

A
CARAVAN
like a
CANARY

SASHA

WASLEY



PANTERA
PRESS

CHAPTER 1

Now

It was still there, hidden under a tarpaulin behind the big shed in Nan's sprawling backyard. I dragged off the tarp and pockets of it got caught on metal, tearing clean lines through the plastic weave. By the time I'd pulled it away, the tarp was in long blue strips on the ground – shed vestments.

The caravan seemed to loom and wobble before me, almost terrifying in its familiarity – the battered tin of its sides, the rusted tow hook, silver gaffer tape over the broken windows perished and crumbling into glitter on the kikuyu. The paintwork was still yellow but had faded in patches over the years.

The tyres were flat, snails with rubber heads and tails squeezing out on either side of the whorls of the rims. They'd have to be replaced if I were to have any chance of towing it up to Elsewhere—

Stop. Never going to happen.

I took a step closer and skipped a heartbeat when something scaly rustled in the grass at my feet. A blue tongue. *You want the blue tongues*, Nan used to say. *If you've got them in your garden, it means you've got no snakes.* I'd thought it was some kind of

quantum fact: one cannot exist in the same dimension as the other. This was a male, big-headed and grumpy. He gave me a languorous hiss and waddled away.

Face up against the cracked, taped window, I peered in. The caravan was as yellow inside as out, now: cobwebbed and stained – the kind of filth that can only come from years of mouldering behind a shed, ignored and wilfully forgotten. I bundled up the tarp and tossed it into the shed, then headed back along the side driveway to the front of the house. I prised a key out of a split at the bottom of the timber window frame. Only us Buttons knew about that key.

This house would soon be my home again. I'd been managing the tenants for my aunt since she inherited Nan's old place. Aunty Jackie lived in Brisbane and didn't get over to Perth very often. The most recent tenant had vacated two months earlier and there was a glut of rentals in Fosdyke, so it was proving hard to fill at the rate my aunt was asking. No one wanted to live on a barely fenced, sprawling land-parcel with a ramshackle house when they could have a townhouse or apartment this close to the city. Aunty Jackie said she needed the rental money and asked me if I could move in. The lease on my apartment was coming up for renewal, so I gave notice that I'd be vacating.

I could never see the front room without picturing Nan's old couch against the wall, lumpy as a body bag, upholstered in brown and orange wool. The adjacent wall, stained with age, was where a low, faux-wood cabinet with sliding glass panels had stood, a classic example of 1970s carpentry. Nan's squat little TV had sat on top, rabbit-ear antennae trying and failing to pick up a good signal for the ABC. I locked the front door behind me and glanced into

the kitchen. The tap dripped into the deep sink every six seconds.

In Nan's bedroom, the wall mirror was the only thing of hers that remained – that, and the ancient carpet. It had been a long time since her old dressing table hulked in the dim corner. When Nan was alive, her dressing table had been a clutter of Avon, prescription medications and Fisherman's Friend lozenges for her cough. Zac once stole the packet and ate them all, resulting in a well-deserved bout of diarrhoea.

The mirror showed me my tight expression. I tried to relax the frown off my face and drop my shoulders a notch, then a message pinged through on my phone.

Mum: Tara, is it there?

Me: Yes. It's still here.

Mum: How soon can you bring it up to me?

I lowered myself to the floor, lying back on the carpet, and thought about the yellow caravan.

Age 11

'Look at the colour! Yellow like a canary.' Our mother was in the frenetic mood of a canary herself – a kind of forced liveliness.

Zac was bouncing around with manic energy, too – but he didn't perform it; he owned it. 'It's so cool! Where did you get it, Mum? How? What did it cost?' He fired questions at her, uninterested in answers. 'Who brought it over? Who painted it that colour? Does Dad know?'

I glanced at our mother. Dad wouldn't know. Dad was in hospital. She didn't meet my eye.

'We're taking it on a special journey,' she said, hitching Sunny higher on her hip. 'No school!'

Zac gasped in delight – the only things he liked about school were art and sport. I gazed at my mother in alarm.

'That's not allowed,' I said. 'Mrs Goerke told us so. You have to go to school or the truant officers come after you.'

'Not if I give you lessons on the road,' she said.

My apprehension deepened. 'How?'

'How what, Tara?'

'How will you give us lessons? You don't know the stuff they teach us.'

Mum shot me a little glare, somewhere between offended and not-in-front-of-your-brother. 'We'll just work through it bit by bit,' she said, waving a hand. 'It's all in your books – *Grammar Go* and *Maths for Fun*.'

'*Maths for Life*,' I corrected.

'Anyway, you'll be getting the most amazing education any kid could ask for on the road. We'll stay near beaches and go swimming every day. We'll see sights. You'll be going to the school of life!'

'When can we go back to real school?'

She ignored me and danced Sunny around the outside of the caravan. 'We're going on the road in a caravan just like a canary,' she sang and Sunny burred, joining in.

Zac wrenched open the door and bounded up the steps. 'Cool,' he called. 'It's got tiny cupboards everywhere, and little windows like portholes in a ship!'

'Do you see how the table drops down to make a bed?' Mum called back.

There was a *thunk*, followed by a cranking noise.

‘What about my friends?’ I asked.

‘They’ll still be here when we get back.’

I wriggled with distress. ‘What about Dad?’

‘Nan will look after Dad and let us know how he’s going. There’s nothing we can do while he’s in this state.’

‘Sunny hates being in the car for a long time, Mum. She’ll spew and cry.’

‘She’ll be fine.’

I stared hard at her, but she ducked through the low doorway after Zac. I heard the sounds of them opening drawers and cupboards, exploring the caravan. The yellow of its sides was so bright I could hardly look at it.

I turned and ran all the way through the front yard, out of our tired little cul-de-sac and across busy Angas Street at its end, to Hyacinth Avenue. Nan’s place was number seventeen, and she was in the front yard, watering in her shade house.

I gasped out the words between heaving breaths. ‘Mum’s going to take us away in a caravan. For months!’

‘Months?’ Nan flicked off the hose. ‘When did she say you’re coming back?’

‘I don’t know. Not for ages. Maybe never.’ I had no evidence of this but needed Nan to understand the impact of what my mother was doing to me. ‘I don’t want to go!’

‘I’m sure it’s not forever.’ Nan resumed watering, spraying the hose across the peace lilies. ‘Where’d she get the caravan?’

‘I don’t know.’ My breathing was settling but my heart was sinking with Nan’s response. ‘It was just there in the driveway when we got home from school. It’s bright *yellow*.’ She said nothing. ‘Nan. What about school?’

‘Missing a bit of school never harmed an eleven- and an eight-year-old. Life is the greatest teacher of all, they say.’

‘What about *Dad*?’

Her finger wobbled on the trigger of the hose nozzle, making the water dip away momentarily, then resume. A firm shower hit the philodendron with a noise like a tent in a deluge.

‘Your father’s in safe hands. I’ll be here to take care of him when he wakes up.’

I sank onto the concrete of Nan’s front porch. She should have been the first person marching me back home and demanding to know what my mother was thinking, leaving her husband in hospital, taking two schoolchildren and a baby on an unplanned driving holiday. I contemplated a future in a canary-yellow caravan, sleeping on a collapsible table, with my mother attempting to pin Zac down long enough to practise his times tables. I thought about Nikita and Tammy, my two best friends, and how in a few months we were going to be year sevens and rule the school, stepping out of the shadows of our cooler classmates at last. I’d been careful not to let anyone at school know about what had happened with Dad. If Tammy and Nikita had somehow found out, from their parents or whatever, they hadn’t let on. They were still my friends. It meant everything to me. We already had our posse name: TNT. How could they go into year seven as just TN? How could I go into the world as just T?

Nan was turning the tap off, pipes juddering from the depths of the old house. She gave me a pat on the arm as she came past. ‘Come on, pet. Let’s get you home.’

Now

The sound of breaking glass woke me. I scrambled to my feet too fast and wobbled while my head span, pinpricks of light appearing in my vision. When they cleared the room was dim. There was a thud, then footsteps.

Barely breathing, every muscle tense in preparation to defend myself, I crept over to the bedroom door and closed it as softly as possible. The latch shot home, making a loud *click*. I turned the old key and waited.

The steps came closer. I snatched up my phone, fumbling to unlock it. The door rattled behind me.

‘Police – open up! This is private property.’

I stopped before entering the third zero on my keypad. ‘Zac?’

Silence, then a sputter of laughter. ‘Tarz?’

‘Christ on a stick.’ I unlocked the door. ‘You dickhead. Did you break a window?’

My brother was grinning as always. ‘The key was missing. I thought you must be a squatter. Where’s your car?’

‘I walked here.’ I pushed past him. ‘You almost gave me a heart attack.’

‘What were you doing in Nan’s bedroom?’ Zac followed me. ‘You got a bloke over?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Dumb-arse. And you’re paying for that window.’

Grinning again, Zac dug in his pocket and pulled out smokes and a lighter.

‘Not inside,’ I said. ‘I thought you’d quit?’

‘It’s my one vice.’

Zac went out the front door and lit his cigarette on the verandah, rubbing his thatch of sandy hair. I followed.

There was still a little daylight outside, the sun dropping off the precipice of the horizon. Zac smoked, watching the sky. His skin had become so tanned over the years that you could hardly tell he'd once had a rash of freckles. He still had the snub nose, though, and a couple of scars – one high on his forehead from a melanoma removal and others from surfing accidents. Or possibly fights.

'Are you okay?' I asked.

He shot me a sidelong glance. 'Yeah, fit as a fiddle.'

'What are you doing here?'

'What are *you* doing here?' he countered.

'I fell asleep. Knackered from work.'

'No, but why are you at Nan's place?' he pressed.

'I'm moving in here,' I said; then, because he was still waiting, I relented. 'Mum emailed me.'

'About the caravan?'

I nodded. 'You, too?'

'Yeah,' Zac said. 'It's still here, did you know that? Behind the shed.'

'Yes. She wouldn't let anyone get rid of it but I hoped someone had anyway. I haven't checked for years.'

'Have you still got your four-wheel drive?'

I caught my breath. 'You're not seriously suggesting I should take it up to her, are you?'

Zac tucked in his chin in surprise. 'Why not?'

'It's a clapped-out piece of crap, Zac. And what's she going to do with it?'

He chuckled. 'Maybe she wants to go on a holiday.'

'She can barely leave her bed.'

‘Bullshit. She’s much better now.’

Was this denial or his obstinate idealism? Zac gazed into the dying light, unaware of my stare. A breeze puffed the hair back from his forehead. I softened – he’d hardly changed from when we were kids.

He met my eyes. ‘Why don’t we go together? Road trip!’

I shot him a wry smile. ‘Again?’

Zac granted me a small chuckle. ‘It’ll be good, Tarz. You working at the moment?’

I didn’t dignify that with a response. I had been working ever since I graduated university at twenty-one. ‘Are *you* working?’

‘In between jobs.’ Zac shot me the grin that always prompted my exasperation. ‘And you’ve always got heaps of leave because you never take a holiday, so it’s perfect timing, huh? It’s meant to be.’

‘Meant to be?’ I laughed. ‘More like inconvenient, stressful and probably expensive.’

But a little part of me fired up at the thought of driving along endless roads lined with wind-blasted coastal scrub and bent ti-trees, with Zac in the passenger seat telling me about the surf. Such an opportunity. Hours and hours of uninterrupted driving time to dig into my brother’s head. I could find out what was really happening in his life – see if any signs of stability or maturity were emerging. A steady girlfriend; an interest in a career; or even a fixed address. I could talk to him properly and work out what he needed to turn things around.

‘She’s asked us to do her a favour,’ he said.

‘It’s pointless,’ I said. ‘Even if we get it to Elsewhere, what then? Do we leave it at the hospice for Mum? Try to sell it? We’d have to pay someone to take it away!’

‘If Mum doesn’t have a plan for it, we’ll take it out the back of Elsewhere and torch it. Bonfire.’ His teeth shone in the low light.

‘Not a chance.’ But I calculated my annual leave. I had plenty – certainly enough to drive from the bottom to the top of the country and back again.

‘It’ll be fun,’ Zac said. It wasn’t clear if he meant the road trip or torching the caravan.

I crossed my arms. ‘I don’t want to get done for towing an unsafe load. I’ll go if you can get it roadworthy.’

Zac’s expression faltered for a moment, then his confidence was back. ‘Easy.’

‘I’ve got a friend at work who can tell us what needs doing.’

‘A cop friend?’

‘Obviously.’

He didn’t hide his dismay. ‘Cops only look for problems, Tarz.’

‘That’s what we need him for.’

Zac blew smoke away from me and the wind blew it back. Same brand – same smell – as our mother’s cigarettes.

‘When y’getting this pig friend over?’ he asked.

‘Jesus, Zac. Paul. His name is Paul, and I’ll get him around after work one day this week.’

‘Which day?’

‘I don’t know. Wednesday, maybe.’

He nodded and shot me a furtive look which made me wonder why he was probing. Did he want to be there when Paul came over? Maybe he didn’t he trust me to pass on Paul’s honest opinion. Or – Christ – was Zac thinking about bribing Paul? He probably knew there was no way we could

get this thing back on the road and figured he could smooth out the registration process ...

‘You’re not allowed to be here when I bring Paul over,’ I said. ‘I’ll tell you what he says afterwards.’

Zac grimaced. ‘Don’t worry, I wouldn’t bloody want to be here.’

CHAPTER 2

Now

My co-workers at the police forensic lab, Laini and Poona, had developed a secret heatmap system for rating the men who came to the lab. I didn't participate – if our manager Duncan caught them, they'd get sacked for sexual harassment. What they were doing was inappropriate, after all, and Duncan Fyffe was a serious kind of guy. Laini often complained about how Duncan had stopped her wearing jeans to the lab and Poona commiserated with the story about how he'd asked her to do unpaid overtime on a high-profile sexual assault case. Poona said she didn't get paid enough for that shit, and I ended up doing the overtime. *The harder you work, the better luck you have*, Nan used to say.

Poona made me laugh, even if I had to hide it from Duncan. She was so honest and outspoken, making vociferous accusations when the PAOs did a poor job of labelling evidence, or dropping an outrageous remark into the middle of a solemn staff meeting. A few years back, we went for walks together at lunchtime, and she still occasionally asked me to go out with her and Laini. I always declined. Poona

got curious once and I had to shut the friendship down. We were just colleagues now.

I was around twenty-five when she mentioned it. 'Hey, Tara, I was reading an article on historical forensic approaches to dom-vi cases last night,' she said, stopping by my desk with a coffee mug, her voice low. 'I came across the Button case and realised *you* were one of the kids. Christ – so traumatic. I don't know how you managed to get to adulthood and stay sane.'

I'd shoved down the prickling fury that rose through my body and trotted out some pop-psych to show I was fine. 'Kids are resilient. You just take each day as it comes. And we had my grandmother. She was a rock.'

'More power to you,' Poona had said, eyes wide.

She didn't get it. The truth was, I was just playing a part. No one came out of trauma a 'sane adult' – we just learned to squeeze it down underneath our consciousness every single day, sometimes several times a day, while people around us bleated on about letting go, moving on and finding peace. Peace floated above trauma, elusive and transitory. You had to keep stretching up for it, stomping the memories down so they didn't push the peace out of reach.

Poona's curiosity had crushed any chance of us being friends. I couldn't afford a friend who would bring my past out into the open for discussion.

However, she was still funny, and I did check the heatmap from time to time, especially after a new guy came through the workplace. It was saved in the shared drive as 'WR-Heatmap', the WR being an abbreviation of *Would Root*. The highest rated man so far was Detective Sergeant Marty Cassidy. According to Poona, he was ripped, smelled amazing

and had a jaw you could cut glass with. He was marked as DSMC, and his initials got clicked multiple times whenever he came by, which had turned his part of the map vivid red.

Detective Senior Constable Paul Ferris (DSCPF) was on there too. His section of the map was a respectably deep orange. Laini teased me sometimes, saying Paul was interested in me. He did tend to hover around my work area whenever he stopped by the lab. Paul was ex-traffic and worked in the Gang Crime Squad nowadays; divorced, no kids.

He sounded pleasantly surprised when I called him to see if he'd give me an opinion on the caravan. He met me at Nan's place on Wednesday. For days, I'd been fending off Mum's messages asking when I could get the caravan up to Elsewhere. She hadn't bothered me for years and suddenly I was inundated, which wasn't good for my efforts at sanity. I got palpitations every time I heard my message tone.

'Chassis's bugged.' Paul was bent over to peer at the caravan's underside, his work shirt pulling up so his bum-crack peeped over the top of his trousers. 'And there's rust everywhere.'

'Ah,' I said.

'It's been in an accident at some stage.' Paul straightened up and looked at me. 'Is this *the* caravan?'

I glanced away. It answered his question. Paul was tactful enough to go back to his task.

'Look at this.' He pulled yellow metal cladding back from one of the walls and pointed his little torch at the rotting insulation inside, even though it was daylight and I could see perfectly well.

'Gentle,' I said, and he gave me a surprised look. 'It's vintage.'

‘You wanting to sell it?’ Paul peeled off some gaffer tape and peered through the broken window. ‘Sell as-is,’ he advised. ‘Unlicensed. A doer-upper.’

I chewed my lip. ‘What would it take to get it roadworthy?’

He gave a short laugh. ‘A stick of dynamite.’

‘I’m serious, Paul. What would I need to do to get it towable?’

He stood back, picked up the beer I’d given him and leaned against the shed. ‘Chassis needs a full rebuild. You’d need to rip off and replace all the cladding. Do a full rewire of the electrics for the tail and brake lights. New wheels, reweld the tow hook, and you’ll be right to go, if you get an inspector in a good mood.’

My phone buzzed in my pocket. Probably Mum again. ‘That sounds expensive.’

‘You’re not shitting me.’ He kicked a flat tyre.

Defensiveness surged again. I took his arm to pull him away, picking through the long grass to the side driveway.

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘It’s good to get an expert opinion.’

‘No worries.’

I led him to the front yard and dragged the gate closed behind us. At least Zac hadn’t turned up and tried slipping Paul a fifty to push the caravan through inspection.

‘This is your grandmother’s place, then?’ Paul asked, gazing back over the gate. ‘Good-sized bit of land.’

‘Yes.’ I glanced back at the house. ‘I lived here as a teenager.’

‘You were close to your gran?’

‘Nan practically raised me.’

Paul nodded. ‘When did she pass?’

‘About seven years ago. Her heart.’

‘Do you own it?’ he said.

‘The house? No, it belongs to my aunt, but I look after it – you know, like a property manager.’

‘I would’ve thought your gran would leave part of the property to you, at least, if you were close to her.’

I scuffed at a weed. ‘Nan died without a will. She hadn’t been sick. It was unexpected.’

‘The place’ll go to you eventually, though? When your aunt pops off?’

‘Well, Aunt Jackie’s got her own kids.’

‘Huh?’ Paul raised his eyebrows. ‘You look after it for this aunty and she doesn’t even cut you into the will?’

‘She lives interstate, so it’s easier for me to do it,’ I said. ‘I don’t mind, anyway. Jackie’s got a right to it, as Nan’s daughter.’ The conversation made me want to scratch.

Paul gave a shrug. ‘Oh, well, maybe you’ll get something from your mum. She’s sick, isn’t she?’

Anything I may have felt towards Paul was dissipating fast. I leaned against my car. ‘My mother has terminal cancer, yes.’

He paused. ‘I’m sorry about that, by the way.’

Relieved, I nodded.

‘What sort?’

‘It’s metastatic, all through her, but it started in her lungs.’

‘Smoker?’

I nodded.

Paul shook his head. ‘Tragic. Bloody tragic. What a waste. It’s horrible to see people throw their lives away like that. And it’s extra pain for you, I mean, with everything you went through.’

My throat locked tight. I reminded myself that they *all* knew, and it was only natural for them to mention it from time to time. And I *chose* to work in the Police Force.

‘And that’s on top of having to look after your gran’s place for your aunty.’ Paul sighed. ‘I always reckon smokers are selfish.’

‘Mum didn’t get cancer to be selfish.’

He laughed. ‘No, ’course not. But smoking even though she knew the risks.’ He shook his head again.

A *whap-whap-whap* sounded, getting louder by the moment. I looked up and saw a guy on a Harley-Davidson cruising along Hyacinth Avenue, decked out in a Nazi helmet with insignia and sunglasses above a black face mask. He turned his head to stare at us as he passed us. Paul met his gaze, frowning.

‘Bloody ferals,’ he muttered. ‘Nasty bunch. Not their usual patch.’

This offered me the break I needed. I pressed the unlock button for my car. ‘Well, I’d better get home. Thanks for coming out here, Paul. I really appreciate it.’

Paul leaned against the rear door and gave me a speculative look. ‘What are you doing for dinner? Want to grab a bite?’

‘Oh, sorry – I can’t. I’m meeting my brother. We’ve got work to do on the caravan, it seems.’ I gave a weak chuckle.

‘Tell him to come along.’

Zac having dinner with me and a cop? I almost laughed. Christ, what if Paul looked him up on the system afterwards?

‘Uh, sorry, I shouldn’t ...’ I couldn’t think of an excuse fast enough and this time Paul saw it for what it was: a rejection.

He straightened, looking away. ‘Well, have fun. Hope you or your brother have got some moolah, because you’re looking at thousands to get that piece of shit fixed up. Belongs at the wreckers.’

I gave him a wan smile. It was bound to be delightfully awkward next time Paul dropped into the lab. He left and I sent my mother a text message.

Me: Not looking good. Apparently it's going to be a huge problem to get it roadworthy.

Mum: No, that's rubbish! Have you talked to Zac? He said he can get it fixed up easy!

Me: That's wrong, Mum. The whole structure is screwed, the electrics don't work and there's rust all through it.

Mum: Are you sure you're not playing up the problems? It can't be that bad. I know you Tara, and you tend to see the glass half empty.

I typed a reply that said exactly what I thought of that, then deleted it. She was dying, after all.

Me: I'll talk to Zac.

Age 9

The car bumped up over the crest on South Street and Zac and I cheered, Mum grinning in the front seat.

'I can see the sea, I can see the sea,' Zac chanted.

I was too old to say the chant but I had it going in my head. I stared at the blue strip of ocean on the horizon, holding that first-sight feeling in my heart as long as I could.

'I bags the boogie-board,' Zac said, not for the first time.

I ignored him. 'Are you allowed to swim, Mum? With a baby in your stomach?'

‘Of course.’

‘The baby might get cold,’ I said.

‘No, it’s warm as anything in there. I’ve got my own little tropical beach inside, and the baby swims in it all day.’

This was simultaneously gross and rather beautiful. I thought about it for a few minutes, imagining the baby bobbing up for air in Mum’s inner ocean.

‘Why doesn’t Dad ever come to the beach?’ Zac asked.

Mum kept her eyes on the road. ‘He’s not keen on it.’

‘But why?’ said Zac. ‘Can’t he swim? He doesn’t even go in Keith’s pool at Christmas.’

I knew why. I watched Mum and she flicked a glance back at me.

‘Some people are beach people; some aren’t,’ she said.

‘Don’t ask him about it, all right?’

Zac’s attention span was like the lifespan of the silk moths we’d bred in science. ‘Can we get an ice cream?’

‘Maybe later, if you’re good.’

We had to run from the car park to the waterline. The beach was so hot it burned our feet, but no kid in their right mind wore thongs for this run. You’d flick up so much hot powder, you might as well be running through a sandstorm. Zac ran ahead of me, his short legs going so fast they were a blur, holding the leg rope of the boogie-board over his shoulder so the foam thumped on his back all the way down. We stopped with our feet in the water, glorying in the cool, anticipating the all-over body splash.

‘Sunscreen,’ Mum called.

I trudged back up the beach to where she was spreading out a towel to sit on, but Zac hung back.

‘I put it on before,’ he tried.

‘Zac.’ Mum’s voice held a warning.

He dragged his feet through the sand up the beach and stood in long-suffering silence while she doled out the sunscreen. He did a terrible job of applying it, as usual. I grabbed his arm and spun him around, rubbing it into his shoulders. It was sitting in white streaks on his face and I tried to rub that in, too, but he dodged and ran.

‘Last one in’s a rotten egg!’

Mum sighed. ‘Off you go. Keep an eye on him, will you, Tara? He’s got no idea.’

I knew what she meant. Zac thought he could do anything. I trotted down to the water and edged my way in, Zac ridiculing and splashing me at every opportunity.

‘No waves,’ he said in disgust when I was level with him. ‘You can have the boogie-board.’

That meant he couldn’t be bothered taking it back out to the shore. I laid myself across the board, feeling the barely-there waves lift me up and dip me back down, as soothing as a swing. Every now and then I looked up to check on Zac. He was diving like a dolphin: springing out of the water, trying to get air beneath his body before his head hit the surface. His eyes were already going red from keeping them open underwater. I drifted near a patch of seaweed and paddled myself away from it. Seaweed gave me the creeps.

‘Why aren’t some people beach people?’ Zac asked.

‘Dad doesn’t swim because of his leg,’ I said. ‘Just don’t tell Mum I told you.’

Zac screwed up his face, trying to figure it out. ‘Does his scar hurt in the water?’ he asked.

‘I think so. And the sunlight hurts it. And people might stare.’

‘Dad wouldn’t care if people stared,’ Zac declared.

I said nothing, but I thought Dad would hate it if people stared. He’d worn long pants even on the hottest days for the past two years – ever since he got a bad burn from the muffler on his truck. The burn made him sweat and itch, and I’d heard murmured arguments between our parents late at night about *surgery* and *infected* and *get it seen by a doctor*.

Zac didn’t want to talk about it anymore. He dived into the water several times in quick succession, then started doing handstands. On the last one, he came up with two large pebbles, which he pitched hard into the water. I said nothing, wondering if I should have left it. I didn’t want Zac to ask Dad outright, that was all. Dad would get mad, then Zac would get hurt. I rested my head on the boogie-board and let Zac have his moment.

It felt like I’d fallen asleep. I lifted my head off the board and my eyesight was all red and yellow from the light through my eyelids. The water around me was still. I slipped off the board and straight into a puddle of seaweed, which clawed at my legs. I gasped and leaped back onto the board, hoping I hadn’t disturbed a dangerous creature.

‘Zac!’ I panted. ‘Zac!’ I lifted my voice to a shout, scouring the ocean for his golden head. ‘Zac!’ I screamed it with all my might, turning towards the shore so Mum would be alerted.

But there he was, digging a hole with some other kid on the waterline. Mum waved at me and pointed at Zac, showing me he was fine. Embarrassed, I dived under the surface, dragging the boogie board behind me. I swam away from the seaweed, letting the cold water stroke relief through my hair.

CHAPTER 3

Now

Zac messaged me at work to say everything was under control and the caravan would be ready in a week.

I left the fibre analysis I was working on and went into an empty meeting room to phone him. ‘How are you getting it fixed so quickly? Who’s doing it?’

‘There’s not that much to do,’ he said, superlatively confident. ‘The guy I’ve got to work on it’s available now. He’s already started.’

‘Hang on. Paul said it’s going to cost thousands. Do you have that kind of money? Because I don’t.’

I did have the money, in fact. I’d been saving it towards a deposit on a townhouse for years now, but there was no way I was going to throw it away on getting the caravan back on the road just because my mother, probably addled by medication, had requested it. The words *dying wish* floated through my mind and I shoved them away.

‘Thousands! What a joker. I’ve got a mate who welds. He’ll fix it up, no problem.’

I should have known. ‘Does this “mate” weld well enough to get it licensed?’

‘That’s not very nice, Tarz. *Yes*, he knows what he’s doing. It’ll be good enough to pass over the pits.’

‘Seriously?’

‘Yeah, seriously. He’s qualified. He’s done this sort of stuff before.’

‘And the electrics? That needs to be done by an auto-electrician.’

‘Yeah, he’s got his ticket. He’ll get the brake lights working.’

I held in a sigh. ‘He needs to get the brake lights working to the Department of Transport’s specifications.’

‘All good. I know you’re a stickler for rules. It’ll be done right.’

‘It’s got nothing to do with me, Zac. If it doesn’t pass inspection, it won’t get licensed.’

‘Tarz.’ I could practically see my brother’s eyes, bright blue, earnest and full of optimism. ‘I get it. It’s not gunna be a problem. Come over to Nan’s after work and see for yourself.’

I hung up and went to Duncan’s office, knocking and waiting. Poona always knocked then charged straight in, and I’d seen on Duncan’s face how much that bothered him.

‘Come in.’

‘Hi, Duncan. How’s your day treating you?’

He sighed. ‘Trying to get a straight answer from the powers-that-be can be soul-destroying sometimes, Tara, I can tell you that.’

I gave a sympathetic chuckle. ‘Bureaucracy at its finest.’

He wasn’t one for small talk and waited, his eyes wandering back to his computer screen.

‘I have family up north, in Elsewhere,’ I began. ‘One of them needs me to transport a caravan up there for them.’

They can't do it themselves due to illness. It's a bit out of the blue, but I was thinking of applying for some leave. Can you spare me at the moment?'

'A caravan?' His eyebrow rose a smidgeon – slight contempt.

'I know.' I laughed. 'It sounds trivial, doesn't it? But there's a good reason. I won't bore you with the details, but it's important.'

He clicked something on his computer. 'Laini's taking leave next month. I can't have both of you gone at the same time. When did you want to go?'

'If I could have a fortnight, starting next week, that would be—'

'A fortnight, just to deliver a caravan to Elsewhere?' The eyebrow rose higher.

I considered. 'Maybe a week and a half, then. It's an old caravan, which might slow me down a little. And it would be good to see my family member while I'm there, just for few days. She's seriously ill.'

He stared at the screen, thinking. 'I'm really not sure ...' He rubbed his chin. 'The problem is, and this is in confidence, Tara, I've had word there's a significant raid planned in the next few weeks. There's going to be a lot of arrests – a lot of evidence to process.'

I knew what it meant: child porn, drugs or guns. Paedo ring, drug traffickers or an outlaw bokie gang, most likely. Whichever unit it was would keep us under pressure to sort out their evidence as fast as possible, trying to keep their suspects in custody and bring solid charges.

'Do you have a date for the raid?' I asked.

‘Within four weeks. That’s why I’m conscious of handing out leave approvals – I can’t allow us to be short staffed.’

‘Okay, how about this: I leave this Saturday, drive straight up and deliver the caravan around Wednesday, spend three days with my sick relative, then leave Sunday and be back at work the following Wednesday. I’ll be back well before Laini’s due to go on leave.’

His position of authority entitled him to take several long moments to consider my request. ‘It’s tight,’ he said at last. ‘It doesn’t meet the two-weeks notice policy, either.’

‘Extenuating circumstances.’ I tried a tight smile.

He sighed. ‘I’ll allow it. I hope I don’t regret this.’

‘I appreciate it, Duncan.’ I grimaced. ‘The trip isn’t even definite yet – we need to get the caravan registered first and the chances of that happening are pretty low. If that doesn’t come off, I won’t even need to go.’ He still didn’t look as benevolent as I’d hoped. ‘Either way, it’s not going to be a fun holiday – it’s just family duty. I’ll be glad to get back to work.’

He hesitated. ‘Is it to do with ...?’

It was like my spine was one of those bendy snake toys that, flicked at the right angle, become rigid. My body locked straight and my gaze hit the floor.

‘Put your leave request in the system,’ he said, his tone apologetic. ‘I’ll grant formal approval when it comes through.’



White sparks shot into the evening air behind the shed and Zac’s voice grew louder as I made my way down Nan’s side driveway. He was positioned a semi-safe distance from the

work, lounging against the fence with a can of Jack Daniel's and cola.

He waved as soon as he saw me. 'Tarz! Come see!'

Pieces of the caravan were lying around on the ground: a section of the door, strips of tin in a stack. A man with a mask over his face was bent over the front of the caravan, welding on the tow-hook.

Zac did a quick dance to get the welder's attention and the sparks diminished as the guy straightened. Jeans and a long-sleeved top – no protective clothing. Was he really qualified? He pushed back his mask and nodded at me with a smile I knew.

'Hi, Tara.'

'You remember Benny,' Zac said.

Zac had called his mate Benny for years but I couldn't remember why. His name was actually Danh. 'Yes, of course. I didn't realise you two were still in touch,' I added.

'Course we are! We've been mates since year four! Benny's kept me on the straight and narrow forever.' Zac's chipped side-tooth showed when he grinned.

Danh shot him a look of amusement and I knew why – if he was supposed to be keeping Zac straight, he was doing a shitty job. Tall and quiet with an intelligent face, Danh had been the least wild of Zac's social circle, somehow outside it, always there but never quite part of the tomfoolery. I'd liked him the best of Zac's mates, despite the strange, silent way he had of observing me.

'Well, thanks for helping us out,' I said.

Danh nodded and surveyed his work. 'Shouldn't take too long. The electrics are mostly done, and I picked up a new tow hook from a scrapyard. Once that's attached, I'll put in

some replacement panels. I've got Zac tearing off the rusty sheets. Then it's just some new glass in the windows.'

I wondered how much Zac had promised Danh in exchange for this work. I would probably get stuck paying for it.

'Stand back, Tarz,' Zac said. 'Sparks.'

I withdrew. On the walk back along the driveway, I plucked a few weeds, worry building in my gut. What if Zac *could* make the caravan roadworthy? Danh seemed to know his way around a welding thingummy and apparently he had his tickets so he could sign off the electrical work ...

No, that's crazy. Look at it. The caravan was a long way from roadworthy. Zac would be crestfallen when he took it over the pits and it failed, but there was nothing I could do about that.

At least I could tell Mum we'd given it our best shot.

Age 10

Saturdays in our house had their own familiar pattern: cartoons on television, a slow breakfast in our pyjamas. Mum would go out and do the grocery shopping and Dad would mow the lawn. It was my job to mind Sunny. Zac was supposed to help but he usually nicked off to ride his bike with his friends. Lunch was fresh white rolls and cooked chicken that Mum brought home from the supermarket. She knew I liked the leg and would sneak a drumstick onto my plate before anyone else got to it.

Then Dad would go to the pub to put a bet on the dogs and we had a couple of hours before he got home. I would go see Tammy and Nikita or check out what Zac was doing

or watch a DVD with Sunny or visit Nan for a Milo and a biscuit. She bought the Arnott's Family Assorted pack, and I liked the Butternut Snaps or Scotch Fingers. Zac always had the Chocolate Ripple. In summer, I'd go to the pool or play on the slip-n-slide at Nikita's or sit and read in the cool library.

Then Dad would get home and things would be strung tight and cautious for the rest of the night. He would often put on the footy or horseracing. Mum would be in the kitchen cooking dinner. Zac would get home after sundown and Dad would growl at him because he was supposed to be home *at* sundown. Sunny would get tired and grizzle but was not-quite-ready for bed, so I'd have to get her bathed while Mum cooked. She was heavy and slippery in the laundry trough.

One night after a bath, I brought her out into the family room wrapped in a towel. Dad was sitting on the floor, leaning back against the couch with a beer on the coffee table. He was watching the news, growling about a car thief who'd crashed the car he stole and killed another driver. I'd forgotten to grab Sunny's pyjamas so I laid her down on the floor and ordered her to stay there, then dashed for Mum and Dad's room, where her clothes were in a chest of drawers. When I got back Dad had Sunny up on his lap. She was standing up on her chubby legs, her hands wrapped around his fingers on either side. Her position looked so precarious, it made my heart beat high up in my throat.

'Dad!' I cried and he looked over at me, startled. 'She gets wobbly standing up.'

As if to prove me right, Sunny's knees buckled and she flopped forwards, smacking her forehead against the edge of

the coffee table. Dad's beer rocked and fell over, running all over the table and onto the carpet. I dashed forwards and snatched Sunny away from Dad, cradling her head as she scrunched up her face and prepared for a massive scream.

My father's expression folded in on itself, his shout coming even before Sunny's wail. 'What the bloody hell were you doing, scaring her like that? Look what you did!'

It was pure injustice but I said nothing, instead whispering a *shh shh shh* to Sunny, who had let loose at last with a hysterical howl of pain. Mum appeared in a moment, a wooden spoon in hand, her head whipping between me and Dad.

'She scared Sunny half to death, shouting like that,' Dad blustered. 'Made her fall and hit her head.'

'No, Dad wasn't holding her proper.' Zac's voice came from the hallway door. 'I saw. Dad had her standing up on his knee and she falled over and hit the table.'

Dad scrambled to his feet, advancing on Zac. 'Lying little bastard,' he said, grabbing Zac by the T-shirt front. 'You weren't even in the bloody room.'

Mum was taking Sunny out of my arms to inspect her forehead and Dad was lifting Zac off his feet, pinning him against the wall until the top of his head nudged a framed picture of a windmill. I dashed over, pushing myself between them, tugging at Dad's arm.

'Stop, stop, let him go!'

Dad swung his arm and it carried me away, tossing me to the floor. Zac's face had gone red and he was silent, his eyes wide as he stared into Dad's face. He wasn't breathing. I scrambled back up and grabbed Dad's hard, strong arm again, hanging off it like it was playground equipment while

I shrieked at him to let Zac down and Sunny roared and Mum cried out to us all.

Now

I stared at the number plate on the back of the caravan. ‘It passed?’

Zac beamed. ‘With flying colours.’

‘How?’

‘Ignore her, Benny,’ Zac told his friend, who was sitting on a piece of concrete, also there for the big reveal. ‘She’s glass half empty.’

The tow hook welding seemed secure, and Zac demonstrated the working brake lights and indicators – but it was rough. The exterior was just patchy now, rather than rusty, and sealed over with odd-sized pieces of tin. The boys had even repainted it so the caravan was once again canary-yellow. Maybe that was how it had passed inspection – the assessor may have been distracted from its structural defects by its colour. I glanced at Danh and he looked back, as tranquil as usual.

‘I can’t believe it,’ I muttered.

Zac leaned against the side of the caravan. ‘So, when are we leaving?’

Sweat was building in the armpits of my work shirt. He’d done it. He’d actually got it registered.

‘Could you take it?’ I said, mouth dry.

Zac’s mouth fell open. ‘Tarz! You said you’d come! I don’t have anything to tow it with, anyway.’

‘They need all hands on deck in the lab at the moment. I could hire you an SUV. Or ... or you could borrow mine, I guess. If you’re careful.’

His face lost all its jolly confidence and creased with hurt. ‘Tarz, you *said* you’d come. I even cleaned it up inside so we can sleep in there, cook brekkie and shit.’

It weakened me. ‘I just ...’

‘It’s *Mum*,’ he said. ‘She needs us to do this for her.’ Zac never looked serious like this. He hadn’t shown me this face in years – not since he’d been in the rehab program.

Danh got up and checked a rivet.

I tipped my head back and sucked in a breath of the blue evening air. ‘Fine. Fine, I’ll come.’

‘Cool. Should we start tomorrow?’ Zac’s grin was reappearing.

‘No. I can’t just drop everything. I have work, and I’ve got to move into Nan’s this week. I can’t go until Saturday.’ He looked downcast for a moment, then the grin continued its work, brightening his whole golden face. ‘And we’ll aim for maximum efficiency, okay?’ I added, making sure he understood this wasn’t fun for me. ‘Shortest route, straight up Great Northern Highway. We’ll take shifts driving, leave as early as possible each morning, and when we get to Elsewhere, we won’t stay more than a couple of days. Got it, Zac?’

‘Yeah, just a few days – cool, cool.’

In spite of myself, his happiness made my tension ebb. I pushed aside the thoughts of *Oh god, not again. Not the yellow caravan*, and focused on the upside: the opportunity to spend some time with my brother, just us two. If I was going to help him, really help him, we needed to connect. This would give me the time with him I needed.

I remembered Danh, who’d been waiting silently as Zac and I hashed it out, and shot him a quick look of gratitude.

He smiled back. He was a lovely guy, actually. Zac was lucky to have him as a friend.

Zac slapped the side of the caravan, which juddered in response. 'Benny's coming too. I said we'd give him a ride to Elsewhere as a thanks for his work on Old Yeller.'