

Chapter One

Rachel woke to rain drumming on the roof, that familiar and comforting ocean of noise. A door slammed somewhere in the dark house and she reached for her lamp, but the power was out.

She made her way down the dark hall, fingers trailing along the wall, to her mother's room, where a flash of lightning lit up the billowing curtains. Rachel slid the stiff window shut, the rain spitting in at her, the carpet under her feet already damp.

Her mother's sleeping face was deathly pale. Rachel hated how hard she found it that her mother was ready to die, ready to leave Rachel behind.

'Is that you, darling?'

'I'm right here.' Rachel crossed to the bed and her hand found her mum's bony shoulder.

Her mother fumbled at the bedside lamp.

'There's a blackout, Mum. I'll light the candle.' She struck the match as another thunderclap shook the house.

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She sat the candle on the dresser and lay beside her mother. Was it the last time they would lie like this? It had become an awful habit; as they played Scrabble or as she kissed her mother good night, she'd think: *Is this the last time?*

'You seem quite awake, Mum,' Rachel said.

'I often am in the night.' Her mother patted Rachel's arm. 'It's when I see Scotty.'

Rachel's heart beat faster. 'Right.' She longed to ask whether he looked happy.

'Remember the night the car broke down on Dorrigo Mountain?'

'I do.' Every day her mother would light upon some memory, some of them incidents Rachel could barely remember: the baby rabbit they saved from a cane fire or her aunt breaking an ankle at a church picnic down by the river. Surely one day soon her mother would bring up the day of Scotty's death.

Her mum adjusted the neck of her nightie. 'In a storm, any watertight pocket of air, even a car, feels secure.'

Rachel's dad had walked up the winding mountain road, into the rainy darkness, looking for a phone to call roadside assistance. Rachel and Scotty and their mum waited in the car where they ate still-warm lasagne from the baking dish, the rain on the car roof too loud for them to talk. Her brother's fingers had brushed against hers and he'd elbowed her when she peeled a slab of melted cheese from the top of the lasagne.

'Scotty really wanted to go with Dad,' Rachel said.

'Yes. I don't know why I was so worried about him going out into the rain and wind.' The tremor started up in her mother's arm. 'There we go again.'

Rachel laid her hand on her mother's cool elbow. Outside, the rain pelted down and she imagined the old leak in the

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kitchen springing, the water working its way down through all the silicone her dad had pumped under the roof iron.

Emily cleared her throat to speak over the rain. 'I'm afraid there'll be no one left who remembers my boy.'

'One day there'll be no one who remembers any of us.'

Her mother's voice wavered. 'But in what would have been his lifetime, I want him remembered.'

'I'll remember him.' Above them, twigs and small branches clattered onto the roof.

'What do you remember?'

'Oh . . . his hair and the way he ran.' In the candlelight Rachel moved her arms to imitate his long-legged gait. He had been tall for eight. Of course her mother would know that what Rachel remembered most was how he looked in death. She had given up hoping for that image to fade from her mind's eye.

The bedside light flickered on, too bright. Rachel reached over Emily and switched it off.

'I have his clothes and things in the garage,' said her mother. 'We should get rid of them.'

'You still have his clothes?' Rachel tried to keep the dismay from her voice.

'Clothes. Toys. Books.' Emily didn't look at her.

'Okay. We can do that.' The rain was easing. 'Do you want some fresh pants on?' Her mother referred to them as nappies but Rachel couldn't bear to.

'No thanks, darling.'

Over the sound of the rain and wind came a loud crack from the backyard. Rachel lifted up onto her elbows to look out the window and sure enough, a flash of lightning showed that the shed roof had gone. Rain would be spattering all over her father's shelves of dusty tools and half-empty paint tins.

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‘What was that?’ asked her mother.

‘The shed roof.’

‘Oh.’

Rachel helped her mother turn over, then stood and ballooned the top sheet high into the air and let it settle. Her voice caught. ‘How old is Scotty when you see him, Mum?’

‘He’s eight. Exactly as he was.’

‘And does he look happy?’

Her mother paused. ‘He does. Now off you go, back to bed.’ Her voice was steadier than it had been for a while, more like the voice Rachel remembered.

‘Good night.’ Rachel blew out the candle.

‘Good night, darling.’

Rachel’s bedroom was bright with light blazing from the doctor’s house next door. All around town people would be awake after the storm. Rachel adjusted her curtains to block the light and lay down. She knew her mum thought of Scotty and of Rachel’s father every day. Who would think of Rachel after she died? Did Karl think of her now? It was amazing how easily someone who wasn’t blood slid out of your life. She had woken next to Karl for four years and now she went days without thinking of him. Was it only ever family who remembered you truly?

The air had cooled in the wake of the storm and she pulled the sheet up. When she finally closed her eyes she saw her father putting her to bed the night Scotty died. He’d kneeled on the floor and stroked her hair while the silence in the house pressed down around them. He hadn’t said so but Rachel had known that it was too awful for her mother to see her.



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The garden was a mess. In the wan post-storm sunlight, Rachel picked her way barefoot over the fallen twigs and carpet of sticky leaves.

She was contemplating the roofless shed when her mother's new doctor appeared between the bushes at the fence. He wore a rumpled t-shirt and jeans and cradled a mug. 'Good morning,' he called.

She wrapped her cotton dressing gown a little more tightly. 'Morning! How did you fare over there?'

'Just a flooded laundry. But I do have something that's yours, by the look of it.'

'Would that be a small red roof?'

'It would.' He grinned.

She sighed and crossed to the fence. There it was, neatly placed in the middle of his back lawn. 'Oh, bugger.' She swung her legs over the fence and pushed through the wet branches.

They stood looking down at the roof and the furrows on the lawn where it had touched down. His black thongs sank into the muddy grass and she smiled at his neatly trimmed toenails and pale feet. When he had come to see her mother for the first time the week before, a day of suffocating summer heat, he'd worn a tie and woollen suit pants.

She bent and raised one corner of the roof. 'Dad built this years ago. I don't know why it suddenly took flight last night.'

He touched his thong to a chunk of lawn gouged out by the roof. 'Only a short flight though,' he said. 'Like a baby bird that leaves the nest too soon.'

'Yes, exactly.' She thought of the scruffy fledgling Tawnies she used to find down at the park. 'Watch your foot.' She dropped the roof back onto the grass. 'Would you help me lift it over the fence?'

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He placed his mug on the cement path and crouched down to take hold of one end of the roof. A twig was stuck in his dark, curly hair and she wondered if she should reach over and pick it out.

He looked up at her. 'I wonder how baby birds make themselves take that first flight when they've never flown before?'

'I guess they're not programmed to be afraid of launching into space like we are.' She bent to the roof.

'I guess not.' He smiled. 'Ready? One, two, three . . .'

They crossed the soggy grass and slid the roof over the wire fence. A lizard flashed its blue tongue at them and scurried away.

He leaned against the fence and regarded her mum's garden. 'Is that the only damage?'

'Yeah. This place has weathered hundreds of those storms that swing over the border from Queensland.'

'You grew up in this house?' His eyes ran over the white timber cottage.

'I did.' She couldn't help feeling touched by the intent way he took it in. The shapes of the house and placement of its doors and windows were as known to her as her own face; it had held her when her mother would not.

'I should tell you,' she said, 'that from my bedroom I can see right into your place at night. I can see everything you're doing in the living room and kitchen.'

'Really?' He smiled. 'Well, they are very big windows.' He combed his fingers through his hair, found the twig and flicked it away. 'It's not my house though.'

'I know. How do you know Bill?'

'We were at uni together.' He crossed his arms and twitched a smile at her.

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He'd be regarded as handsome by his women patients, like her Aunty Beryl. *That disby Dr Davidson*, Beryl would say. He didn't do it for Rachel; he was too boyish, too soft-looking around the edges, but he did have an appealing earnest quality.

'You may *see* me,' he said, 'but I can *hear* you.'

'Oh, we're used to that,' she said. 'I used to lie in bed at night and listen to Maeve and Linky, who owned the house before Bill. I heard every word they said if they were in that front room.'

'What did they talk about?'

She pictured tall, thin Linky who dropped dead from a heart attack while weeding, and Maeve who moved to her daughter's in Casino straight after the funeral. 'Their kids. The garden. They talked about my parents a bit.' She climbed back over the fence and crossed to her mother's small, neglected vegie patch beside the outdoor laundry. The storm had shredded the silver beet. 'They thought my parents let us kids rule the roost,' she said. 'It made me think the same in the end. Insidious.'

'I wonder if they knew you were listening?'

'I don't think so.' She didn't like the idea that Linky and Maeve said those things with the intention of Rachel hearing. 'Do you want some limes?'

'Sure. If you have some to spare.' He climbed over the fence and came to stand beside her as she twisted five glossy fruits off the tree and passed them to him. Even in its neglected state, her mother's garden offered up citrus, beans, herbs, passionfruit and pale green chokos that straggled along the back fence.

'That's more than enough,' he said. 'I'll take them home with me this evening.' He looked down at the limes in his cupped hands. 'I want to say, after our conversation about your mother's treatment the other day, that you and I really do have the same goal. To give your mother the best possible quality of life.'

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'I know.' She smiled at him. 'You don't have to worry about offending me. I'm practically un-offendable.'

'Un-offendable?' He raised his eyebrows and smiled. 'I'll remember that, then.'

Perhaps it was he who had been offended by her questioning of the complicated medication regime he'd given her mother. She said, 'I tell you someone who *has* managed to piss me off, though . . . When I was in Sydney, I rang Jim Stanton and he didn't tell me Mum had got so much sicker.' She blinked back tears. 'She kept saying she was fine until finally my aunt called me to ask why I wasn't here.'

He grimaced. 'Well, it really is up to your mum, not her GP, to tell other people about her health.'

'Oh, come on! He could have somehow indicated *something* to me. He just likes to play the big man around town.' Why did she always end up being sharp with this guy? Their conversation about her mother's medication had become uncomfortably tetchy. She bent and picked a sprig of parsley. 'Do you want some of this, too?'

'No, thanks. You do know I'm only in town two days a week? But if you're concerned about anything at all, call me anytime in Brisbane. And once we get her doses sorted out, I'll hand things back to Jim.' He nodded. 'I should get ready for work, now. Let me know if you want a hand lifting the roof back up later on, before I head home.'

'Are you a handyman as well as a doctor?'

'Well . . . no.' He shrugged. 'But it looks like a two-person job.'

'Sorry . . . that came out wrong . . . I didn't mean . . .' She tossed away the sprig of parsley.

'It's okay.' He smiled but was already stepping backwards.

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‘Thanks for offering,’ she said. ‘It’s kind of you. But I’ll call my cousin. He’s a builder.’

‘You have family in town?’ He dropped the limes into a little hammock he made with his t-shirt and she glimpsed his flat belly and an arrow of dark hair disappearing into the waistband of his jeans.

‘Oh yes,’ she laughed. ‘I’m related to half the town. And more than half your patients, I reckon.’