

ONE OF US

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PANTERA
PRESS

Prologue

There was crowded, hurried, organised chaos as paramedics manoeuvred between police in paper booties. First responders in bottle-green overalls rushed to the victim on the living-room floor.

But the detective stood deathly still and watched.

The secret to finding reason in every crime scene was the detail. The debris of modern living was everywhere – a half-eaten yoghurt tub, crumb-speckled plates piled on the breakfast bar. The detective noticed crayon-scribbled walls, a scooter thrown in a doorway, a private-college schoolbag abandoned mid-hall. He scanned the happy snaps perched on the buffet, the smiles and laughter. Those images would soon be recoded, stored in the family's 'before' memories. Before this day, the day their lives were torn to pieces.

A shell-shocked, teary teenager sat hunched on the wing chair.

And there she was: the wife.

The attractive, middle-aged woman sat slumped in silence on the couch, hands splayed on either side of her like stabilisers. The show carried on around her in double speed, contrasting her stillness. She seemed not to have realised she was an integral player in the scene. That every reaction, or lack of one, was being analysed.

She was difficult to decode. Her expression remained blank, but her face looked as if a whole world of trouble was going on inside, her eyes fearful of some unknown terror.

This sort of thing played out between gangs in dark alleys, not around here. This place was ivy-league. The exclusive estate boasted twenty-four-hour CCTV whirring in the background, keeping the residents' artwork adorning their walls and their Teslas charging in their garages. Apple Tree Creek Estate – the name sounded as pure as the morning dew. Immaculate lanes, wide cul-de-sacs, shade-speckled playgrounds flanked by pockets of pristine gardens, springy lawns you had to sink your toes into – it was like a modern-day utopia.

The detective huffed, unsure.

Was the wife traumatised because she'd witnessed this low-life act, or because she was guilty of it?

Part 1

The Suspects

Chapter 1

Gertie

‘But ... we love each other. You adore the kids. You’re *devoted* to them ...’ The dent lines on the doona spread out from where her husband sat and made the pattern become out of sync. Just like his words. ‘I mean, I see your face when they blabber on with their long, boring stories and you don’t look bored at all. You’re never *token*. You actually *love* them.’

He nodded an impossibly slow nod. ‘I do.’

Gertie shook her head. ‘You’re Super-Dad. Super-Dad doesn’t *leave*.’

Ed’s jaw twisted. He was feeling rubbish about it, she could tell. But this simply made no sense.

‘My anniversary card said I was the love of your life. That I was the best mother in the world, that you’d marry me again ...’

‘I would.’

Her chin tucked in, disbelieving. ‘And yet you’re moving to Singapore.’ The sentence had bumps in it, like the shaky breath filtering through her lungs. Gertie glanced at the framed family selfie she’d bribed the kids to smile for (after the forced removal of their screens on a Sunday afternoon to tackle the cliff-top trail at Bondi). With all three inheriting Gertie’s jet-black hair, dark

chocolate eyes and wide grins, Ed's mousey colouring seemed tame in comparison.

'If it's just the job, we could come too ... I know it's supposed to be a cauldron of humidity, but they have air-conditioning, surely? And schools, and specialists for Abe – he'd need some transitioning time, but we could manage if—' Even as the words left her lips, Gertie predicted their eldest, Kat, would collapse in a histrionic meltdown if Gertie even suggested their family emigrate to Singapore. *But the formal!*

Ed gently placed his hand across Gertie's lips, and she sat, stunned, mute, beneath his touch. 'It's not just the job, Gert. The job is just a vehicle ...'

An excuse I can give to people to camouflage the fact that my rock-solid husband of twenty years is leaving me.

But she would not be told. She was married to a man impressed with logic, persuaded only by facts. He'd do anything for his family. He always had, before this strange mindlessness. He was the sausage-sizzle volunteer at the school fundraiser, the dad who knew which kids had crusts cut off.

Ed's eyes met hers for a millisecond. They were pained and watery, like the day after his company's end of year; tired, but a little relieved that the hard yards were over. Had they too been quantified, like a commodity? Did that broken look on his handsome face say that all the pros and cons of 'us' had been accounted for?

Ed gave his sympathetic head tilt, the one that used to melt her. The one that showed how kind he was. Gertie wondered if she had been naive all this time.

'Is this because of that show with the experiment where the guy takes a marriage vacation – is that what this is?' Gertie wagged her finger at him. 'Being part of the trend?' Ed had never been a follower before. He still wore chambray, for God's sake.

‘Gert ...’ He took her hand and gave *that* tone, the one usually reserved for disgruntled, blustering staff who were being ‘transitioned outside the company’. It had a firm yet empathetic ring, and she had always been a little turned on by it – how it demonstrated the skill he had in finessing people at their worst. Now that he was using it on her, it sounded patronising. ‘You haven’t been yourself since Christmas. You’re not happy. You haven’t been happy for a while.’

‘I am happy!’ Gertie raised her eyebrows and stretched her lips in a manic grin to prove the point, but the tears streaming down on either side of it contradicted her efforts.

‘Hon, you’re not. You’re always tired, stressed about the kids, unwilling to take time out to do anything for yourself or as a couple ...’

Gertie felt the frown arrive with her frustration. ‘That’s every woman with kids I know. The mental load’s a killer. It can be a shit gig!’ Half the time she felt as if her role was reversing the kids’ mess just so they could make it again.

He hesitated. ‘You’re on anti-depressants.’

‘Just a little one ... and they’re for my back pain, I told you.’ He was forgetting she’d broken her tailbone birthing Harry and never quite got over it.

‘When we have sex, you are somewhere else.’

‘No! I’m here! I’m right here!’ She paused. ‘Is that what this is about? Sex? Because I am open to ramping that up – just the other day Lou was telling me about this weekender—’

‘This is not about sex, hon.’

Gertie was a little curvier than when they first married, and she didn’t do actual exercise anymore, but her hair was still lush and shiny, her eyes dark and mysterious, and she scrubbed up okay for a nearly-forty-year-old mother of three. Gertie liked sex, she just found there were so many hurdles before getting to

it – tiredness, washing piles, kids interrupting – that it always felt like a distant land that was no longer accessible by any means available to her. And when all the planets aligned and they did find themselves there, perhaps she *had* been mentally elsewhere.

One thing she did know for sure was that the tone of their relationship had definitely sullied since moving to Apple Tree, to this haven for Sydney's elite.

Gertie and Eddie Rainworth began married life with two bean bags and her mother's fridge. And yet when slurping two-minute noodles through disposable forks as they recounted the highlights of their day, she'd felt she was the luckiest woman she knew. They'd saved half of what they'd earned from their starter jobs straight from uni until they'd had enough for a deposit on a renovator, two suburbs away from where they wanted to live. It had rising damp and a leaky roof, but it was theirs. Dinners were cold or from a box (Ed had acquired the crusty old microwave from his dorm), but back in her days as a young nurse on her never-ending nightshifts, she'd count the minutes until she could return home and slip into bed beside Ed. In those early days, together in their house that smelled like wet dog, in their bedroom with vomit-yellow carpet, in a twist of cheap sheets, they had been enviably happy.

The set change for the second act of their married life had been unexpected – they'd won a charity prize home from a ticket stuck to a box of Cadbury Roses left for Gertie at the hospital's maternity wing by a patient who came in with suspected appendicitis and left with a newborn. The ward nurses had raided the chocolates but left the ticket among a nest of coloured wrappers. Gertie and Ed joked about those prize homes being pretend fronts for money launderers, that no actual families won nor managed to insert themselves (and their associated clutter) inside those picture-perfect lives.

But they *had*. And they *did*.

Apple Tree Creek Estate was minimalist in style with sharp contemporary lines and monochrome colours. The common area was landscaped to Botanic-Garden standard with contemporary plants like yuccas that had leaves as spiky and glossy as their residents. To Gertie, all that grey, all that formality felt like a prison block. It was carbon neutral, perfectly planned and designed for sustainability, but all that science made Gertie feel like an insect in a bug catcher. Each dwelling reminded her of the Lego villages her boys built, with lawns as artificially green as the baseplates the bricks clung to.

Locals complained when the village got the green light and carved its chromatic palate into the kaleidoscope of cultures that was greater Sydney. Tucked behind an estuary that fed Sydney Harbour, the estate's community boasted ex-PMs, Olympians, Instagram influencers and rock stars. But Gertie hadn't been worried. Before she'd trained as a midwife, she'd changed enough colostomy bags of famous people to know they were every bit as human as everyone else.

Was that the point where things had slowly gone downhill? When they'd moved to 12 Lily Court? How could she have thought – with their clearance-bin clothes and second-hand Tarago – that they'd ever fit in with the hat-wearing Range Rover club? Gertie was so petrified of being judged by the hoity-toity residents that she'd spent a large chunk of the gold bullion that came with the house on posh, impractical, provincial furniture to fill the damn thing. Then there was the 'stylist' who convinced Gertie she looked ravishing in gold shoes and resort wear, all of which had hung gaudily in her closet for years with the tags still on before she had donated it all to the Salvos.

Kat had been an all-knowing twelve, Abe an absconding three and Harry a red-faced bundle in nappies when Ed and

Gertie first visited the prize home in a cloud of disbelief, in awe that it was real.

Was that really five years ago?

The designers hadn't offered a better home. They'd promised a better life. 'What was wrong with our old one?' Ed had questioned. He would have preferred to sell the prize house and put the proceeds in a trust for the kids. 'Statistically, lotto winners are miserable.' Looking back now, he had sported a furrowed brow ever since discovering their windfall.

'We won't be miserable if we're together,' a naive Gertie had declared. Who'd refuse a free house? With a pool you didn't have to inflate before using! Not to mention it came with gardeners resembling jovial chimney sweeps and a security man with a shiny hat.

But a few months in, things hadn't been as glossy as the brochure. The pool cost a fortune to maintain, and unless you paid a fortune extra, the upkeep stopped at the property line. Not that she'd ever admit this to Ed, but Gertie had started to feel – and still felt – a sense of claustrophobia from the thick hedge of dense foliage encompassing the cluster of houses as if they were in an upmarket prison. She also felt something sinister in the dark shadow the hedge cast over her garden, killing her lawn, and a sense of unease in the sameness of the architecture on the estate. Even the interior plans were mirror images of each other. It was rather off-putting – as if her neighbours made tea at *her* sink, slept in *her* room.

Perhaps they'd been happier broke.

But this was where Sydney's elite chose to live – and after growing up in middle-class suburbia, Gertie always felt she had the cheap seats in the nose-bleed section of life. She was curious about what the rich got to experience with backstage passes. Her kids deserved the best. She wanted them to run free in

a safe neighbourhood, attend the best schools, and climb in a playground without graffiti and the odd flasher.

‘Change always brings growth,’ Ed spouted, his voice tugging her back to reality.

Oh, God, it was those self-help books he’d bought from Amazon.

‘It’s only a twelve-month contract,’ Ed said.

‘Only!’

‘I just thought if I take this job, it’ll give you mental space, time to think – maybe even to consider moving out of this pretentious warren. You don’t need *me* to be *you*, Gert. I’ll make good money overseas, and it’ll give you some time to figure out what you really want.’

‘*You* are what I want! This *family* staying together is what I want!’ Her tone aimed for confident, persuasive, but came out all bluster and bluff.

Could she be herself without Ed? It felt as if every memory she owned included him. Their lives were so intertwined, since childhood, really, when their mothers (nurses too, the both of them) would drink together, toes dipped in the shallow end of the Rainworths’ kidney-shaped pool, and when, as teenagers, she and Ed would canoodle in the caravan behind the umbrella tree, acting as if their parents didn’t know what they were up to. *I don’t know how to be me without you*. ‘Even if we’re less happy now, we made vows!’

‘Life’s too short to think like that.’

She could see the weariness in his eyes, and it made her feel distant from him – small and distant from the biggest, most important person in her life. That wasn’t a good feeling.

Ed continued. ‘You were so deliriously happy in our mouldy old house when the kids were little. Tired, harried, but besotted. The only thing I’ve ever wanted was to make

you happy. I think I did that, for most of our marriage. But not now. Not for a long time. I've accepted that. And if I'm not the person who can do that anymore, I don't want to stand in the way of someone who can.'

Could he seriously be this calm about his wife of twenty years finding someone else, or was this just a clever way to ease his guilt? Then it hit her, and the desperate need to cling to him like Teflon dissipated.

'Who is she?'

His eyes dropped closed, as if they'd reached an expected page of his script. The script he'd written in his head months ago, but had never allowed her to preview.

'You know there isn't anyone else, Gert.'

He was right. She kinda did. If Ed had been off with some other woman there'd be footage by now. The security in this place always seemed excessive for law-abiding citizens. Electronic keys. Apps that automated lights. Security vetting of housekeepers and pool boys and private physicians. Was it really necessary to stream footage of her front door to her mobile (as well as to digital panels all over the house, including near the loo, which the technician had assured her did not look both ways)? And while the urban planners had done a fabulous job secreting the bulbous cameras beneath the leafy hedges that adjoined the properties, Gertie felt they hadn't removed one crucial thing – an unnerving feeling of forever being watched. *Blink, blink, blink.* The irony about security was it robbed you of your sense of privacy. But it did mean she didn't have to worry, didn't it?

Besides, Ed was the same faithful dork he'd always been. Every second away from his family was accounted for – eaten up by work or soccer coaching or chauffeuring kids to their sleepover or karate class. It was physically impossible for him to have managed an affair unless it took place on top of the

photocopier in his workplace, and she doubted that. She'd seen his colleagues.

But maybe he was *planning* an affair – in Singapore.

'You're so overwhelmed with the kids' lives, the kids' needs, you have no idea that you've lost yourself,' Ed said.

Gertie inspected her hoodie and threadbare leggings. Her sense of self – what she wore, what she did – was not exactly a priority. That had all changed the moment Kat was placed in her arms seventeen years ago, and it just got more ingrained with each child. Motherhood was a great leveller – any sense of self, vanity or privacy was punctured by kids crawling onto your lap when you peed. Her time was no longer her own. But she'd signed up for that. She was *grateful* for it. Gertie thought of her fertility-challenged sister, and how she'd amputate a limb for just one child.

'Eddie – they *are* me. I made them. Their happiness is my happiness. Their needs do come before mine.' *You can never be happier than your least happy child.* They were her life. Was that so wrong?

He nodded. Still so calm, still so unflappable. He'd rehearsed this for a long time; Gertie was ad-libbing, a manic dry run of a horrific scene she'd never thought she'd be in.

The creases across Ed's brow deepened with pity. 'The crazy thing is that's what makes me love you. That's what makes you such a good person, a good mum.'

But, evidently, a shit wife.

'After a bit of alone time we can regroup, and then focus on what's important – it will be good for us.'

He was talking as if they were eighteen, as if she just needed a nice trip trekking in Cambodia to find herself. *Men*. If anything, he was the one who had been a little off the past few months.

‘Us? Don’t make abandoning me be about saving *us*. What am I supposed to do when they need lifts here or there all at the same time?’

‘That’s the thing. With the role in Singapore, I’ll be able to afford a housekeeper – a live-in, whatever I need to support my move as GM. It’s a cushy job, Gert. Twice the salary—’

‘You’ll have a replacement to ball your socks – I’m delighted for you.’

‘I asked for the allowance to be allocated to help *here* – instead of there.’

‘I don’t want a housekeeper! I want a husband!’ she said between sniffs. ‘You haven’t got your share of attention? Is that the problem, Ed? Well, sorry if I’ve been busy raising your children! The children, as I recall, you more than willingly agreed to.’

‘This is not forever, Gert. They can visit me. I get three trips a year, free, and my increased salary will pay for extras. I’ve already booked their flights over. There’s a zoo, gardens. I could take Abe and Harry to the grand prix in September ...’

His eyes danced like Gertie hadn’t seen in months. Ed was looking forward to this.

Her hand flew to her mouth. ‘Oh, God, you’re doing this. You’re actually doing this.’ Sobs pumped from her chest. ‘When are you planning to tell the kids you’re leaving us?’

Wrinkles gathered on his forehead. ‘Gert, don’t be like this. I’m not leaving you. I’m changing things up for a bit, seeing what falls out.’

Gertie raised her tear-stained face. ‘And what if that’s me?’

Chapter 2

Rachael

Two streets east and three gardens down from Gertie and Ed's, at 16 Lavender Lane, the loft window blushed as if everything inside was on fire. It was nearly midnight. Pink-nosed possums balanced on roof peaks, electric cars recharged in their garages and Rachael York left the lights on for her husband.

The lamp in the bedroom revealed a maze of designer furniture, a basket of crisply ironed sheets, and discarded pillows and throws. The scent of lemongrass and Persian lime wafted through the master suite, the oil burner masking the occasional whiff of new paint – a remnant of their renos.

Rachael York lay awkwardly in a twist of bamboo sheets, absentmindedly tracing the darkening line trailing down her growing abdomen. Carefully unwrapped gifts had been stacked high on the desk – ribbons dived over corners as a pale-pink bootie dangled loose from its pair. Her team at Beehive, her recruitment agency, had lavished her with such heartfelt well-wishes she'd cried ugly tears as they'd lugged bundles of rattles and bibs, onesies and throws to her Audi on her last day before maternity leave. She was physically exhausted, but her mind would not rest.

A headache of birthing books, prenatal vitamins and anti-stretch-mark creams cluttered her bedside table. She'd been clock-watching; hours had ticked by since she'd meandered through her nightly routine – stacking the dishwasher, reading six-year-old Noah to sleep and threatening to ban Ethan from the Xbox if he didn't shut it down. She was amazed how they lived in a different place but the daily tasks remained unchanged.

She accepted her fate; pretending she didn't have to pee was futile. She got up, legs wide, her swollen feet directing her towards the en suite. Her stomach fell forward as she lowered herself to sit to pee, forklift-like. Silvery stretch marks slivered down her belly. Not for the first time she wondered why they had paid a fortune for architects to redesign a bathroom with a full-length mirror that insisted she watch herself wee. Her sandy-blonde hair had grown coarse and thick, her cheekbones hidden under a rounded face. Was she too old, at forty, to pull off this pregnancy? Procreating was a young woman's game – that's why nature invented menopause.

The sight of her ridiculous belly, disproportionate to her small frame, overwhelmed her. Why did she marry a tall man with tall-person genes? What maniac designed the human reproductive process? Flashbacks to the magnificent, blinding pain of labour (that they said you'd forget but she never had) collided with this thought and kicked off a spiral of fear. She had no choice now. The baby was in situ, it had to get out. The fact that men become parents without having to physically *make* the humans never seemed so clearly unfair. *Let's have three*, he said. *It'll be fun*, he said. What was she thinking, bringing another child into an unsustainable planet that was melting, a world bubbling with violence and injustice?

Motherhood had never been on Rachael's agenda – too much to go wrong, too much she wasn't up to dealing with. But

then she'd met Sam and wanted *Sam's* kids – the full-spectrum experience. She'd bravely ventured into parenting, surprising herself each day she'd kept another human alive and well and flourishing. Why would this time be any different?

Just breathe.

She panted her way through the panic like a contraction and waddled back across the solid oak floors to their lavish king bed. She had no right to feel overwhelmed with all she had. What sort of monster felt ambivalent, had anything but good thoughts about motherhood?

Sam should have been home hours ago. She didn't know why he'd agreed to the job now that he was coaching again. Maybe it was smart to milk his glory days – Sam being offered work as a keynote speaker had petered out as his notoriety had waned. In a similar way, it sometimes felt as if their marriage was living off the fumes of their earlier feats.

Their first kiss wasn't on the lips. Their first date wasn't dinner and a movie. Nothing about Sam and Rachael's relationship was the norm. They'd met at a charity ball; Sam devilishly handsome in black tie and Rachael in an emerald-green dress that set off her warm eyes. Broad, tall and perfectly proportioned, his charm and good looks had made him seem pretend, like a superhero figurine, not a living, breathing soul. Yet he'd lacked the arrogance and guardedness she'd come to expect from successful men.

When at one point she'd dragged herself free from his adoration, she'd googled him in a bathroom stall and discovered he was a professional athlete, a world-record-holding swimmer, training for the next Olympics in London. Seeing the red brick mansion with lavish green spaces in the background of the shot from his English childhood, she'd pegged him as a trust-fund kid with portraits instead of photos, housekeepers instead of

cleaners. By contrast, Rachael had practically raised herself on a farm, waking to the mew of dairy cows desperate to be milked and the sun peeking through the splintery sleepout slats. Hers had been a childhood in which weevils in the flour were expected and the weather controlled their fortune – her idea of luxury was scoring the bath before her brother peed in it.

She couldn't help but gape at his eyelashes (women would die for lashes that long), let alone the eyes beneath them. When he'd offered himself as a prize for the cerebral palsy charity auction they were drinking in aid of, Beehive made the winning bid.

'I'm sure having those biceps to help landscape the gardens at our new all-abilities playground will create a bit of publicity,' Rachael recalled announcing when she'd won the winning bid.

Sam had fobbed off the acquaintances interrupting their flirtatious chatter as they enjoyed a champagne at the bar, and it had felt as if she were the only woman in the world. Rachael had been sure it was just infatuation. She could see why those shoulders had graced the cover of men's health magazines, why that smile had gained sponsorship from the leading dental brand. Something about him had brought on a heady feeling and made Rachael want him immediately – not sex in broader terms, but his body, his smell, his lips.

He'd kissed her on the throat, and that had been the end of her.

He'd raised the partition between their limo driver and the back seat on the way to the hotel and warned Rachael that he was on the tail end of a messy relationship, that he came with a host of complications, that the online rumours about him were mostly true, and she'd admired his directness, his honesty. She'd also known she'd rather die than stop.

It wasn't until her silk dress had made a puddle of emerald on the carpet of the nearest five-star hotel that Rachael had

believed it was actually going to happen. That this tall, perfect specimen of a man had chosen her – a drought-stricken farmer's daughter from out west. The newness, his physicality, the sheer want in her had created a flush of almost intolerable need.

Rachael had sunk deeper under his spell as they'd revealed secrets through the night. He'd shared his memories of boyhood in the quaint green knolls of country England before moving to Australia. The way he'd spoken about family, his traditional values and respect for his parents had made her swoon. Within weeks, she'd found herself enamoured of him. Their love-bubble was obvious even to strangers. They'd quickly eloped, despite Rachael's reputation as a discerning businesswoman. As a team their careers skyrocketed; their notoriety exploded.

As their relationship blossomed, she noticed his points of difference from previous partners. Her needs always came first in the bedroom. Sam would habitually walk on the roadside of the footpath to protect her. He loved to buy her designer clothes, and would set them out before a special event. She let him order at restaurants – he knew far more about food and nutrition. His focus felt chivalrous but his prowess between the sheets was anything but gentlemanly.

Being with Sam had made Rachael feel more feminine. She loved having a man take charge. She had always been the responsible one, even as a child, and in adulthood every business decision for her company rested on her shoulders. The magic settled over their relationship that first year like a protective shield.

All these years later, Rachael still felt gushes of those early love-drunk days, that all-encompassing sense that nothing else mattered. She'd put up with almost anything to stay in Sam's arms. Which was lucky, as he'd tested every boundary since.

Rachael consulted the security panel next to their bed – Sam's favourite gadget since they'd moved to the estate a few weeks

ago. The screensaver was a picturesque shot of the oleander flanking Apple Tree Creek's gates beneath a glorious sunset. She navigated to the menu and clicked on 'home security'. Her husband's black Porsche GT3 was not parked tandem to her Audi. An eerie quiet settled over the house. She double-checked the alarm was activated in all sectors.

Apple Tree Creek. The name had attracted Rachael to the estate. It conjured images of wholesomeness, of vine-ripened fruit weighing down branches, crisp red apples firm to the bite and children wading in slow-flowing streams. It wasn't exactly quaint, but it was elegant and well designed, marketed as a luxurious, eco-friendly haven. It boasted world-class security, which was what her husband had wanted (for Sam to keep tabs on her, she'd joked to the salesman), yet they would be enveloped in a bubble of successful entrepreneurs – free of the riffraff best left outside.

What was left of the namesake orchards was a triangular grove boasting three varieties of apples and various fruit trees. The meticulous elegant gardens and vine-tangled surrounding fences made you feel as if you were inside a snow globe, sealed off, protected from the evils of the world. Rachael and Sam had had the delusion that no harm could come to anyone in the vicinity of those fruit-laden shrubs, behind those iron gates. And that was exactly what the York family had needed back then, with everything.

Since the move, her six-year-old, food-obsessed Noah was winning hearts at his new primary school and Ethan was topping Year 10 advanced maths at St Aquinas College. Sam had even landed a teaching job at the same school, much to Ethan's disgust. As an already awkward adolescent, all elbows and knees, Ethan avoided attention as a rule, and tried not to mention he was related to the PE teacher (he considered e-sport the only activity worth his time).

Sam's mother's Nordic genes were as dominant as his backstroke pull, and both Ethan and Noah had inherited his colouring. Rachael loved the boys' distinct eyes – hazel with flecks of amber and gold – that were as complex and enchanting as starlight in a desert.

Rachael thought back to their first night in the estate – she had wanted to unpack boxes, but Sam had found his dreaded spud gun in the move and had decided to make the evening memorable. He'd plodded around the small square of golf-course green lawn, covered from head to toe in protective gear, barely recognisable beneath one of the kids' stackhats and with cricket pads strapped on each limb to shield him from random flying potatoes.

Noah had been whingeing, 'How come Ethe always gets the good jobs?'

Sam had told Rachael she was a 'fun sponge' when she'd enforced strict safety instructions, demanding their six-year-old be nowhere near the PVC pipe when (a face-shield-wearing) Ethan sealed it off with a spud, filled it with deodorant and exploded the accelerant with a lighter. A roar and the spud had shot into the air at incredible speed.

'It's not fair! Ethan always gets to do it,' Noah had yelled at his father, ducking and weaving like a footballer as he anticipated the landing. 'He's your favourite child!'

'That's not true, Noah – I dislike all my children equally,' Sam had said straight-faced.

'You're mean. You don't even like us!' Noah had harumphed.

Rachael had narrowed her eyes at Sam's black humour. Her husband had made a beeline for his son, scooped the kid up on his shoulders with the prowess of a lead danseur, and had him in a fit of giggles within seconds.

'You know I love you, fart face.'

Ethan was reloading the spud gun, new muscles tensing in his biceps. ‘Ready?’ His voice was a little croaky, changing from boy to man like the rest of him. He grew more like Sam every day and was already wearing his dad’s Nikes, but thankfully he hadn’t inherited his overblown daredevil attitude.

‘This is not the time to aim for your little brother, Ethe. Or my balls.’ Sam had ducked as another potato shot into the air with a pop then crash-landed on the deck, splattering into lumpy mash.

Boof#2 – named after their original spoodle with curls that made him seem fat instead of furry – had galloped eagerly towards the mess. With a few slurps of his pink tongue, he’d licked it up, which had suited Rachael as she’d loafed on the hammock.

‘Okay, E-man, fire her up again. C’mon, ya wuss. Be a real man and get serious with these shots, huh?’

Ethan had cringed at the macho name-calling his dad liked to dish out. Rachael blamed it on Sam’s competitive ego, on playing in England’s grassy meadows with his toff-nosed friends. His family had immigrated to Canberra’s Institute of Sport when he was a promising thirteen-year-old, but he’d never quite lost the boy from Surrey. Rachael had hauled her pregnant-self out of the hammock and taken Noah’s shoulders, directing him away from the gas lighter Ethan was clicking to ignite.

‘What could possibly go wrong?’ Rachael had said, waving away the musky smell of the Tommy Hilfiger body spray escaping from the pipe.

‘You know you love it!’ Sam’s tawny eyes had locked with hers as he’d darted about on the grass like a peacock and planted a kiss on her cheek. All his faults melted away when he looked at her that way.

A hum, like a giant mosquito, had distracted her – she'd thought it was a remote-control toy at first, but realised it was a drone circling above their roof.

'Oh, that must be the six pm security patrol.'

'Should I aim for it?' Ethan had smiled, lining up the flying object with the pipe. His school shorts had looked ridiculous, too short for his ever-extending legs.

Rachael had glared her reply.

Sam had raised his eyes to the darkening sky. 'Reckon mooning the drone would be against body-corp regulations? They've got rules for every other bloody thing.'

'What's mooning?' Noah had asked.

Rachael shook her head. This was why they were in the tabloids so much – this streak of mischief she couldn't rein in. Life was never boring with Sam York.

'Last spud, Dad,' Ethan had called, lighting the pipe filled with aerosol. It had roared alight and propelled the spud high in the air.

'Strike three!' Sam had called.

Noah had cheered.

'I see all that shooting practice online hasn't helped your aim, son.'

Ethan had given him the finger.

'Just joshing, cobber.' As Sam had grabbed his first-born in a headlock, Rachael had taken a mental picture of the first night of their new beginning. Things were going to be different here.

But right now, she feared the loneliness that had plagued her at their last house had followed her.

The electric garage door thrummed. A moment later, six foot six inches of Sam York stumbled up the loft stairs, perched on the edge of their bed and loosened his tie. His thick, wavy hair, always ad-worthy, grazed his collar.

‘How’d it go, Sam?’

He flicked off both shoes in quick succession before he stilled and pressed his thumbs into his closed lids. Tears flowed.

‘Hon?’ Air was sucked from her lungs as if she’d been winded. As soon as the light cast on his features, Rachael knew. It wasn’t the first time she’d seen that look of all-consuming guilt. A cloud of dread swooped in on her.

‘Blimey, Rach. I’m such a rubbish husband.’ Those hazel eyes met hers with the sincerity of a mother’s kiss. ‘And you’re amazing. I don’t deserve you.’

She wished she hadn’t waited up. She wished she could delay this moment even for just one day. She knew what was coming – her partner of over a decade had racked up another affair while she’d waited expectantly at home, growing his child inside her.

‘Don’t say it.’ Her chin wobbled as she shook her head. She told herself she was wrong. She was happy to dig her head down deeper, forage for air beneath the sand.

But he went on with his truth. It had started with a leggy Californian and ended in a parking lot.

Rachael felt numb, as if he was discussing somebody else, but at the same time, knew it to be real, the details ringing true. Hadn’t she expected this, marrying a charmer like Sam? Wouldn’t she have left him the first time if it wasn’t for the scandal that would follow, the fallout for the kids, for her business? Her feminist friends liked to judge women who stayed with men who strayed, but adultery was never as simple as it appeared from the outside.

‘I’m a weak bastard, an utter prick.’ His attempts to swear beneath his upper-class accent usually made her laugh, but not now. ‘I have no excuse.’ The agony on his face matched the despair in his words.

He was a contradiction; he had the determination to swim fifty k's a week for half his life, to push past thresholds of pain despite the lactic acid burning through every muscle, but somehow he couldn't find the strength to say no to a drunken party-girl.

She hated what her husband's athletic career had done to him, the obsessive routines and rituals when he was competing, the depression that plagued him after retirement. Once deemed *Cleo* magazine's 'Bachelor of the Year', the gold medallist's fall from grace was quick and painful, the unsustainable drug-like highs making the dreary existence of real life afterwards almost unliveable.

Rachael was so glad Ethan showed no interest in following in his father's footsteps. Ethan had always hated water; the drips felt like worms on his skin, he'd said.

Sam went on. 'And you, here, building our baby, taking care of our boys ... I'm so sorry, Rach. I deserve a good bollocking.'

Sorry was just something he said to expunge his guilt. It didn't help her.

'Please forgive me. I need this. I need you.' He hesitated as he reached out to rest his hands gently on her swollen belly. He was co-creator and part owner of what grew inside – more than likely another golden-haired, perfect child. She couldn't find it in her to ask him to remove his touch, but neither could she offer support or forgiveness.

'Say something. Anything ...' He noticed the pile of unwrapped gifts on the table. 'Oh, Christ, and it was your last day – how was your shower thing?'

She shook her head at his change of tone.

'Everything's going to be better now you've stopped work – more time for us.'

Stopped work? Running Beehive was the one thing she felt good at, the place she felt respected and valued. Her eyes

narrowed, and she was unable to simulate the back-and-forth banter of any ordinary day.

Was this man, who only weeks earlier had been playing with their sons, throwing her a kiss as the dog tracked circles around the yard, the same man who now risked losing it all for sex with a stranger?

Rachael knew a better woman would demand better treatment. Would slap him, scream a torrent of abuse, evict his cheating, athletic arse. Yet all those options required so much emotional energy, and she was sick to death of being responsible.

The weight of the baby pressed on her lungs was suffocating. It felt as if her cerebellum was not receiving the energy to process words, and yet she tasted the salt from the tears gathering in the corners of her lips, as if her brain had computed the feelings without her permission.

She tried to conjure up thoughts of the charming blond bachelor she'd first met at that charity ball over a decade ago; the memory was yellowing in the corners like an old portrait, morphing into something more stifling than supportive.

His voice sucked her back to their room. To their life, in meltdown.

'I've just been driving around, knowing I couldn't bear coming home without telling you the truth. I know I'm a shit who evidently can't keep it in his pants, but the one thing I've always been is honest. And I'll do anything to make this right.'

This was his usual MO to smooth over the damage, but this time Rachael resented his attempt to dress up his betrayals as opportunities to showcase his devotion. This whole dreadful night, pacing around the loft, lights blaring, thoughts swirling, felt dreamlike. Staged. He sat upright, his face crestfallen, and waited for her reaction as if his world depended on it. Was the

concern in his eyes an act, or did he really care? Which version was the real Sam?

They had moved here with the boys to escape this sort of scandal, not create a shinier, newer one for the media to feast on like hawks. She should hate him now. But hate took energy. And Rachael didn't have the emotional bandwidth.

She heard his breath catch as he waited for her response.

It was a rare moment where she held the reins, but she didn't want them.

'I'm tired, Sam,' was all that came out.