

PALM BEACH, SUMMER 1996

lighthouse (*n.*) - a tower or other structure displaying a light or lights for the guidance of vessels at sea.

An early moon had risen, casting a pale silver light over the sand. The world was turning blue, as though the day could no longer hold onto its colours. In the fading light she could see the lighthouse at the far end of the beach, a luminous streak in the sky. Kase had walked the track to it so many times during the day but never at night. She wondered what the cold, dark ocean would look like from high above. The bonfire crackled and the waves washed against the shore. The murmurs of her friends reached her; voices lulled by the heat of the fire and the wine.

‘Want to walk up to the lighthouse?’

It was as though Sylvie had read her mind. But Sylvie was always reading her mind. There was a line of communication running between them and they had long ago stopped saying ‘jinx’.

‘Yes. Want to see if the others are up for it?’

‘Nah,’ they said in unison and linked arms.

'I'm cold.' Kase huddled into the thin lines of Sylvie's ribs.

'Here.' Sylvie took off her scarf and wound it around Kase's neck.

It smelled like Sylvie. Vanilla musk mixed with smoke from the fire. As she stood, the world tilted slightly. 'Are you as drunk as me?' she asked as Sylvie steadied her.

'A bit. Not too bad. Not as bad as the others.' Sylvie pulled her close against the early summer breeze.

They walked in silence, the soft, cold sand numbing their toes, the salty air on their lips. They reached the bank of bush leading to the lighthouse and Kase looked back. The fire was like a warm beacon. A shiver ran through her. 'Are you sure we shouldn't get the others to come?'

'It looks like they already are.'

Kase could just make out the forms of their friends moving towards them up the beach, sea-salt ghosts hovering in the dusk air. Tristan, Gabe and the others. She yelled to them, but the breeze snatched her voice before she and Sylvie walked into the bush.

CHAPTER 1

friend (*n.*) – someone attached to another by feelings of affection or personal regard.

Sometimes the words were light, like tissue paper. She could feel them brush her skin, a sweet caress. Other times they were dark and heavy – stones, or rotting bones to be carried deep in your gut. Sylvie didn't know if other people experienced words like she did. She assumed everyone held a word in their mind and felt its tiny pulse. Felt them under their skin, in their eyes, pricking to tears. Sylvie had long ago found the word to describe what she was – a logophile. The list of her beloved words sat in her heart like a balm. *Elixir. Lullaby. Eloquent. Pristine. Ethereal.*

But it wasn't just words. Everyone thought her job was boring. *Don't you get depressed going into people's homes after they've died? You're too smart to be a cleaner.* But they didn't understand what she really did – which was find people's stories. Stories were hidden everywhere if you only cared to look, to listen. She collected the stories of the dead like an archaeologist digging up treasures. Everyone had one. They were hidden in the bags

of clothing Sylvie emptied from wardrobes, the shoe boxes she found at the back of cupboards, filled with letters, even in the piles of unpaid bills to be cleared from tabletops. She couldn't bear for the stories to be lost. She'd read once that stories only survived three generations and then they were gone, blown away by the winds of time. The proof: What does anyone know of their grandmother's mother?

Sylvie opened the front door to the smell of wilting flowers. Houses decayed so fast without their people in them. She took a deep breath and then stepped inside. Discovering someone's world gone cold always made her heart ache until she got to know them a little better; until she found their warmth, their essence. She stepped into the light-filled room and the bay windows drew her gaze. The ocean. The sky. And lining the walls, books – dozens and dozens of books. This was a special world. And by the looks of the room, filled with flowers now fading on their stems, a special lady.

She took her notebook out of her pocket and wrote:

Sylvia. 91. Lover of books. Gazer over oceans. My namesake.

Sylvie's mother had named her Sylvia at birth, but somewhere along the line Sylvie's name had morphed. It was funny how people always found the names that suited them.

She brought in her bucket of supplies and cardboard boxes and placed them carefully on the thick cream carpet. She was meant to wear covered shoes, but she found herself easing her feet out of her sandals to feel the soft pile. Bare feet sometimes felt too familiar, but already it was as though she knew Sylvia. The family had stripped the house of valuables and it was Sylvie's job to clean out the last of the possessions to get it ready for sale. Everything left was to go to charity or the tip.

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Sadness moved through her as she looked around the room. So many once-precious things to be discarded.

She could see the ghosts of shapes in the dust – furniture that had been sitting there forever, now gone. Such a beautiful old house was bound to have held some treasures. She gazed around at the shelves. Had no one wanted to take any of these books? A tingle ran through her. She knew she was meant to stack them into a box for the pick-up at the end of the week, but she also knew she would go through them, each one a key to who Sylvia had been, the other worlds she had escaped to in her ninety-one years.

There was a knock on the door behind her and she swung around, heart thumping.

A man wearing an expensive suit stood on the doorstep. ‘Are you the cleaner?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ said Sylvie, hating how small her voice sounded. She felt his eyes on her, no doubt appraising what she was wearing. She knew a flowing dress was not the most practical thing to wear to clean a house but slipping one on made her happy. She liked to think it was her way of showing respect. Like when her mother was in her religious phase and made Sylvie wear her Sunday best to church.

He strode past her into the loungeroom. His shiny black shoes looked like cockroaches on the clean carpet and Sylvie cringed.

‘Smells like old people,’ he said, his nose crinkling. ‘But the house is worth an absolute fortune.’

Sylvie wanted to ask whether he was a real estate agent or perhaps a greedy, rude, distant relative, but she kept her mouth shut and picked up her bucket, slipping her feet back into her

shoes, and moved towards the hall that she saw led to a kitchen. She felt his eyes on her, watching her, no doubt noticing her slight limp. The familiar rush of shame flooded her.

‘I won’t be long. Just need to do an evaluation. The family wants this place empty and ready for sale by the end of the week, so you’ve got your work cut out for you.’

Sylvie nodded. At least there was no pity in his voice. ‘I work quite quickly,’ she said, avoiding his darting eyes.

‘I presume you’ve got a dump bin coming for all this stuff? There’s a lot of crap still here. Looks like the old biddy was a bit of a hoarder. That’s what the son said.’

Sylvie felt anger rise and colour her face. She had cleaned hoarders’ houses and this was nothing like them. She wanted to slap his smug face. Instead she bit the inside of her lip and walked away from him down the hall.

‘The skip will come tomorrow,’ she mumbled.

He followed her and they reached the kitchen. The view was even more spectacular from here – the jutting jaw of the coast falling to the smooth curve of the harbour.

‘The new owners will pull all this out and make it sleek as,’ he said.

But all Sylvie could see were the tiny, soon-to-be-erased markers of Sylvia’s life. Of a life well lived. The tray with a floral teapot. A pile of books, the top one still bearing a bookmark. An empty fruit bowl in the shape of a hen.

The man walked off into an adjoining room and Sylvie breathed out. She had a bad habit of holding her breath when she was nervous.

She got to work cleaning out the kitchen, wrapping the crockery and cutlery and placing it into a box. She imagined all

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the meals that had been eaten off these pale blue floral plates, the celebrations toasted with the vintage champagne flutes.

The man returned, dusting his hands in front of him. ‘Upwards of ten mil, I’d say. Huge old place. Views from all the bedrooms. Apparently the family was just waiting for her to die. They couldn’t get her into a nursing home. Imagine, one person living alone in this huge place. Maybe they even slipped her one. Bingo, instant millionaires, all four kids.’

Sylvie’s breath quickened and she longed to scream at this man, to push him out of Sylvia’s house, but instead she scrunched a piece of newspaper into a hard ball.

The man moved closer and peered into the box. ‘Bet there are a few things of worth still here. Wink wink. The family cleaned it out in such a rush. Want their money ASAP. Just saying ... a cleaner’s salary can’t be much. Not for this depressing work.’

Sylvie felt her shoulders bunch to her neck. She bit down the words forming on her tongue. ‘I don’t find it depressing,’ she said, her voice a whisper.

He studied her for a moment then clapped his hands so loudly she started. ‘Each to their own, I guess. Okay, I’m done and dusted. Out of here.’

She watched him stride down the hall and slam the front door behind him.

The sudden quiet was like a soft pillow and she relaxed into it. She took a deep breath. *I’m sorry you had to have that man in your house, Sylvia.*

She stood and stretched her legs. Now she could finally explore the rest of the house and find out who Sylvia was. She found the well-tended garden. Sylvia had loved roses. She

found the living room where Sylvia had obviously spent most of her life. She had loved crosswords and newspapers. She found the study with a long timber writing desk in front of a window that overlooked the garden. A stack of leather-bound books sat on the desk. Sylvia had been a writer.

The room was bathed in light, refracted through the stained glass at the top of the windows. Sylvie sat down at the desk in a square of blue light and ran her fingers over the cracked leather spines. These were journals. Surely her family had wanted to keep these. Perhaps they hadn't realised their significance; she would keep them aside. She took the top book and pressed its pages open.

Here was Sylvia, the real woman. Sylvie felt a quiver down her spine as she began to read. She allowed herself only twenty minutes. She had always read fast – she swallowed whole books in a day. She closed the journal and took her notebook from her pocket. It was a habit she'd begun after the accident when she hadn't been able to trust her short-term memory. She had to write important things down so she wouldn't forget. She'd continued because the writing of words, the cataloguing of feelings, calmed her. She wrote down four words.

Best friend. Lost. Regret.

The words felt heavy, sodden; they pulled at her heart. She slipped the notebook back into her pocket. Now she understood Sylvia and could properly commence her work. It seemed they shared more than just a name. The connection was uncanny. Sylvia had been lonely too. Her family never visited – her children lived interstate ... they were busy. There was too much time to think in this empty house alone and the past haunted her. Her best friend's name had been Rose. Rose and Sylvia.

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Sylvia and Rose. Girlhood friends, and her most true person for so long. But they had fallen out. Rose had closed up to her, become a stranger. Sylvia never knew exactly why, but she'd been too proud to reach out, to breach the years of distance. But she had never forgotten, never recovered. *Best friend. Lost. Regret.*

Sylvie thought about the invitation stuck to her own fridge door.

Please join us to celebrate Kase's 40th Birthday. As one of her nearest and dearest you're invited to an intimate long weekend of everything 'Kase', from book talk (naturally), to lashings of red wine, to skinny dipping in the sea (not compulsory but we all know it will probably happen). We're holding it on our private island off the Tassie coast, so we can all commune with nature while we celebrate the wild force that is Kase Fowler.

Those same four words had come flying at her when she'd opened the thick, creamy invitation. *Best friend. Lost. Regret.*

It had been so long. Twenty-three years. Why had she even been invited after everything that had happened? But she felt pulled, like the sea drawn back. And now here was a sign. Did she want to finish her life with the regret and longing that Sylvia had? When you were young you believed life would be full of soul-deep connections. That there would be many who understood you without needing words, who laughed with you without being able to stop, and who felt deeply known to you as soon as you met. Someone who you could never forget. But now she knew they were rare and precious things. Fleeting things. Like memories.

Sylvie thought about her small flat behind the cafe. Her tiny life – words and death. Kase had been her everything at seventeen. They'd had dreams of such a big life. And Kase was living that life – an award-winning, bestselling author, academic husband. A part of Sylvie stirred uncomfortably at the thought. *That could have been me.*

It all led back to that night at Palm Beach, up at the lighthouse. But there was no story for that night. The words were gone. Or maybe they had never been. The doctors said it was normal after a traumatic brain injury – not to remember. There was only thick black silence, like a cloak. She had never wanted to know more, not really. Perhaps it was a small mercy that her brain had forgotten. Blank, like the cassette tapes she and Kase had recorded over so many times.

Sylvie ran her fingers over Sylvia's final words. Sylvia who was no more. Who had nothing left to lose. Who had died with the name of her friend written in her last pages. *Rose.* Sylvie felt the pull of her own past, like a rip that ran cold and deep beneath the safe shallows. She thought she heard a loud whisper in her ear, or it could have been the wind coming off the sea, playing in the sheer curtains through a crack in the window. Three words that made her heart beat fast: *Be brave. Go.*

* * *

She woke to the sound of coffee beans grinding. It was the same sound, the same smell every day. It wasn't such a bad way to greet consciousness, except that she didn't drink coffee. There was the slide of chairs on concrete, the clash of cutlery and the

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hum of human voices growing louder. Sylvie got up and made herself a tea then sat in her bed with her book as the cafe filled on the other side of her bedroom wall. A high laugh. A baby crying. A thin partition separating her from life. She was happy listening to its muted chaos, safe behind the wall.

She tried to focus on the story, but her eyes kept skipping over words. This morning the sounds seemed louder, the smells stronger. Now bacon frying. She must be hungry. She stood in front of her small refrigerator. Kase's invitation slipped off the front. It was soon. At the other end of the country. She'd have to take leave from work. She'd have to reply to Kase. She didn't have the words. The paper was too thick to scrunch into a ball so she folded it as small as it would go and threw it in the bin. She was not brave.

She looked into her empty fridge. When had she run out of food? Books were her sustenance. She would spend her last pennies on stories rather than meals. And she so often had to clean out other people's refrigerators, it was no wonder she was never hungry. But for some reason she was hungry now, and what she wanted was bacon. She looked over at the lukewarm tea and open book by her bed. She wanted food. She pulled yesterday's dress over her head and stood in front of the tiny bathroom mirror, applying lipstick. Was she really doing this? It was so rare she chose reality over fiction.

She walked through her tiny courtyard filled with succulents and potted plants and out the side gate. The sky was high. The world seemed too boundless. Around the corner the cafe was overflowing with people, inside and onto the pavement. She took a step back. There wasn't anywhere to sit, she should just go back to the quiet world of her book. But she looked at the

muffins and the eggs and her stomach growled. She'd just say hello to the owner, her landlord, and order a takeaway.

She had to wait in line inside. It smelled like eggs frying and toast cooking and aftershave. There were kids playing on the floor, groups of friends conversing loudly, couples reading newspapers.

She ordered a bacon and egg roll.

'Love, you're going to have to speak up.'

'Mr Jones, it's me Sylvie, from the flat behind the shop.'

The man wiped his hands on his apron and looked at her properly. 'Oh Sylvie. I haven't seen you for so long. Nice to see you, love. Breakfast is on the house.'

Sylvie felt unaccountably sad as she thanked him. A couple got up from the prime table beneath the window. Sylvie sat down.

'Are you waiting for anyone else?' A woman about her age with a baby on her hip stood with her hand on the chair opposite.

Sylvie shook her head.

'Can we take this?' The woman nodded towards a group of people, towards her family and friends.

Sylvie nodded. She watched the woman drag the chair over to her table. She felt her eyes fill with tears. The words were here now and so was her breakfast. *Alone. Unaccompanied. Lonely.*

CHAPTER 2

wild (*adj.*) - living in a state of nature.

The sails clanged in the wind and a fine salt spray wet her face. Sylvie stood on the jetty at Kettering with her small suitcase and waited. The boats were like ghosts, hovering in their misty moorings. She scanned the horizon for the water taxi. The water was the same flat grey as the sky, and whispers of cloud clung to the shoreline. She pulled her rain jacket closer. Salt was in her hair, on her tongue; it was seeping into her, washing away the stale airport air. She was completely alone, but strangely, she didn't feel as lonely as she had in the café only a week ago. She watched two eagles wheeling above, their cries almost lost on the cold wind.

It was summer, but Tasmania operated on a different weather pattern to the rest of the country. There was something raw and wild and shifting about this place. It frightened and energised her in equal measure. She couldn't believe she had come. She had spent so long just finding the words to accept.

Dear Kase, Thank you for the invitation. I'm really looking forward to your party and to seeing you after all these years. Your island looks beautiful. Sylvie x

Kase's reply had been perfunctory, but not without some rapport, as though the two of them were work colleagues who shared a desk – close by proximity, rather than childhood friends, twinned in every sense and cleaved apart a lifetime ago. Sylvie had written back, counselling herself to seem normal. She knew what normal was meant to look like at nearly forty. Mother. Wife. Career woman. Kase wasn't a mother but her eminent career as an author was like a baby, growing fatter every year. Sylvie wasn't normal, but she knew the words to make her appear so.

Really busy with work but have managed to get some much-needed time off. I will arrive Friday. The others had all arrived the day before, apparently. Her whole body convulsed with cold and she felt tears build behind her eyes as she thought about the people she was about to be thrown back together with. People she hadn't seen in half a lifetime. *Strangers.* And yet they had once been woven into her very fabric.

Be brave. She thought of Sylvia who never got closure with Rose. *This is a chapter you need to close.*

She braced herself against the cold. A tiny boat appeared through the mist.

'Heading out to the island? Sylvia Dane, guest of the Fowlers?' a man called.

'Yes, hi,' she called in return, but her voice was lost on the wind.

'This is our warm Tasmanian welcome.'

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He tied the rope to the jetty, and she passed him her bag and climbed down a ladder and into the boat, blinking back water from her lashes. She slipped and felt him steady her, his hand on her back.

‘Sorry. Are you okay? I’m Holden.’ Warm brown eyes hid under a beanie and hood.

‘Yes, hi,’ she said, breathless. ‘Thanks, it’s slippery.’

‘Take a seat ... sorry it’s so wet. I’m the local water taxi operator, or party taxi in this case.’

‘Or the main character from *Catcher in the Rye*.’ She chastised herself and picked at her fingerless gloves. This wild weather was making her more uninhibited than usual. *Stupid*. He didn’t look like a literary type.

He revved the motor and the smell of petrol filled the air. ‘You can hardly talk, Sylvia, or should I say, Sylvia Plath?’

She smiled, surprised, and felt the hairs on her arms lift. ‘How did you know I was named after her?’

‘The intuition of someone named after a literary character I guess,’ he said, winking.

She felt herself blush. ‘Just call me Sylvie.’

‘Parents who name their kids after famous literary characters have a lot to answer for.’

She laughed. ‘I know. My mother is incorrigible. You’ve read Plath?’

He nodded. ‘Sure have.’

She felt bad for judging him. The boat moved out into the channel and the words swirled around her as she took in the sky, painted black with dabs of yellow where the sun was pulling at the clouds, trying to get through. The water churned and frothed below her, a mirror of her insides. The boat crested

a wave, and she was thrown against the side, her hands gripping the seat, knuckles as white as the foaming sea below.

‘Is it always this choppy?’

Holden shook his head. ‘No, you got the extra special treatment. But it’s only a twenty-minute trip across the channel and there’s a big fire lit at the house ... and I think everyone’s already drinking wine.’ He checked his watch. ‘At 11 am.’

She found herself laughing. That sounded like Kase. It was funny how someone didn’t change all that much from fifteen to forty. Maybe it would be exactly the same. Maybe they’d fall into the same easy rhythm, joined at the hip, finishing each other’s sentences, laughing at things other people didn’t find funny. Maybe the past was far enough away now that they could forget.

But there was a rift, as deep and dark as the place Kase’s brother had fallen. They had never spoken again after that night. *Were there words for such a tragedy anyhow?* Sylvie had been there when Tristan fell, but she had no recollection, no memory. Kase had been there too. Sylvie had swallowed the pain of Kase’s silence and moved on with her life, altered as it was. She had let the past lie, careful not to unsettle the dust. But now she was roaring towards it, the wind whipping her face, the salt stinging her eyes.

She saw Bruny Island come closer into view ahead. The grass was straw-coloured, like tufts of unruly golden hair. The trees were ancient, tall and gnarled like a giant’s limbs, leaning into cliffs that fell away to crashing waves. The wild beauty of it sent a rush up her spine. But that wasn’t where they were headed. Kase’s island was in the D’Entrecasteaux Channel, between Bruny and the mainland. Kase had bought the private island several years ago, presumably when her books had become bestsellers overseas.

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The gulf between their lives now seemed as deep as the channel they were crossing. The water was darker here. Holden's voice was small against the sea. He pointed skyward.

'Our resident eagles. Tail and Claw.'

'Oh, I think I may have seen them before, on the mainland. Are they following us?'

'They know me. They nest over the headland, where my cabin is. I'm sort of the caretaker of the island.'

She wanted to ask more, but the wind was swallowing their words. As they approached the island, she saw the headland with two majestic blue gums rising from it. Holden eased the throttle back and pointed up to the house. Its timber was raw, as though it had been gnawed on by salt air, but it was as beautiful, honed and natural as the trunks of the trees that surrounded it. The building had been architecturally designed to merge into the landscape, camouflage with the brown earth, the black rocks, the grey water. A long timber deck ran its length, and several levels were built into the slope. Big glass windows surveyed the bay like blinking eyes. Below it, a small boatshed rested on the lip of the water, a long jetty jutting out like a tongue.

Kase and her mother, Fran, had lived in Hobart since they'd fled Palm Beach to start again after Tristan's death. Sylvie thought she remembered that Fran had grown up in Hobart. It was funny how the place you were born never left you. She knew that Kase had a home in Hobart as well as the island. Sylvie imagined what that would feel like to have a mother who wanted to be wherever you were.

Holden cut the motor and they drifted, the squall of gulls and the slap of ocean on the hull the only sounds. He handed her a card. It read 'Holden's Water Taxi Service'.

‘My mobile number. If you want a tour of the little coves, help building a fire, supplies of any kind, a lift to Bruny or back to the mainland, I’m your man.’

Sylvie’s heart swelled at the warmth in his voice. At least she had an escape plan. Almost an ally. ‘Thanks, that’s very kind,’ she said as he helped her out of the boat and handed over her bag and her small leather backpack.

‘No problems, Sylvie Plath.’

She laughed. ‘Bye, Holden Caulfield.’

She hadn’t thought about *The Catcher in the Rye* since she was fourteen and read it in one sitting in bed on a rainy day. And now here she was, about to face the universe her teenage self had once starred in.

Holden smiled under his hoodie and turned the boat around. She watched him speed off into the bay then took her notebook and pencil out of her dress pocket and wrote four words. *Holden Caulfield ... Bookish ... Intrigued ...* She slipped the notebook away. It had become like a nervous tic. A crutch. She wasn’t even aware she was doing it, she didn’t even have to do it anymore. Her memory was much better now, but somehow the writing down of words calmed her. Steadied her. As though the recording of feelings exorcised them from her body. She was aware it was not a normal thing to do. She was going to have to resist writing in it while she was here, but how could she hide the other physical reminder of the night that everything changed?

She was acutely aware of her limp as she started down the jetty, her right foot dragging ever so slightly with each step. The rain had eased and her heart was pounding as hard as the waves on the rock shelf. She remembered Sylvia’s words. *Be brave*. She clung tightly to them as she climbed the slope and then the

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wooden stairs to the house. She stood on the deck and looked back out at the view.

The grey water of the bay stretched beyond a gentle slope covered with blue gums, pines and that same straw-coloured grass. The beach was a wild stretch of white sand, framed at either end by dark rocks and oyster flats. Bruny Island crouched in the distance. Sylvie breathed deep, the air cold and fresh. She felt a ripple just under her skin. It was so pristine here, so beautiful, she didn't know where to put the feeling. She took out her notebook but then put it back into her pocket. She needed to appear normal now.

She turned and pulled on the thick, salt-encrusted rope to sound the bell that hung at the front door. A low gong. No movement from inside. She eased the door open and stepped in. It smelled like wood, smoke, candle wax and home-cooking.

'Hello?' She should have come yesterday so that she wasn't the odd one out. *Who am I kidding?* She was always going to be the odd one out.

She moved through an entrance foyer with coats on hooks and gumboots lined up ready for the onslaught of the elements. To the right was a loungeroom with exposed timber beams and rustic floors. It was warmed by Persian rugs in muted colours, white linen sofas, chunky mohair throws and a fireplace that smelled like it was still smouldering. Sheer curtains billowed softly at the windows facing the sea. Sylvie had the urge to run her fingers along the spines of the books in the bookcase and curl up with one in an armchair. She wasn't sure if it was the books and the cosy atmosphere that made it welcoming, or the fact that it felt like Kase.

She followed her nose until she arrived in the kitchen. She dropped her bags next to an island bench. Pots and pans hung over an industrial stove and from the sink there was a view along the coastline. The kitchen was modern, but with nods to the elements of nature that surrounded them. Shells sat on the windowsill, a metal anchor leaned against a wall, and there were hues of navy blue, grey and cream. A perfect mirror of the rawness outside. The Fowlers had always had beautiful homes, and this was another.

She followed the sound of voices until she reached a glass door, which opened to a covered deck. Everyone was sitting around a weathered teak table. Sylvie's body was rigid with nerves and she found herself unable to speak. But Kase saw her and jumped to her feet.

'Oh my God, Sylvie!'

Kase's arms were around her, squeezing her tight, and she might have been a teenager again. Tears pricked her eyes at the warmth of the greeting, at the same sweet scent of Kase's hair. She said a silent prayer to Sylvia.

Kase drew back and shook her head. 'You look the same. How is that possible?'

Sylvie laughed. 'So do you.'

'But just really old, right? Middle-aged.'

'No. The same.' Sylvie squeezed her arm.

'Surely we've improved with age. Remember how short I used to wear my hair? I was trying to be Winona Ryder.'

'We were all trying to be Winona Ryder.'

'Or Drew Barrymore.'

They said it at the same time, their voices chiming in unison. They looked at each other, their eyes wide with shock. Their

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secret language, the line of silent communication was still intact. It felt like it had never gone away.

Kase's rich, deep laugh pealed out, and with it came the silver edges of so many good memories. *Full. Brimming.*

'No, you were just you, Sylvie Dane,' she said, still holding Sylvie by the shoulders. Kase pressed her lips together, holding back emotion, and gestured around to the table. 'Everyone, this is sweet Sylvie, my long-lost friend who has come all the way from Sydney.'

Sylvie's face grew hot, and her fingers twisted her wet dress into a knot. It felt good but strange to be seen for who she used to be. She had forgotten, but Kase remembered. Or was Kase just focusing on the past to avoid the so obviously changed woman standing before her right now?

'You remember Mum, Fran. And this is my husband, Henry. And you remember Rachel, and you know Gabe, who used to be in our little posse. His wife, Trina, and their kids are around somewhere, too.'

Sylvie's eyes flicked from Rachel to Gabe. She forced a smile onto her face and swallowed. Of course. Why wouldn't Kase still be friends with her brother's best friend? For most people, life moved on after death. Those who knew Tristan no doubt helped to keep his memory alive. And no one knew Tristan better than Gabe.

But Rachel, Gabe's sister, the girl who'd tormented her and Kase from age fourteen to seventeen, how was she here as one of Kase's nearest and dearest?

Sylvie chastised herself. Maybe it was only natural they'd stayed in touch, become closer after Tristan's death. Jealousy twinged inside her, like a discordant string, an old feeling. She

opened her mouth to greet them, but two kids rushed at the table like little gusts of wind, energy high, just like their father's had been.

'Steady on. Don't take all the food,' Gabe cautioned them as they grabbed muffins and pastries.

'Dad, can you come and see this sea creature we've found? It might be poisonous,' one of the kids said.

'Can you go with them, babe? I just want to have a coffee in peace,' said Trina – Sylvie assumed – flopping down at the table.

'So much for our long-awaited child-free weekend.' Gabe rolled his eyes. 'The grandparents fell through at the last minute, and now behold the tag team.' He gestured to his wife, drained his coffee and followed the kids down the steps that led towards the beach.

'Oh, we love having the kids,' said Kase.

Fran stood and embraced Sylvie warmly. 'Oh, it's been too long. I still remember how much you loved my carrot cake.'

Sylvie laughed at Fran's greeting. Perhaps all the usual pleasantries were not available to them, given the events of the last time they'd seen each other. Still, a warm seam opened inside her remembering that cake. 'You know, I can still taste that cream cheese icing with the walnuts down the middle.'

'It was from a packet, you know, but I never told you that because I think you had this picture of me as the ideal mother who baked from scratch, which I quite liked.'

Kind. Soft. Present. The ideal mother. Yes. I did think that. So far removed from her own mother, who was absent, indifferent to Sylvie's whereabouts. How many times had Fran picked her up

from places? Fed her dinner? Given her a toothbrush and fresh sheets to sleep in. Asked them how school was, what was going on with friends. Unlike Evangeline.

‘How is your mother?’ asked Fran.

Sylvie nodded. ‘She’s well. Busy. Living in Istanbul at the moment.’

‘Oh, how glamorous.’ Fran’s voice was laced with a tiny hint of sarcasm.

Sylvie cringed inwardly. *Glamorous, beautiful, free-spirited.* Words frequently bestowed upon her mother.

‘Come, sit down. Can I get you a coffee or tea? Or there’s morning wine, which is of course permitted for such momentous birthday celebrations.’ Fran winked.

‘Tea would be great, thank you.’

Kase nudged her. ‘Come on, have a mimosa. It’ll warm you up. It’s my birthday and I’ll make people drink breakfast wine if I want to.’ She poured a glass from a big jug and handed it to Sylvie.

Fran passed her a cup of tea and a soft mohair blanket. ‘And it looks like you could use this too. Sit, sit. Get cosy.’

‘Thanks.’ Sylvie sat between Fran and Kase and wrapped the blanket around her damp legs. She hadn’t realised she was shaking, couldn’t tell if it was from the cold, or nerves.

Kase reached out and squeezed her hand. ‘I can’t believe you came. I mean I was hoping, but I didn’t even know where you were living.’

‘How did you find me?’ Sylvie took a sip of the sweet cocktail, enjoying the sharpness of the alcohol in her throat.

‘My agent knows Evangeline and she emailed her and asked for your address.’

‘Oh.’ Her mother hadn’t mentioned this in their recent email exchange.

‘She’s doing well, isn’t she? Shortlisted for two prizes in recent years.’ Kase sat back, crossing her legs under her in the exact same way Sylvie remembered, as though she was made of a bendier substance than the rest of them.

‘Can you still put your legs behind your head?’ Sylvie wondered out loud.

Kase laughed. ‘I don’t know.’ She pulled a leg out from under her and proceeded to stretch it up until her ankle fitted neatly behind her neck.

Fran rolled her eyes. ‘Kasey June Fowler! Really? At the table?’

‘How the hell did I not know you could do that?’ exclaimed Rachel. ‘Did you know about this sorcery?’ she asked Henry.

Kase’s husband shook his head, a bemused look on his face. ‘What do you think? She gave me a demonstration on our first date.’ They all laughed. ‘No. I didn’t know.’

Kase attempted the second leg but failed. ‘Not as flexible as I used to be then,’ she said. She took a swig of her drink. ‘And what about you? Are you still writing?’

Sylvie laughed. ‘Me?’

Kase widened her eyes. ‘Yes, you. Star English student. Famous author mum. You were born to be a writer.’

‘No.’

‘Really? You don’t write at all?’

Sylvie shrugged. ‘Work keeps me busy.’

‘What is it that you do for work?’ Rachel asked from across the table. Sylvie took in her neat honey-blonde hair, dark manicure and chic black turtleneck jumper. Their family had always had money and now it showed.

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‘I’m a cleaner.’ Sylvie felt a mixture of shame and defiance saying this in front of all these people from her past.

She saw Rachel’s eyes glaze over; she clearly hadn’t changed since high school. *Superficial. Hungry.*

‘No, I refused to believe it when I heard,’ said Kase. ‘You can’t possibly be, because how on earth do you clean houses in those beautiful dresses of yours?’ Her face was open and free of judgement, and Sylvie laughed. *You still know me.*

She shook her head. ‘How do you know I don’t wear overalls?’

Kase rolled her eyes. ‘I just know. You would never.’

‘I clean out furniture and things from houses after people pass away. I like to dress up out of respect for them.’

Kase smiled. ‘How interesting. What do you have to do exactly?’

‘I go in after the family have taken everything they want, and I pack up the rest for charity or the tip. There’s a lot of going through old things. Finding things in the backs of wardrobes, in long-forgotten places.’

‘Oh, now that’s interesting,’ said Rachel, leaning on her elbows and narrowing her eyes. ‘That’s not a cleaner, that’s a death curator.’

‘That’s a dramatic interpretation. Can you tell she works in the theatre?’ added Kase.

Sylvie laughed. Rachel had always had a flair for the dramatic. She felt her shoulders drop and the clench in her gut ease a little. She took another sip of her drink. The fresh salty air and the sweet sharp wine were good. Now she wanted the conversation to steer away from her. She knew what came next.

All the questions: Don't you find it depressing? Do you have to move dead bodies? *Morbid curiosity.*

'So what book are you up to now?' she asked Kase.

'The one about the long-lost friend showing up at the party.'

Kase shot her a cheeky look and everyone laughed, but Sylvie felt the tightness return to her throat. *Abandoned, not long-lost. There is a difference.* Her eyes met Kase's and she saw amusement there, but also something else. There had been a time when she could read her friend's every expression.

Kase waved her hand dismissively. 'No, not really. Though it's not a bad premise for a book. I'm running short of ideas at the moment. Bit of a dry patch creatively, despite the next one being due soon. I really must be getting old.'

'I want to read something about a death curator now,' said Rachel. 'Can you write that? Richard, my director, can turn it into a play.'

'Why don't you get Sylvie to write it? She's always been a far better wordsmith than me,' said Kase.

Sylvie shook her head, feeling a rush of embarrassment at everyone's eyes on her, remembering all the dreams she used to have, how good with words she used to be. *I was better. But I never did anything with it.*

'Don't be silly,' she said.

'You are. We both know it. Our Year 12 English teacher knew it. Your mother knew it. I have no idea how I've published five books and you're working as a cleaner.'

There was a ripple of awkward laughter but the words hung in the air like the mist sweeping towards them across the bay. Sylvie felt the cold stain her cheeks. She didn't know what to

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say, so she said nothing, and then they all felt the fine mist of rain, slanting sideways, like icy pins.

‘Oh, that’s cold. I think it might be time to light the fire and think about lunch,’ said Fran, rising and collecting the mugs. Sylvie busied herself with helping clear the table and Kase hugged her again as they went inside. But her words sat within Sylvie like the dark stones glistening under the bruised sky on the beach outside.