

CHAPTER ONE

Mercy Blain's house was on fire, but that wasn't her biggest problem.

Flames licked orange tongues up the walls; great billows of greasy smoke poured into the night sky. Emergency service vehicles were gathered about the burning house, lights strobing across fences, gardens and the shocked faces of neighbours standing about in slippers, nightgowns clutched at their necks.

An ambulance sat in the middle of the street, back doors flung open. Inside the pool of light spreading from the ambulance doors, Mercy stood with the dog in her arms, ignoring the paramedics. Her body was shaking and tears were coursing down her cheeks. She could hear nothing—not the jets of water shooting into the flames, not the hoses slapping onto the pavement, not the shouted directions of the fire-fighters. Mercy could hear nothing but the high-pitched ringing of her own pure, absolute terror.

It was almost midnight. It was the eve of Mercy's thirty-sixth birthday. None of these things—not the orange flames nor the agog neighbours, not the birthday nor the deafly ringing ears—were Mercy's biggest problem, either.

The dog gave a sudden wriggle and licked Mercy's jaw. Unfamiliar voices swam around her, ebbing vaguely at the edges of her awareness, filtering in through the squeal of horror in her ears.

'Ma'am?

'Can you hear me? Ma'am?'

'Are you her neighbours? What's her name?'

'I don't know,' said a woman's voice. 'We've never met.'

'She keeps to herself,' said a man's voice.

'Ma'am?'

The paramedic was squeezing Mercy's shoulder. The dog began to lick furiously at Mercy's hands. Mercy closed her eyes and the flames were still there, blazing beneath her eyelids. There came a sound like iron cleaving apart, the rush of water battling against flames. Something cracked, groaned, and fell with a crash. Cries rose from the crowd.

'Can she even hear? Maybe that's one of them, you know, hearing dogs?'

'It's a sausage dog.'

It wasn't that Mercy was unconcerned about her house transforming rapidly into the first circle of hell. It wasn't, either, that Mercy was as worried as the paramedic hovering in front of her, calmly desperate for signs of smoke inhalation, or burns, or maybe even concussion from falling debris. No, those things weren't the source of Mercy's current despair.

'Mercy?'

Mercy's eyes flew open. With surprising agility for a Dachshund, Wasabi wriggled free of her arms and thudded to the ground, then took off on his stubby legs towards the figure hurrying up the street.

'Eugene,' Mercy croaked.

Heads swivelled. Onlookers parted. Even the paramedic finally paused in her scrutiny of Mercy as the man strode towards them. He lifted his arms and approached Mercy as if to gather her up in an embrace but, at the last moment, he faltered. His arms lowered awkwardly back to his sides.

'Are you okay?' Eugene said.

Mercy glanced down and saw his feet thrust into sandals. For a long moment she stared, uncomprehending. Since when did Eugene wear *sandals*? The exposed skin on the top of his feet looked pale and obscene. She thought she might be sick.

'Your voicemail didn't make any sense,' Eugene was saying. 'You said you had a small kitchen fire. But oh my god, Merce ...' His voice faded as he took in the flames, roaring and crackling into the sky. Glass shattered and the crowd gave a collective gasp.

'We need to take a look at her,' one of the paramedics said, pushing Eugene aside. When Eugene retreated, bending to scoop up the dog, Mercy felt the bones in her legs turn to jelly.

'Don't leave me,' she said.

They took her into the back of the ambulance. Penlights flashed into her eyes. A blood pressure cuff tightened around her arm and the cool disc of a stethoscope slid below her clavicles, across her ribs, beneath her shoulder blades. She inhaled; she exhaled. *Any headaches?* they wanted to know. *Abdominal pain?*

Mercy knew she needed to answer. Dimly conscious as she was, it was enough to know she needed to say *no* to those things, because then they would leave her alone. But her throat was knotted tight and her voice would not come, and without the dog to hold onto her fingers trembled and clutched the pyjama pants at her hips, as if to hold herself together.

Did paramedics carry diazepam? Or maybe, if she asked, they could give her the green Pentrox whistle? Something. Anything.

Eugene and two neighbours stood at the ambulance doors. Eugene was watching her with alarm and something else—anger?—shifting across his features. She noticed he'd cut his hair shorter, and even in the dark she could see the silver that had once feathered his temples had crept upwards and spread, and now covered most of his head. In the flashing lights the silver hair gleamed.

'Lucky I found you, huh?' the male neighbour piped up. It was only now that Mercy noticed the man was shirtless, grey tracksuit pants slung beneath a protruding white belly.

Mercy blinked. Still no words came out.

'Very lucky,' the paramedic said.

'I was just outside, having a bit of a ciggie, when this little dog here—' the shirtless man gestured to Wasabi, who was licking Eugene's face '—appeared out of nowhere, barking its head off. So I look over and at first I thought all the lights were still on, which is a bit weird, because usually it's pretty quiet in that house—'

'Mike,' a woman standing next to him hissed.

'But then I saw smoke and realised it was flames.' The shirtless neighbour shook his head. 'So I ran over. Gave the poor girl a hell of a fright, didn't I, love?' He turned to Mercy. 'Sorry about that. We've never met officially but I just went barrelling into the poor lady's bedroom, found her standing there, smoke everywhere. I grabbed her and took her outside.' He swung his belly towards Eugene and stuck out a hand. 'I'm Mike. And this here's Jenny, the missus,' he finished, stabbing his thumb over his shoulder.

Jenny extended a polite hand towards Eugene, then uttered a shriek as something in the burning house fell with a crash.

The paramedic was taking Mercy's pulse for the third time, frowning. 'Pulse is still fast. You're not coughing though, so that's a good sign. Any nausea? Dizziness?'

Mercy was feeling both of those things, and more, but not for the reasons the paramedic was asking, so she gave a tight shake of her head. The medic's fingertips were cool against Mercy's skin, her thumb pressing gently into the back of Mercy's wrist. The contact was merely professional, and necessary, but to Mercy, the press of the paramedic's fingers was almost unbearably tender. A sob choked out.

The medic smiled at her. 'Bit anxious?'

Mercy's tears flowed faster. She nodded.

'Just keep breathing nice and slow, okay? That's it. In to the count of four, out to the count of ... hey, you've got it. Done this deep breathing thing before, huh? Now, here's what I'd like to do.' The paramedic went on to say that Mercy needed to come with them to the Adelaide Northern Hospital, an instruction Mercy vehemently declined. When the medic pressed again, concern and authority sneaking into her voice, Eugene spoke up.

'I'll keep an eye on her.'

The paramedic was unconvinced. She began to say something about smoke inhalation, until Eugene leaned towards her and murmured. The paramedic listened, nodded, looked sidelong at Mercy and smiled.

'Well,' she said, picking up a clipboard, 'if Dr Phelps here is going to take care of you, I feel much better.'

There was more chatter among onlookers and medicos, peppered thick with the sentiments *lucky* and *close call* and *at least it's only things*. Mercy was shepherded out of the ambulance and the doors slammed shut behind her. Once again out in the open, the black night yawning above her and yet more neighbours clustered and gawping, any brief whisper of security Mercy had experienced in the ambulance dropped away. Her heart began to beat so fast and hard

that the fat smacking sound of it only amplified her terror. It was like a horse bolting, only to scare itself with the sound of its own hoof-beats and gallop even harder.

Her house. *Her house*. She had lived there for two years.

'Anyway, love,' Mike was saying, 'I didn't catch your name?'

Mercy looked at him. The shirtless man was right. Never, before this night, had they met. For the past two years, all Mercy had known of the people living directly across the street was what she could see from her living-room window. A straggly gum tree was growing beside the footpath, and through its twiggy limbs she could see their carport, where a perpetually half-demolished old car languished beneath an oil-stained sheet. Their front fence was made of green-coloured mesh; their house was of dark red brick. Unlike the people living in the new house on Mercy's left, sometimes the people across the street forgot to put out their bins on a Monday morning and the garbage truck would sail past their house without stopping.

The air was clogged with the stench of smoke and white hot brick, incinerated fabrics and plastics and timber. Voices yelled, water whooshed, truck engines rumbled and dogs all up and down the street were a frenzy of yips and howls. Emergency services personnel in hi-vis scuttled about; Mercy was questioned, her details taken and business cards pressed into her hands. Police sauntered about following directives from the firies. People with FORENSICS written on their backs showed up. Mercy's voice squeaked and shook; she felt as if she were in an alternative reality. As if she were watching all the commotion from a distance, from the surface of another planet. So many people, so much noise. So much attention, all because of *her*. At one point a police officer bent his head to lock into her line of vision and said, 'Can we call anyone for you? Family or friends? Do you have somewhere to go?'

This is not what's wrong, she wanted to tell them all. *This is not my biggest problem*.

Eugene's eyes met Mercy's, then shot away.

Mercy looked towards her house in time to see a huge section of the roof collapse into the flames. Embers shot like fireworks into the dark sky.

And that was when the doom struck. Black and oily as that smoke-filled night, Mercy felt death tap on her shoulder as time ground to a complete halt, the present moment of exquisite pain stretched for an impossible eternity and her lungs filled with a scream of sheer panic.

In desperation, she wheeled to Eugene. 'I don't have—anymore—'

Eugene's face creased. 'She'll stay with me.'

The shirtless neighbour turned to Mercy, surprised. 'Well,' he said, 'I'm glad you've got a friend, love.'

Eugene said, 'I'm her ex-husband.'

'Technically,' Mercy managed to put in, 'we're still married.'

It was the first time Mercy had been outside her house in almost two years.

And *that* was Mercy's biggest problem.