivid green paddocks. The rain started to fall even harder and the car filled with the sound of the windscreen wipers beating back and forth. Julia stopped at a small weatherboard shop with a faded Coke sign in the window and a knot of kids in bright raincoats waiting under the shelter of the verandah. She reached for the car door.

‘Why don’t you come in with me? I’m going to pick up a couple of things. You could see if there’s anything special you’d like. Chocolate or chips . . .’

‘No.’

Julia slammed the door behind her and hurried through the rain to the shop.

Allie had forgotten the way the wet heat of the valley entered her body and slowly rose through her, as if heating and swelling her insides. She remembered the sweat beading on her mother’s skin when they came up last time, small trembling balls of moisture on her upper lip and neck. Perhaps Mae had taken the train over the Blue Mountains all the way to the desert, perhaps she was standing on the hot red dirt this very minute, looking out into the shimmering nothingness.

The back door of the car opened and a woman got in, piling bags of shopping onto the seat. ‘So, I’m Petal,’ she said. She had a tanned face and blonde hair pinned up on her head.

‘Hello.’ Allie could smell something sweet, like the joss sticks Mae bought in Chinatown once.

‘You’re with Julia.’

‘She’s my aunt. She’s my mother’s younger sister.’

‘Oh. I never knew Julia had a sister. I thought she was an only child.’ Petal began rummaging in her things, taking out bulging brown paper bags and scraps of twisted paper. ‘So, where do you live? I haven’t seen you around.’

‘Sydney. I’m only staying until Thursday.’ Allie could see the curve of Petal’s breasts through her thin shirt. Mae didn’t care if the neighbours saw her naked on the roof. An old man who lived in a boarding house across the

back lane would watch from his window. 'It's my gift to him,' Mae used to say.

'Only till Thursday?' said Petal. 'Uh oh. I hope it stops raining for you then. They say the wet season's going to be early this year. But you must have been here lots of times. Your family's an institution in this place. Here it is!' She pulled out a jar of dark golden honey, still flecked with wax. 'This is unbelievable, it's from the rainforest.' She unscrewed the lid, 'Stick your finger in. Taste it.'

Allie was surprised at how thick the honey was. She shut her eyes to the intense sweetness and the sensation of sucking on her finger. There, in the muggy car, with the spicy damp smell of the woman and the drumming rain, she felt certain that her mother was starting to make her way home.

Petal touched the back of Allie's neck with a sticky finger. 'Look how you're sweating. Julia never swims in the waterholes, she says the water's too murky. But if you want, I'll take you down for a swim before you go. There's a path from our side of the creek.'

Allie nodded, the sensation of Petal's finger lingering on her skin.

A big white school bus pulled up and the kids ran out to climb on, slipping in the mud. An old man and child got off the bus and stepped slowly over the puddles. The man, in a long brown raincoat and felt hat, glanced at the car, and then stopped, pausing in the rain to look again, his eyes narrowing. He walked along the verandah of the shop, and turned to look back from the doorway.

'He's looking at you,' said Petal. 'You must know him, do you? Old Clarry.' She screwed the lid back on the jar.

'No. I've only been here once before. Who is he?'

'One of the original valley folk, owns a property back that way.' She motioned with her head up the valley. 'He spends most of his time babysitting these days. He bugged his back.' She bit into a small red apple. 'So you've only been here once, huh?'

Julia got back in the car and passed Allie a paper bag to hold.

'Old Clarry was just looking at your niece like he'd seen a ghost,' said Petal.

'Oh, really? Where you'd spring from, Petal?' Julia smiled over her shoulder.

'I was hoping you'd give me a lift. Thought I'd have to walk the rest of the way home in the bloody rain.'

'No worries,' said Julia as she started the car.

'Where have you been? I dropped in to see you yesterday.'

'Sydney.' Julia pulled out around the bus.

'Can anyone take the bus?' Allie asked.

Julia frowned at Allie.

'Yeah,' said Petal. 'I take it to town sometimes. You've got to put up with all the kids though. Julia, you went to Sydney? Really? Why?'

'What time does it come by?' said Allie.

'Twice in the morning,' said Petal. 'At about seven and then at eight. One run for the primary school and one for the high school. Do you like catching buses?'

'I need to get to town in a couple of days.'

Julia sighed. 'You know you can't, Allie. It's just not . . .'

Allie clenched her teeth and looked out at the rain moving in curtains along the high valley walls. 'You can't

stop me, you know. Mae will be bloody furious when she finds out.'

Petal leaned forward. 'Who's Mae? Your mum?'

'Just drop it, Petal.' Julia braked suddenly to cross a low cement bridge.

'Okay, okay. Keep your pants on, love. Hey, did you know your car is leaking back here? There's water coming in the door seal.'

'Yeah. I know it.'

Petal wound down the window and threw her apple core out into the rushing brown water. 'Oh well, it matches everything else at your place then. Look how high the creek is already.'

Allie turned in her seat to face Petal, her back to Julia. 'Will it flood?'

'Yes,' said Julia. 'It floods every year. But we won't have a big one for a while yet, there's not enough water in the soil. Maybe later, after Christmas.'

When Allie was younger, she and her mother used to lie in bed listening to the rain and imagining the great flood that would come. They planned to wait in their hilltop terrace house, watching the whole city go under, then they would launch their dinghy from the roof and paddle around the vast new sea.

'Like the flood when I was born?' she said.

Julia glanced over at Allie. 'So you know about that?'

'She tells me everything.' She stared back at her aunt, 'Everything about the valley.'

'Oh, is that right?' Julia smiled as she turned the car up a muddy rutted driveway. 'Hey Petal, there'll be heaps of eggs in the chook house. Go grab some if you want.'

She looked sideways at Allie. 'Do you remember collecting eggs when you came up for Dad's funeral? You really loved the chooks.'

'Yeah. I remember.' She was eight years old and she had sat up beside her aunt at the kitchen table, helping wrap each smooth brown egg in a piece of newspaper and packing it into a small cardboard box. She had carefully carried the box onto the train, thinking of the plump hens scratching at their straw. Halfway home, Mae had taken the box from her and dumped it into one of the rubbish bins and Allie had quietly cried for the golden yolks the chickens had made for her.

She hardly recognised the farmhouse for the trees and bushes growing up against the walls and over the rusted tin roof. Last time, the cows had grazed the pasture right up to a neat wire fence around the house.

Straggly hydrangea bushes wiped against her legs as she followed Julia up the cracked cement path, past the fence, rusting where it lay in the waist-high grass. Mae would laugh when Allie told her that purple fluffy-topped weeds were blooming in the cracks between the verandah boards.

'They'll be mad at me for leaving them for so long,' said Julia, looking over to where Petal was opening the door of the chicken shed, the birds clucking indignantly. 'I'll take them some green stuff later.' She banged the front door open with her hip.

Inside, there was the sour smell of mould and every flat surface was stacked with books and papers and glass jars of what looked like dust.

'Seeds. They're seeds,' said Julia, as Allie bent to look

at one of the jars. 'I'm helping the forest reclaim its land.' She waved her hand towards the paddock outside the window and walked through into the next room.

The place was even messier than last time. A vine curled in an open window by the front door, its fine green tendrils reaching for the curtain rod, and blue work shirts hung on a line sagging across the room. Last visit, Mae had stopped at the front door as if reluctant to step inside, then she had walked slowly through every room in the house, trailing her fingers over the walls and the heavy dark furniture, leaving shiny tracks in the dust and collecting spider webs on her fingertips.

'You're in here.' Julia put one of Allie's bags in Mae's old room, with its two narrow single beds. She touched the toe of her boot to the puddle on the floor. 'I'd better get you a bucket for that leak.'

From the window Allie watched Petal trudging across the paddock under a red umbrella, past dozens of small trees growing up through green plastic tree guards. Petal closed the umbrella, then bent to climb through the wire fence and disappeared into the tall forest. Allie didn't recall the forest being so dark or close to the house.

Julia sat down on one of the beds. 'I'll make some space for you in the wardrobe. There's some old dresses of Mae's in there you might like to wear. They should fit you.'

'I'm not staying, Julia.'

'Allie? I'm just trying to be realistic . . .'

Her voice was loud. 'You know where she is? She's in some hotel down south. She's staying down there and getting herself together. She's done it before.'

'You never said she'd left you alone overnight.'

'I never said she didn't!' She paused, 'She's only done it once or twice.'

Julia shook her head, and spoke quietly, 'Listen to me. She's not at some country pub. They found her dinghy. It's just a matter of time . . .'

'It's not her dinghy! It's my dinghy. And what gives you the right to make me stay up here? You're not my mother.'

Julia looked down at her feet. 'You know what the police said.'

'No! That's just what you want. I know you were always jealous that she got away from the valley and you never did. Because you were never brave enough to leave.'

'What?' Julia's eyes widened. 'Is that what she told you?' She got up awkwardly and stood in the doorway, shaking her head. 'Oh, that's rich. That's bloody rich, that is.' She walked out, her boots heavy on the floorboards.

Allie sat down on the bed that she knew had been Mae's when she was a girl. Everything was damp, the blanket under her and her school blouse sticking to her hot skin. She lay down and rolled over to face the wall. The house shook as Julia banged open the swollen wooden door onto the back verandah.

The first night that Mae ever stayed away, Allie had sat up in the dark kitchen, her senses tuned to the faintest noise or movement as she waited the night through. She never spoke to anyone about it, not her teacher when she took herself to school in the morning and not even to Mae when she found her mother sitting on the back step in the afternoon, smoking and reading a magazine, the

oars laid out on the kitchen floor, ready for a row on the harbour.

The day they got the dinghy was Allie's ninth birthday. Mae had woken her early and the sun was just starting to rise as they let themselves out of the house and walked down the empty streets. At the wharves, fishermen in gumboots hosed down boat decks and wheeled crates along the dock. Inside, they skated boxes of fish and ice over the floor, shouting across the room to each other, and there was the sharp smell of raw fish. It was embarrassing the way men noticed Mae, heads turning to watch her pass.

After a few minutes a tall man with a thin red face came over and stood beside her. 'Mae,' he said and started to roll a cigarette.

'Hey George.'

'I've got it down at the wharf for you. You still want it then?'

'Uh huh,' Mae nodded and reached for his pouch of tobacco. He smiled and handed her his just-rolled cigarette and leaned forward to light it for her.

'So, this is your daughter?'

'This is Allie. It's her birthday.' Mae's warm hand rested on her shoulder.

He smiled at Allie. 'You like fish?'

She liked crumbed fish fingers but not the whole fish with dead eyes that Mae sometimes brought home and baked in the oven.

'Go and pick one, love. From that box over there.' He pointed, 'Go on. It's okay.'

She walked over and stood before the box and then turned back to look at Mae. The man and her mother

watched her, smiling. She looked down at the slimy skin and glistening eyes. Then he was behind her. 'That one?' he pointed.

She nodded.

He picked it up and wrapped it in paper and gave it to her. 'Come on. Let's go get your birthday present, Miss Allie.'

At the wharf, seagulls screamed, rising and falling with the wind, orange legs extended. The small tin dinghy floated down below, a puddle under its wooden bench seat.

'You can leave her at my mooring if you want, Mae. You know where it is. You'd best take the oars with you, though. I might be able to find somewhere for you to leave them. But take them today.' He stood with his legs wide and arms crossed.

Mae smiled up at him. 'You're a winner George. It's perfect.'

'Whatever you say, Mae. Whatever you say, darlin'.' He rested his hand on her cheek for a moment.

They walked back through the streets, Mae holding the oars across her shoulders and Allie carrying the heavy fish. At home, Mae leaned the oars behind the door in the laundry.

'Can we row out to one of the harbour islands for a picnic?' Allie asked.

'Sure, sweetheart. Of course.' Mae washed her hands at the laundry tub.

'Can we take Clare from school with us? I owe her a visit to my house.'

Mae turned off the tap. 'Let's make it our secret. Just

you and me. You won't say anything to Tom, will you? Let's not share it with Clare or Tom or anyone.'

Allie didn't see the fisherman again until he appeared at the front door the morning that Mae disappeared. He stood beside the policeman, the two of them silhouetted in the sunlight.

In the afternoon, she stood at the bedroom window and watched her aunt wheel a barrow of saplings down the long slope to the bottom paddock. Julia had trampled the weeds to make paths to the newly planted trees. All signs of the cows were gone, except for the old dairy building and a tractor, streaked brown with rust and abandoned in the house paddock.

Soon she would be sitting on the train again, watching the landscape change back to dry eucalyptus and sandstone, gliding alongside the Hawkesbury River where oyster frames break the glassy surface. Mae would be waiting for her in their little kitchen, wearing one of her sundresses, her hands around a steaming teacup.

Julia disappeared behind the high weeds and there was just the wind scattering rain across the tin roof and a distant cow lowing. Allie had heard quiet crying from Julia's room earlier in the day and the memory of it turned her guts to ice in the heavy afternoon heat.

She found a pair of muddy gumboots on the verandah and hurried down the stairs and through the wet grass, the oversized boots slapping her calves with every step. She was surprised by the wave of relief she felt when she saw Julia bending to pick up a potted tree.