

PROLOGUE

The clear night sky offered no insulation from the insidious cold that curled around Helen with long icy fingers. Despite the jeans, jumper and woolly hat she was wearing, and being snuggled under a sparsely feathered doona, the chill penetrated the layers like a stealth bomber finding its target. Her car could double as a cool room. Shivering, she urged herself to look for something positive in the situation, but her weary sleep-deprived mind struggled to cough up one thing. Eventually it settled on the milk for her cornflakes. Unlike earlier in the year, it wouldn't be curdled in the morning.

A vicious 'hah!' twisted sharp and harsh in her laugh, scaring her almost as much as sleeping in her car did. People believed homelessness meant sleeping on a park bench or in the doorway of a city office building. No one associated it with the wholesome countryside or with people who owned a car. In six months, Helen had learned every rule about how to sleep rough in her car. During the day, her age gave her an invisibility she railed against, but after dark, when she wanted to fade into the inky night, she became visible. Spending more than two nights parked anywhere risked her being noticed by the local police who told her to move on. Even free camping sites weren't harassment-free. She'd lost count of the times she'd been told, 'This is for real campers'. Apparently, the tiny sink in a Kombi or the mattress in a Hiace van made them far more acceptable places to sleep than her car.

Tonight, she was parked in the shadows of ironbarks in an abandoned worksite she assumed had been created for gravel piles when Vic Roads widened the highway. On her self-created scale of safety, the spot scored highly and she'd anticipated a deeper than usual sleep, but the frigid night put paid to that. Perhaps she should run the car for ten minutes and blast herself in heat? She scotched the idea immediately, unable to afford wasting precious fuel.

Her phone, now four days out of credit, suddenly beeped at her. She glanced at the reminder: *JobSeeker form*. Bugger! Before she could lodge it, she needed to apply for ten jobs. It was the game she played to receive a 'looking for work' allowance—aka 'go directly to poverty' allowance. The government thought she should work until she was sixty-five. Helen wanted to work beyond sixty-five, but employers in the real world only wanted to employ people under fifty-five. Over the course of a year, her optimism had morphed into realism before settling on jagged disillusionment. Filling in the form was a fortnightly farce, only no one who received the allowance was laughing. Helen had long ceased applying for jobs she was qualified to do, instead applying for anything to keep the bureaucrats happy. Anything to eat and keep petrol in her car.

Over the previous two hours, the noise of passing traffic had changed from a constant thrum to the occasional whoosh. Helen curled her knees to her chin, pulled the doona over her head and silently recited the opening paragraphs of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford*. It was as much a memory challenge as it was to block out the cold and encourage sleep.

She woke with a start, jerked to consciousness by the whoops and yells of male voices. A hot flush raced across her skin, sweat beaded and she lay rigid, assessing the risk. She hadn't heard a car, but after months on the road she was less attuned to vehicle noise than to human and animal sounds. It was hard to tell how many men or how close they were. Had they noticed her car? Holding her breath, she listened with acute intensity.

The haunting hoot of an owl echoed around her but no voices. Relief rushed air back into her lungs, easing the burn of fear. It lasted five seconds. Then the sky lit up with the brilliant white of spotlights, arcing like searchlights seeking enemy planes.

She shrank under the doona. *Don't find me, don't find me. Dear God, please don't let them find me.*

The crack of a gun shocked the air, vibrating around her in brutal and terrifying waves. Her fist flew to her mouth so fast it bruised her teeth and her stifled scream pooled in the back of her throat, choking her. Voices cheered. More shots rang out—each one coalescing dread. Seconds

elongated to minutes as her mind grappled with her best course of action. Stay or go? Both choices were precarious. Definitely dangerous.

The car provided shelter but it offered scant more security than a park bench. She weighed up the fact the hoons hadn't noticed her versus the attention she'd draw if she started the engine. Although reasonably reliable, it hated cold weather and always took a few turns of the key before it kicked over.

Helen eased herself up, keeping her head low, and peered out the window into the dark. Two utes were parked haphazardly across the road, their positions creating a rally-driving obstacle course for her if she left. She swivelled to look out the back window, hoping an easier exit lay behind her.

The car suddenly flooded with light so bright she saw the white scars on the backs of her hands.

'Hey, someone's here.'

Before she had time to dive under the doona, a man's jowly cheek was pressed against the window. His slack mouth leered at her.

'G'day,' he slurred. 'You want some company, sweetheart?'

How drunk was he? Very drunk, because she was old enough to be his mother—possibly even his grandmother if she'd started early.

'No, thanks,' she said lightly. 'I'm pretty tired.'

'I know how to wake ya up.' He tried the locked door. 'Hey, Ricky. Bray! I've got a live one here.'

A live one? Panic exploded.

She scrambled between the bucket seats, banging her head on the central light and scraping her knees on the console. Her hips screamed as she hauled her legs through the tiny space and forced them under the steering wheel.

'Come and have a drink with us, love.'

'You're not planning on going, are ya?' a new voice said. 'Not when Stu's being all hospitable, like.'

The spotlight swung straight at her. Blinded, all she saw were a haze of dancing red spots and black splotches. Her arms rose instinctively and she dropped her head, protecting her eyes.

A series of clicks and thwacks detonated around her as the men tried all five locked doors.

'Open the door!'

She shook her head.

'Playing hard to get, eh? We can play along, can't we, boys?'

The car suddenly lurched to the left and then to the right, its suspension rocking wildly. Would they tip it over? Did it matter? They had more than one gun between them and they could shoot out the windows.

Still blinded by the brilliant light, Helen shoved her foot forward and found the accelerator. She pumped it twice and fumbled for the key, feeling the plastic head scrape against her palm.

Come on, car.

She turned the key. The ignition clicked and whirred.

Dread dug deep and she tried again. The rocking car gained momentum, then lurched so violently she slid sideways. Her right shoulder slammed hard into the door. The pain barely registered.

Third time lucky. Please.

The clicking and whirring of the ignition was suddenly drowned by the throb of the engine. She had no time for gratitude—the spotlight was still blinding and two utes stood between her and the road. Gripping the gearstick, she moved it into reverse, pressed the accelerator and shot backwards. There was no ominous thud, only outraged yells.

Pulling hard on the wheel, she turned the car away from the light, miraculously avoiding colliding with a tree. Blinking frantically against dancing silver spots, she gunned it. The tyres spun on the gravel, making the car fishtail wildly and she had a split second to decide which was the lesser evil—slowing down and risking being caught or slamming into a tree.

Light cast long shadows as she raced towards the official exit. Her already dry mouth parched further. Would one of the utes try to overtake her and block her in? Or would they use the other exit and get out onto the highway before her, then ram her and push her off the road?

A glimpse in the rear-view mirror offered no answers, only darkness. She veered right, floored the accelerator and hit the welcome bitumen of the highway.

Her eyes flickered between the rear-view mirror and the road in front of her, both fraught with danger. Headlights appeared in the distance behind her and fear's long fingers sank deeper. Was it traffic or were they following her?

The low fuel light glowed orange. Her chest cramped. Had she escaped only to fall prey to them when she ran out of petrol?

Her belief in God was almost non-existent, but heaven rose out of the night like a rising golden sun in the form of a roadhouse. *Thank you.*

She pulled in, killed the ignition, then slumped over the steering wheel, shaking hard. *Move!*

She rubbed her eyes, then glanced around, testing if this reprieve from a starring role in a horror movie was actually real. The reassuring presence of a cop car steadied her—thank God for coppers' coffee addiction.

She made it inside on unsteady legs and headed straight for the toilet, where she vomited into a bowl that was long overdue for a date with bleach and a brush. After rinsing her mouth, she parted with a few precious dollars for a sugar-laden coffee. By the time the glucose hit and she was capable of cogent thought, the police car had left. Not that she had any numberplates to report.

Nursing her coffee, she leaned back on the banquette and closed her eyes, absorbing the warmth of the heated restaurant.

'Hey, lady.'

Helen startled. She had no idea how long she'd been asleep and she blinked a few times, bringing her eyesight into focus. A gold name badge with black writing declared she was being addressed by Sam. 'Yes?'

'You buying more coffee? Something to eat?'

'No. I'm heading out.'

He nodded and walked away. Helen closed her eyes again.

'Hey!' This time he jostled her arm. 'We're not a motel. It's time to go or we'll call the police.'

Once Helen would have argued, but tonight she barely had enough energy to breathe. Rising under his unsympathetic glare, she walked slowly and warily back to the car. It was four o'clock. In less than two hours, light would filter into the sky, bringing with it comparative safety from terrorising morons.

Not prepared to risk sleep, Helen drove. When she saw *Welcome to Boolanga. Home of the Bro/gas* and an accompanying blue road sign with the white symbols for a picnic table and toilets, she took the exit.

Riverbend picnic ground greeted her in a spectacular sherbet dawn with myriad shades of pink, purple and peach splaying across the sky in long graceful strands. The Murray River, wide at this bend, glinted violet in the light and a lone pelican glided towards her. Cockatiels shrieked and wheeled above, bursting yet another myth that the country was a quiet and peaceful place.

The wide sandy beach with its tall over-hanging trees—perfect for swinging and bombing into deep water—provided Helen with the real gift. Its existence meant the shire had spent the big bucks installing a boat ramp, gas barbecues, an instant hot-water tap, picnic tables and a playground. There was also a state-of-the-art amenities block complete with a toilet for people with a disability, a sink, baby-change area and, miracle of miracles, a shower.

Despite her exhaustion, Helen whooped with delight. She lathered up and washed her hair, herself and then her clothes. Afterwards, she fired up a barbecue, cooked an egg in bread and ate it sitting in the folding camping chair she'd found on a roadside collection weeks before. Soaking up the view, she pretended she was living in one of the impressive riverside homes, enjoying her custom-built outdoor kitchen on her deck.

Daylight meant no one would ask her to move on; she had a few hours' reprieve. A few hours to luxuriate in normalcy and ignore her homelessness. Then the sun would inevitably sink, giving carte blanche to the insidious march of inky darkness and all the dangers that lurked within.

CHAPTER

1

Tara Hooper stood in her bedroom, blinking at the unfamiliar but glamorous woman in the mirror. She swayed a little, admiring the way the crystals on the dress caught the light and threw it back to her in a rainbow of dancing colours. Was it really her?

It wasn't just the dress—she'd also treated herself to a professional hair and make-up session. She usually wore her hair down or tied back in a quick and easy ponytail, but Ebony had swept Tara's long blonde tresses into an up-do, accentuating her long neck. Then she'd blushed her cheeks and smoked her eyes in a way that enlarged and darkened them to an arresting come-hither blue. An altogether sexy blue, which had been the brief. Tara intended to knock Jon's socks off.

She slid some ibuprofen, lipstick and tissues into her evening bag and was looking for her phone when she caught the time on the bedside clock: 6:30 pm. How had it got so late and where on earth was Jon? The babysitter had arrived half an hour earlier to settle the kids and give her and Jon time to dress. They were supposed to be leaving for the Boolanga Chamber of Commerce business awards in five minutes. Hoopers Hardware, Timber and Steel was up for an award and after all Jon's hard work—their hard work—they deserved a win. They needed a win, in more ways than one.

Tara found her phone and called Jon.

'Don't stress,' he answered, pre-empting her. 'I'm just turning into the drive now.'

'You still have to shower and dress! Why have you cut it so fine?'

'Denny North finally turned up just as I was leaving. Apparently we're not the only business in town being graffitied.'

Tara stifled a sigh. 'Please hurry.'

Why had the new police sergeant chosen tonight to talk to Jon when he'd had all week? Tonight was supposed to be a night off from the problems at the store. Hopefully a night of celebration and a chance to reboot and haul them out of the rut she believed they'd tumbled into without really noticing. People talked about the seven-year slump but she and Jon had weathered that. It was the ten-year mark that was proving tricky.

Unlike other couples, they hadn't faltered when they'd become parents; instead they'd embraced the change. From the outside, it appeared that she and Jon had fairly traditional weekday roles—he worked full-time at the store and, apart from one day a week, she'd been at home with the under-fives. In the evenings and on the weekends, Jon was—had been—a hands-on dad. They'd prided themselves on their mixed skill set; how they each played to their strengths and together juggled the many balls demanded by family life. Privately, they'd congratulated themselves on how they appeared to be doing a better job of marriage, work and family than many of their friends.

But lately, Tara wasn't sure they were doing better. This year, things felt different between them—everything was slightly off. She was missing the chaotic early years when Jon would walk in after work and, with a kid hanging off each leg, grab her around the waist, kiss her and ask, 'How's Team Hooper?'

Initially she'd assumed it was because Clementine had joined Flynn at school. Change always came with adjustment, but all the roles within Team Hooper that she'd happily occupied for years now seemed like chores. It felt like she was the housekeeper, laundress, chef, taxi driver, childcare worker, sports coach, art and craft teacher, and the personal assistant to Mr Hooper instead of a beloved wife. The tight-knit team of four they'd been so proud of felt as if it had fractured into three very separate parts.

Jon was different too. After work and on the weekends, his concentration was always elsewhere—far away from home. Whenever she asked him what he was thinking about, he'd say, 'Just work'. Was it though? Their sex life, which had always been healthy, was deep in the doldrums. Jon had stopped touching her and she couldn't shake the feeling that maybe he wasn't distracted by work, but by something—someone—else.

Tara desperately wanted things to return to normal and tonight was the first step in making that happen. The few times they'd attempted sex recently, Jon had been so preoccupied with work he hadn't come. Once, he'd been so tired he'd gone soft. But winning an award would get his blood pumping to all the right places. And so would this dress. It was so tight she'd forgone underwear, so when Jon peeled it off her she'd be naked and—

Her pelvic floor instinctively twitched, her cheeks flushed pink and her pupils spread like ink across the blue. God, she was as ready to ignite as the tinder-dry paddocks surrounding the town. All it would take was the spark of one deep kiss, one trace of his hand down her spine and she'd go up in a ball of flames.

'Daddy!' Clementine's excited shriek floated up the stairs.

Tara rushed onto the landing, not wanting Jon waylaid by demands to read a story.

'Mummy's a princess.' Wonder and delight rounded Clementine's eyes. 'Isn't she, Daddy?'

'Does that make me her frog?' Jon said, bounding up the stairs towards Tara. 'I'll hit the shower and be ready in six. Promise.'

He disappeared into the bedroom, barely glancing at the silver and gold frock. Or the way it hugged her newly toned body like a second skin, emphasising curves in all the right places.

Disappointment formed a lump in Tara's throat. She swallowed, pushing it down. The only reason he hadn't commented on her and the dress was because they were running late. When they were finally alone in the car, he'd acknowledge that all her hard work with the personal trainer had paid off and tell her she looked a million dollars.

It had taken months, but Tara had finally banished the baby fat deposited by two pregnancies and hitting thirty-five. She was back to the size ten she'd been when she'd met Jon. Back when life stretched out in front of her, full of endless and exciting possibilities. Back when Jon looked at her with hungry eyes that devoured her and a secret smile that said *you complete me*.

By the end of tonight, that look would be back. Tara was sure of it.