

Chapter 1

Richmond Valley, 1949

Now Stella was in this new place of waterways, crops, swampy lands and flood plains. Her eyes glazed over at the greenery, the brimming rivers and the concentration required for the undulating, twisting roads. She drove past fluffy trees with bushy crowns and papery bark and a sign that advertised the selling of tea-tree oil. She pressed the brake pedal and pulled the station wagon to the edge of the road, slowing to a stop. In the shade of a proud tree, she dug in the soil, squeezing the earth until it gummed together in her palms. She looked back towards the hills and the spring haze that blurred the scene in a whitish mist and breathed in hot, moist air. It was seven years since she'd left to go inland. Stella supposed the eastern coast hadn't changed much in her absence. She was the one altered. Her mind and body would forever remain braced for the dry, hot winds of the past, for the bulging dust storms that sought out man and beast, and the emptiness of that old life.

On her left was an expanse of tall, tropical grass. The fields of sugar cane that charted her course to the fork in the road were in various stages of growth. Some of the paddocks were cut off close to the ground. Other stands of cane had sent up new, bright green stalks. Green. The shade of life. The colour of most grasses and leaves, of some fruits, like limes and avocados, flavours she could barely recall. Stella stared at the simple cane shoots, and the strip of grass on the verge of the road, and considered the warp and weave of this new place.

She got back into the vehicle and checked the scratchy directions noted on the piece of paper sitting on the seat next to her, then looked back out the car window. Separated by a patch of burrs, two postboxes served as property signs. They were positioned on either side of the road just before it split into two. One of the letterboxes bore her married surname, O'Riain. The other had been vandalised, the words unreadable. In the rear-view mirror an indignant Watson stared back at her from his cage. The bird cocked his proud head sideways, his expressive sulphur-yellow crest rising in annoyance.

Her brother-in-law Harry had said that his house was less than two miles from the gravel road. Stella wished it were another twenty miles, or even thirty. Four days' driving had not lessened her unease. The car and trailer she towed jolted over a buckled ramp where a no-trespassing sign in red lettering hung at an angle. Stella drove past a turn-off that led to a double gate, behind which were what Stella guessed were the work sheds, while the road she followed ended directly at the front of the house. She followed the narrowing track and parked the station wagon to one side of the carport, near where a clothesline tilted ominously.

Stella carefully unclenched her hands from the steering wheel and wiped her palms across the skirt of her dress. To think she'd been married to Joe for seven years and only now was she visiting his family home.

'I'll be back for you,' she said to Watson, opening a window for him.

The bird averted his dark eyes in reply.

Dust flew from the rear of the vehicle as she opened the boot. The contents had shifted during the journey. Stella surveyed the assortment of belongings and then dragged out two suitcases. She ran her eyes over the remaining items and righted a large globe of the world, which had fallen on its side. She tucked her handbag under an arm and lifted the suitcases, setting her eyes squarely on the building before her. The sun-blistered walls of the old timber house were yellowish in colour.

Someone had painted the gutters without sanding back the original shade and brown patches showed through a more recent coat of grey.

Stella swallowed, feeling the air catch in her throat, then she stepped up onto the open veranda and, placing the suitcases on the timber boards, knocked on the frame of the screen door. A sweetness hung in the air, reminding her of the caramel tart she used to make for Joe. She rapped on the door again, and when no one answered she started wandering along the length of the veranda.

‘Stella?’

The voice was weak. Stella called out a response, her vocal cords scratchy through disuse after the long days of solo travel. She peered through each of the four gauze-covered windows, moving carefully so as not to trip on the buckled veranda that, like the house, was built flat on the ground. The wall was of tongue-and-groove pine like her old home and she ran her hand against the weathered timber until she came to the last window.

‘Hello,’ said a woman’s voice.

Stella lifted a hand to her eyes. It was almost impossible to see anything through the flyscreen. ‘Are you Ann?’

‘You must be Stella.’

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘Let yourself in. My bedroom is at the end of the hallway.’

Stella returned to the front door. She propped it open with her foot and pushed the suitcases inside. The door closed loudly behind her. She was standing in a narrow passageway. Through an open door on her right was a kitchen with mint-coloured benchtops and wooden cupboards. From where she stood, every surface appeared to be covered with unwashed dishes, glasses and saucepans. Something crunched underfoot as Stella crossed the floor and entered the adjoining sitting room. It was in a similarly messy state. A trail of ants were making their way across the coffee table and up the side of a bottle of red cordial. Newspapers were scattered on the sofa and armchairs and an old roll-top desk and filing cabinets were crammed along a wall. She found herself hesitating, caught in the clutter of someone else’s life.

The end of the sitting room led to another hallway. Stella walked its length slowly, studying the photographs that hung in a row, one by one. She recognised her brother-in-law Harry, and assumed the slight woman beside him was his wife Ann. She looked nice. Four children featured prominently. Three boys and a girl, the tallest boy dressed in a uniform. The other people were strangers, like most of her husband’s family.

There were two doors on each side of the hallway and the last on the left was open.

‘Hello?’ called Stella.

‘Come in.’

She entered tentatively. A woman was propped up in bed, a mass of pillows framing her. The sheet was moulded to her body so that her legs appeared long and skinny beneath the material. A table had been dragged to one side of the bed, and on it were magazines and books, a jug of water and a plate of uneaten, curling sandwiches. The bedroom was stuffy and smelt of stale air, and it was just

as untidy as the rest of the house. Clothes were strewn across the floor while flies buzzed about a chair that had a sheet draped across it.

'So then, you're here. I'm Ann.' She smiled.

'Hello, Ann. I'm Stella.' The woman lying before her was fair-haired and pale-skinned, a frailer version of the person in the photographs. Stella guessed her to be in her mid-fifties, a good decade older than she was.

'It's nice to meet you,' said Ann. 'I can't believe that it's taken so long.'

Stella was unprepared for this moment. She knew that she should be grateful. She had no other options, at least not ones that came with a home and employment of sorts, however these people were strangers and they must have wondered at her ready acceptance of their offer. They probably assumed she had nowhere else to go – which was true as far as her immediate future was concerned.

She brushed hair from her face in an effort to tidy it, recalling the sugary tea spilt on her dress, and ran a hand over the creases. The car had been her bed. It was four days since she'd showered. Cleanliness had been replaced by a terrible need for action, to pack her belongings, leave her home and simply drive. And now she was standing in her sister-in-law's bedroom, suffering the inspection of a woman she'd never met before.

'You're very Italian,' said Ann finally, as if she'd been searching for conversation in the absence of any help from Stella.

'That's because I am,' replied Stella, immediately wishing she'd not been so abrupt.

'Of course.' Ann smiled apologetically. 'I'm sorry about the state of the house. I've not been able to do anything since the accident. I don't know if Harry explained what happened.' She paused and, when Stella didn't interrupt, continued. 'I was on the ladder cleaning out the gutters. It was the simplest thing. One minute I was bucketing leaves, and the next I was backing away from one of those nasty black spiders. I woke up on the ground.' She gave a brief laugh. 'It was just like any ordinary day.'

'They always are,' said Stella, wincing at how formal she sounded. 'Quite ordinary.'

Ann stayed silently expectant, however Stella wasn't quite ready to reciprocate with her own story. She was still trying to make sense of the changes in her life.

Finally she asked, 'Where are you injured?'

'It's my lower back. The pain is excruciating. I've damaged three discs. If I lie still, it's not nearly half as bad. But I'm getting better. I couldn't move at all the first week. Now I can just manage to make the pot.' She glanced at the sheet-covered chair. 'Harry cut a hole in the upholstery and wedged a bowl in it. Sorry. Don't think I'm happy with the arrangement. I'm not used to living so basically.'

Stella thought of the walk to the long drop at Kirooma, with its plank of wood and three holes of different sizes. While Joe was out bush tending his sheep, living on silence and greasy mutton chops, a chamber pot had been a welcome alternative to the deep pits in the garden.

'It's been terribly hard on Harry,' Ann continued. 'It's harvest time here. The worst time to be laid up in bed.' Ann stopped again, as if she were waiting for Stella to reply.

Stella gave a slight smile, feeling foolish at her inability to chatter along.

'Well, you'll be wanting to settle in. You can take the first room on the left. It belonged to my eldest, Lyn, but she's long since married.'

Stella gave a grateful nod, both for the welcome and the lack of fuss. She supposed any queries regarding her own situation would come later – not that she had any plans that she could share, not yet. 'I don't want to impose, but I do have a few bits of furniture. Nothing much. A lamp and a table. A rug. Odds and ends. I can leave them in the car unless there's somewhere I can store them. And there's a cockatoo,' she added.

Ann pushed herself up a little higher in the bed, her already pale face turning white with the effort. 'A cockatoo.'

'I couldn't leave him behind.'

'I forgot. You've come straight from the property, haven't you? A long drive, I'd imagine.'

'I can leave the furniture in the car. It doesn't matter.'

'No. Don't do that. I'm pleased you've brought some things with you. It makes a person feel more at home. Anything in Lyn's room that you don't need you can put next door in Paddy's room. He's trying to be a banker in Sydney, much to his father's annoyance. He came home for a few months after he was demobbed, but he was too restless to stay.'

'It's just you and Harry, then?' queried Stella, pleased that she'd actually been capable of asking another question.

'Good heavens, no. The twins, Bill and John, still live with us. They work at the sugar mill and help out here when they can. They keep long hours during harvest season so you'll hardly see them. Sometimes they stay overnight in town. But if they intend on being home for dinner, they'll let you know.'

'Oh, dinner?' said Stella.

Ann sighed. 'I knew Harry wouldn't go into detail. I'm afraid you'll be doing more than just helping me until I'm up and about again. There's the house of course, which I'm sure is in a dreadful state. My boys have never been known for their cleaning abilities. The garden, like most, needs constant attention now we're heading into the hotter months, then there's clothes-washing and, of course, the meals. I should warn you, the three of them have large appetites. You'll have to keep an eye on the tea. We're lucky if we have enough to make it through each week. I thought they would have ended rationing by now.'

Cook, cleaner, carer. Ann was right. The extent of Stella's duties was more than she'd anticipated.

'Is that all right?' asked Ann.

'I wasn't expecting—'

'I'm sorry.' Ann drew up the sheet, fiddling with the top hem. 'Country homes. There's always so much to do.'

Although Stella hadn't considered her role beyond that of tending to Ann's needs, she realised that it was impractical of her to have believed that her tasks would have been limited to that of carer, and yet it irked her that Joe's family assumed that she'd be happy to do whatever was asked of her.

'You can put your bird on the rear veranda if you like.'

'Thank you, Ann, for having me here,' Stella said cordially.

'Keeping busy. That's the thing, Stella, during difficult times. It's always helped me. And I'm sorry – about what happened.'

'Thank you.'

'Now, you might empty my pot for me. The bathroom is just down the hall.'

Stella walked around the bed and, uncovering the chair, carried the pot out of the room, the flies trailing her. Harry had been remarkably plain in his speech across the telephone line when he'd told Stella of Ann's accident and offered her a bed in exchange for help in caring for his wife.

Perhaps she'd been a little too quick to accept.