

My gut is a bag full of fists. I strap on a smile and remind myself why I'm here: to help heal Lottie. If she were my child, I would do anything to save her. Just like Anna.

I weave through the crowd that has flocked to the fundraiser. There must be a quarter of the Gibbs Creek population attending the event—by far the most bodies the primary school has ever had on its grounds. Like a royal bloody wedding, it is.

I nod thanks, wave hello and shake hands as if I'm a local politician, all the way to the child-sized bathrooms. The walls of the girls' toilet block are painted an offensive lollipop pink. The boys' block is a haphazard splattering of cobalt blue. Good old Gibbs Creek Primary School still representing gender like it's 1950. Each toilet door has an inspirational quote penned across it. The messages give me some hope for the next generation.

*Throw kindness around like confetti!*  
*Be the change you want to see in the world!*

Anna and Lottie are taking a moment before they brave the people.

'Time to greet the fans!' I clap in anticipation.

'Morning, Ren.' Anna's half-smile masks what must be all sorts of pain tangled inside her. She cups a shallow pool of water in her palms then, like a slap, splashes it across her face. She dabs concealer under her eyes and reapplies blush to her cheeks.

'Charlotte? You ready? Ren's here!' Anna calls over the top of the cubicle.

'Hey, Lottie?' I tap my knuckle on her door. The quote painted across it couldn't be more appropriate: She believed she could so she did. 'C'mon, chickadee, we'll get you over to see your friends faster than you can say fairy floss!' Lottie unlocks the door in slow motion. Her floral sun-dress hangs loose. Spindly arms poke out from the cardigan draped around her shoulders. She shivers despite the temperate autumn day. 'Do I have to go?'

Anna rubs the goose bumps off Lottie's arms and kisses her forehead. She leaves a faint red outline. 'A quick photo. Then you can play with your friends.'

Lottie scrunches her face in an attempt to stop a single tear that escapes down her cheek.

'Oh, darling, it'll be OK.' Anna rubs it away with her thumb.

I press my teeth into my bottom lip, ward away the sorrow and breathe deep into my diaphragm. 'The quicker we get the photo over, the quicker you can nick off with your mates,' I say. 'What's bothering you, hun?'

'I look ugly. Bald and ugly,' she says. 'They'll tease me.'

'Don't be ridiculous!' My voice is too high-pitched to sound authentic. 'You look like a freaking superhero, Super-girl ... a super bald-headed slick hero ...'

She grants me a small smile.

Anna wraps Lottie's head in a silk scarf adorned with large flowers and delicate swirls. She spotted the piece in a city boutique on one of Lottie's appointment days. So very Anna, so not Lottie. Anna squats level with Lottie's eyes and holds her emaciated face. In a firm but gentle voice she says, 'You are strong. You are beautiful. We can do this.'

Anna's ease is quite incredible for someone who never wanted children. The campaign Jez launched to persuade her to start a family could have qualified as an extreme sport. I shake my head, remembering his sales techniques like a telemarketer calling every night at dinnertime. You're made to be a mother, he'd said to Anna too many times to count. He may be an excavator but I thought back then he was digging a hole with a teaspoon.

When those double lines finally showed, Anna's apprehension was a stark contrast to Jez's palpable joy. I was close enough to her to know that becoming a mum scared the stuffing out of her because she was fixated on giving her child the upbringing she'd never had. You know, Golden Books versus Grimms' Fairy Tales. Jez, on the other hand, bellowed like a madman right across their backyard. I'm sure you could hear it echoing off the creek beds: 'I'm going to be a dad!'

He was sure this baby would be the glue that stuck them together. They called the glue Charlotte. Charlotte Ivy, to be exact, but to all of us she is Lottie. Except for Anna, who named her Charlotte because she loves the name and refuses to embrace the small-town habit of nicknames. City folk can get all knotted up about some weird shit.

Jez ordered a sign to hang from their front fence: *Garson Family*. His hope for more kids has never quite abated but Anna was only ever going to agree to one child. Especially when Jez started working away weeks at a time on the new motorway tunnel project. Wonder if this is better with a full stop and recasting the next two sentences? She didn't sign up to be a single parent with Jez only home on weekends, but to get ahead financially he had to go where the money was. They waited until Lottie started school so the impact of Jez being away during the week wouldn't be as difficult. Lottie missed him like crazy, though. We all did. I helped Anna out whenever I could during the week and they had quality family time on the weekends, but Jez's absence left a gaping hole. Strange, the decisions we make for money. Hard to believe eight years after they welcomed Lottie into the world we're here raising money to save their only child from the cancer invading her brain. Life: you can try screwing it down as tight as you like but there's always something that will shake it loose.

I ignore the pungent smell of sympathy. My role today is to spread positivity like a rash all over these people. I have every other day to think about how gloomy life is for the Garsons. The only thought I will allow today is that we will defy the prognosis and heal Lottie.

The day has an optimistic air to it. A cloudless sky holds a sun that heats with care, not attitude. Autumn weather we couldn't have ordered if we tried. Filtered light soaks through maple trees and the distant mountains create a postcard backdrop. Despite my nerves, a fizz of pride swells my chest at what a stellar community we live in.

The school commands pole position on the wide, tree-lined main street that cuts through former farmland. Principal Richter offered the grounds to Anna because Lottie is a student here. So was I, and so were most Gibbs Creek residents at some point in their early lives. I'm not sure which is older—the school or the staff. Mr Richter taught a class when I started school back in the eighties.

Activity buzzes around us. Polished athletes from the GC Raiders are playing ball games with

the kids. A five-dollar ride on a Harley will take you for a swift loop around the block. Jumping castles bounce children while rides force squeals from adrenaline junkies. These activities have all been donated in the spirit of supporting the Garsons. Food and drink vendors spruik their offerings and music blares from the loudspeakers. Excited children full of life and healthy organs dart in and out of the crowd. Lottie watches them as we skirt the edge of the sports oval.

Anna tiptoes, careful not to poke heel-holes in the grass. She wears a vintage sundress and matching shoes. She told me she had imagined Brigitte Bardot at a garden party when she saw it in the window. Big flowers, a neckline that teases to the cleavage. An adult version of Lottie's dress, I guess you could say.

My riding boots are used to the mush underfoot. I cleaned them for the event, which seems pointless now I'm rebranding them with slicks of mud. I forced on a blazer too. I had to dig to the back of the wardrobe to find it and I'm pretty stoked it still fits. Sweat slithers down my back and reminds me why I don't wear fancy gear like this every day.

Lottie dawdles. Her weak body and unsteady gait are the new normal. People watch us—the reluctant stars of the show. Anna stops for anyone who approaches, sharing grateful thank-yous and hopeful wishes. I slug mouthfuls of water to rinse away the metallic taste in my mouth. Anna powers on, energised by the enthusiasm of the day. Locals are here for them, to help get Lottie to Germany for a medical trial costing one hundred thousand dollars. Add to that the price of flights plus living costs in Germany for six months while she undergoes treatment and we're looking at two hundred grand.

I slow for Lottie. 'OK?' I cock my head to the side. She is breathless from the short walk. We finally make it to the office steps where Jez waits. A Heal Charlotte Foundation banner stretches across the entrance. Anna kisses him, a quick peck, then Jez hugs Lottie to his side.

'Hey, Jez.' I smile.

He forces a pained grin. Relax, Jez. I imitate deep breaths and a little side dish of namaste yoga hands. He screws up his face, trying to read my ridiculous expressions and exaggerated gestures.

The newspaper photographer choreographs their positions. 'Lean in a little closer, Jeremy. Huddle underneath the sign. That's it. Now put your arm around Anna. Charlotte, you tuck right in there between Mum and Dad. Great!'

They follow his instructions. Jez covers his discomfort with an awkward laugh. Anna finds his hand and squeezes a silent reassurance. She is as effortless in front of the camera as she is in crowds. She draws people in with her open and outgoing manner.

When we first met, over a decade ago, I was daunted by her confidence. She volunteered her time to help with event planning for the Gibbs Creek 150-year celebration. She managed to turn a token nod to history into a fantastic community-wide festival. Her PR background certainly shone through and I think that's when locals saw her as an asset, not a threat. It's fair to say she was the last person I thought I'd end up friends with but over time I realised she needed a comrade as much as I did.

Anna's good for Gibbs Creek. Country towns can get stuck, because the invisible menace of an insular life is that you become suspicious of outsiders and what they can offer. That kind of mindset closes you off from so many possibilities and adventures. Well, that's how I see it. Anna wasn't deterred by the gruff locals who were wary of some city chick calling our town her new home. She did the groundwork, took the time to get to know the locals, showed interest in their lives and listened to what was important to them. It was nothing for her to be bailed up in the main street while an octogenarian rattled off the history of the town-ship. Never once did she rush them, ignore them, patronise them. Speaking to locals, particularly those who had lived in Gibbs Creek all their lives, was a rich source of knowledge. A privilege, she once described it as. This effort and care she showed proved her worth and the community readily accepted her.

A gaggle gathers behind the photographer, taking photos on their phones so they can boast their attendance on social media. The Garsons will be all over the internet before the painted butterflies and spiderwebs dry on children's cheeks.

'OK, all done! Thanks for that.' The photographer gives Lottie a thumbs-up. 'Get well soon, princess.'

Lottie manages a thin smile, watches him unscrew the camera lens and place it, like a jigsaw piece, in his equip-ment case. Anna moves closer until her silhouette shades the photographer.

‘Excuse me, David? Before you pack it all away, could we have some shots in Charlotte’s classroom? Show her work? I’m happy to offer an interview if the paper’s interested in a longer feature.’

Anna holds Lottie’s hand before she can make an escape. The sound of children’s laughter ricochets off school buildings, the smell of barbequed food and the whirr of fairy floss draw Lottie’s attention. Her friends call for her to join them at the lucky spinning wheel. I scratch the back of my neck until it hurts. A habit I need to stop.

Jez pushes his sunglasses onto his head. ‘Anna, do you really need to do this? Let her go with her friends.’

‘It won’t take long.’ Anna appeals to David before he locks the case. ‘Please!’ She smiles wide, exposing teeth all the way at the back of her mouth.

Lottie sags her shoulders and the scarf slips off her head. Anna fixes the headpiece back in place and rubs Lottie’s cheek.

Jez sighs. ‘You OK with this, Lottie?’

Lottie squirms but remains silent.

‘We’ll have fun, won’t we, darling?’ Anna encourages. Lottie kicks dust from the path.

‘Meet you back at the drinks cart!’ Anna calls to us as she signals to David to follow.

Jez and I stand like two old blokes at a rock concert, not quite knowing what to do with ourselves. We’ve been in each other’s lives long enough to sit comfortably in silence. Our friendship spans more years than mine and Anna’s and, to be honest, probably makes more sense. How he and I, a couple of country introverts, became the centre of her life I’ll never quite explain. Anna’s magnetism could be to blame. We were sucked into the force field: one lover, one friend.

'It'll be right,' I finally say, and I whack Jez on the back. I'm not sure to what or whom I'm referring.

'Yep,' he replies, not asking.