

Chapter 1

Carra Finlay stood under the clothesline and watched in dismay as all her dreams blew away in the wind. In linty little pieces they whirled up, up and all around. Some landed in her hair, others collected cheekily in the folds of some drying knickers before shimmying skywards, and one very bold piece danced right into her gaping mouth. By misfortune of reflex, she spat the tiny scrap of paper onto the lawn, then stared at it in dismay, wondering which particular fragment of which dream it might have been.

'You will go,' said Carra to the fleck of paper, 'to the place where all the broken dreams go.'

She spent a moment wondering what a place filled with broken dreams might look like, and just as it was starting to take on a familiar shape in her mind, the corner of a sheet whipped her smartly in the face.

'Ow,' Carra said to the wind, rubbing her cheek. She flushed with rage, but quickly saw that being cross with the wind was unfair. It was, after all, her fault for leaving the list of dreams in the pocket of her jeans. It was she who had put the jeans in the washing machine. She inspected again the bits of notepaper dotted on the lawn in case they might be reassembled, and leaned down to pick up a few mushy flecks. The grass, by contrast, was brown and crisp. The warm spring wind buffeted her ears before blustering away towards the hills. Carra looked up at the dun, threadbare hills and let her anger return.

'Sod off, you bastard wind.'

In response, the wind flapped the sheets again, as if to remind Carra of its usefulness.

'Sod off,' she said again, but quietly this time, because fast-drying sheets could help the day catch up on itself. It had got unruly, the day. As usual.

Carra berated herself for being so slapdash about the laundry. Once, she had found great satisfaction in viewing her neat lines of clean washing: tiny, bright white socks and wafty, softened muslins. Now she couldn't remember how to care. And evidently nor could she remember to remove things from pockets. Not two months before, she'd presented her husband, Duncan, with the sodden pieces of his pocketbook and said meekly, 'Um, I'm hoping this didn't have all your passwords in it.'

Duncan had drawn one of those deep breaths with a significant pause before the exhale, which is how Carra could tell he was cross. She wished he'd yelled about it, though. She didn't know what to do with such a tiny hint of anger, couldn't yell back about doing his own goddamn washing or checking his own pockets. She could only feel guilty. The little notebook had been filled with reminders, contact details, jottings to enter into patient files, details of committee meetings . . . all the hallmarks of an active and conscientious community member, good friend and diligent GP. He had reason to be grumpy about losing it, but, as always, Duncan's temperate nature prevailed.

From under the clothesline, Carra wondered whether some intractable part of her had known the notebook was in his pocket. And whether that same part had also sabotaged her list of dreams. She surveyed again the last of the flecks in the grass – all that remained of her considered, bulleted list, titled with the earnest declaration *Things I Really Want*. The first of these Things (Carra recalled) was *To*

create a wonderful garden admired by people far and wide. This was followed by a less confident *Maybe make a name for myself??* and then a grumpily scrawled *Use my degree!!!!*

This was a perennial source of disquiet for Carra, the fact that she had attained first-class honours for her Bachelor of Landscape Architecture and worked as a council gardener and then, for the sake of marriage to Duncan, a move to the country and the arrival of twin babies, ceased gainful employment altogether. There had been a dismaying but grounding period between marriage and pregnancy in which she had dreamed up a landscape design service and shop for the Nowhere River High Street, but her detailed business plan had been met with rather pat, dismissive responses ('What a romantic idea', 'How sweet', and so on) and a feasibility study had rendered it absurd.

Be a better mother had been another item on the list, followed closely by *Be a better wife*.

Those two had then been struck through with heavy-handed lines and replaced with BE A BETTER PERSON.

The words shouted through the wind to Carra as she stood beneath the clothesline in an unkempt garden with her dreams in pieces at her feet. *Smithereen dreams*, she thought, as she turned her back on the mess of them. *Perhaps they'll help the grass grow*. This reminded her that the compost bin needed emptying and that time should not be wasted under the clothesline.

It was, after all, very precious time. Cherished and adored time. Nap time. Her twins, at almost ten months old, still blessedly slept for two hours (ideally) in the middle of the day and in the middle of this particular day, Carra needed that great swathe of silence more than ever.

The morning hadn't actually dealt anything singularly distressing, more an accumulation of frustrations: a dragging of bones from broken sleep at dawn's crack; multiple kettle boils without any actual cup of tea; the interrupted ablutions; the refused prunes; the crusts of something chewed stuck to her cardigan; the cardigan itself, shapeless and pilling. Nothing at all unusual for a new mother of twins.

Things had been slightly more fraught by the imposition of an eight o'clock appointment. This wasn't early by baby standards, but it did mean that by at least a quarter to eight, everyone had to be fully dressed, bundled out of the house and clipped into the car with clean bottoms, full tummies and something to rattle. Daisy's something to rattle wasn't found in time, which meant she was grizzling well before the end of the driveway and screaming by the time the car pulled up outside the medical centre. By then, Carra was the thing that was rattled. Also she'd had no time for breakfast.

She wasn't, owing to a forgotten nightdress under the cardigan, wholly out of her pyjamas either, but this had escaped her attention. She did at least have a clean bottom. *How did I end up here?* she thought, while summoning the energy to haul the pram from the car. *Thirty years old, white-knuckled and dreaming of cereal*.

The scheduled appointment was with the child-health nurse, Sister Julianne Poke. Sister Poke had alarming purple hair, don't-mess-with-me hips and flawless lip disdain.

'Strapping stock, those Finlays,' said Sister Poke as she deftly placed little denuded Daisy (now silent and staring fearfully at the purple hair) onto the scales. 'Your daddy' – she tapped Daisy's round belly – 'is made of good bones.' She handed Daisy to Carra, made some notes in the blue baby book and inspected Carra over her glasses.

'You're looking a bit washed out, though. Are you eating properly? You should be having plenty of steak if you're still breastfeeding.' Sister Poke jotted more things onto an official-looking piece of paper. Carra pondered what she might be writing. *Something funny about the mother? Not fit for purpose? NEEDS TO BE A BETTER WOMAN?*

'I'm vegetarian,' said Carra. 'But I eat very well.'

'Ah, of course, vego,' said Sister Poke's lips. There was more jotting. 'Plenty of eggs, then. Cheese. And get your hair done. There was a salon voucher in your mothercraft baggie. Use it, get out and about, see some actual people, join something. Surely you can get involved with one of Dr Finlay's things. Get a babysitter. What sort of support do you have around you? I know your mother-in-law would be a big help. She's a dynamo, that one.'

Carra thought of Lucie, her full-of-beans mother-in-law, and wilted a little more. 'Yes, she's great.'

'What about your own mother? She must want to see these beauties all the time.'

'She and Dad spend winters in the British Virgin Islands. Most of the year actually. They're really into sailing. We FaceTime.'

'La-di-da,' said Sister Poke. 'My sister's eldest daughter went there once.'

Carra tried and failed to raise the energy to reply.

'Now, tell me, are you looking forward to anything?'

'Pardon?'

'Standard postnatal depression screening question,' said Sister Poke. 'Is there anything you're looking forward to?'

'A glass of wine and some sleep,' Carra said without thinking.

The lips gathered themselves into a series of neat pintucks, then twitched in time with the note-taking.

'And,' added Carra hurriedly, 'I have a whole lot of dear friends coming to stay. After Christmas. Old uni friends.' Having read somewhere that a lie is often followed by a downwards glance to the left, she tried very hard not to look at the floor. 'They're, you know, my tribe. So much in common. One of them is quite famous now, she designs gardens for celebrities, writes books. Ursula Andreas?'

Sister Poke looked blank.

'Anyway, we studied together. She's a dear friend. We'll have a ball. So, yep, looking forward to that. Very much.'

Sister Poke engaged in some more writing, punctuated by several suspicious glances at Carra, who looked at her left shoe and felt a buzz of fury.

'Right.' Sister Poke lay down her pen and locked her hands. 'What questions do you have for me?'

Carra looked straight into Sister Poke's pale eyes and said, 'Is your hair a natural purple?'

Sister Poke's eyes stayed on Carra's face as she took the pen up again, pressed her signature into the bottom of the page and embellished it with a violent full stop. Then she examined the scratches on Ben's leg that he'd given himself with a rogue toenail and said, 'You poor little boy, what's going on in your head?'

This meant that Carra left with some baby nail clippers, a tub of ointment for the scratches, a new nagging concern for Ben's teeny state of mind and the dread that comes with offending the town's most conscientious gossip. She cursed Sister Poke, with her smarmy lips and her ointment, but mostly regretted her own runaway mouth.

'Out and about,' said Carra to herself when she got back to the car. She looked up and down the street. Out and about in Nowhere River's High Street meant either Pfaffs' Post and Groceries (where Mr or Mrs Pfaff were guaranteed to give you service with a grimace), the pub, the park, the library, the hairdresser, or the bit of lawn near the town hall with a seat and a rubbish bin. Carra had sometimes sat on that seat and gazed for a little too long at the back of the daily bus to Hobart as it drew away.

Mostly, she avoided the High Street in favour of a ramble in her garden. It wasn't large enough for actual ramblings, but adequate for Carra to lose herself among the weeds and let her mind cover quite long distances, designing borders, co-ordinating plantings and so on. She never did get past the planning stages. It was higgledy, the garden at Kinvarra, full of possum ravages, mysterious horticultural ailments and tumbledown walls. And despite her sophisticated planning, Carra had only managed to cull some woody daisies and remove the prickles from what was left of the lawn before twin pregnancy happened – with its cloy of all-day nausea and doctor's orders. This was followed by the slightly premature arrival of the babies, with their endless needs and their cycles of confining stymies. Carra wasn't quite prepared to be a mother when she went into labour at thirty-four weeks. The house wasn't ready and neither was she. Duncan's mother, Lucie, had done a beautiful job with the nursery but Carra's state of mind, even with two healthy babies sailing to their ten-month milestones, remained in a state of hobbled delirium.

Widespread drought in southern Tasmania had further stalled Carra's garden plans, along with a sort of stunned hesitation about putting down actual live roots. But still, she found solace in pouring bathwater onto the earth and watching the crickets run out of the cracked soil. She could let her babies crawl naked in the puddles without having to pack complicated bags, wrestle with car seats or run into any of the strange familiars who populated the town's High Street, the same ones who would regard and report upon her worn-out face, her cardigan and possibly now (since the purple-hair comment) her lack of respect. In the garden, Carra felt a semblance of belonging without any witherings of social anxiety.

Social anxiety. Carra wondered whether she should have just mentioned the words to Sister Poke. Perhaps the town could readily digest such a neat, clinical label and then stop looking at her as if she were a stray cat, startled and drab. But there was also the probability people would roll their eyes and mutter about woo-woo excuses, ungrateful whingers and getting on with things. Country people, Carra had noticed, seemed to do quite a lot of getting on with things. Also, she wasn't sure whether social anxiety was what she suffered from. *It could, she mused, have more to do with the gradual sinking of very high hopes.*