

East of Alice

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Gemma Hayden stood at the front of her new classroom and drew in a deep breath. It didn't matter where the school was or how new it was, that same familiar smell of a primary school classroom always filled her with happy anticipation. The waxy crayons, the rubber of the kickballs in the storeroom, the mustiness of books, and the oddly pleasant smell of glue all combined to create that unique atmosphere. There were only three days before the school year began, and although the fresh and eager faces staring up at her this year would be unfamiliar, the promise of making a difference in those children's lives dispelled any lingering doubts Gemma held about her move back to the Northern Territory.

Home.

Trephina Primary School was on the eastern side of Alice Springs and close to the Ross Highway, which led out to the East MacDonnell Ranges. She was close enough to Ruby Gap to go out and camp on weekends and holidays—if she wanted to. The old house where Dad's great-grandmother had given birth to two boys over a hundred years ago was in ruins, and the land had since been subsumed by National Parks to create a nature park, but Dad had always made sure that she and Ethan knew where their family had come from.

Crossing to the window, Gemma stared across the grey asphalt of the playground to the east, where the range beckoned. The low mountains might look smoky blue from a distance, but she knew that the dramatic ridges and bluffs were a deep ochre and red, broken only by stands of white ghost gums marking dry stream beds. She and Ethan had spent much of their childhood at Ruby Gap, fossicking for gemstones, listening to Dad's yarns and surviving his ordinary camp cooking. Despite his basic cooking skills, he'd taught them both how to survive in the harsh Australian bush, the tricks to finding water, and the bush tucker you could find if you knew where to look.

Gemma opened the equipment cupboard and tried to stop her thoughts being pulled down into the dark past. She had clung to hope for a long time, and maybe it was time to accept her brother was not coming back. Maybe her mother was right; maybe she shouldn't have come back to the Territory.

She shook her head; her happy mood had evaporated. She'd come back to the school tomorrow and finish her inventory. She closed the cupboard, resting her head against the doors. 'Where are you, Ethan?' she whispered.

'Who are you?' Gemma jumped at the gruff voice and turned to see a woman with tightly permed grey hair framing an unfriendly face furrowed with deep wrinkles.

'I'm the new Year Two teacher. Gemma Hayden.' She crossed the room to stand beside the newcomer and tried not to wrinkle her nose at the strong smell of smoke emanating from her clothes. 'Can I help you?'

The woman nodded and looked her up and down, unsmiling. 'You're a bit early for term, aren't you? I'm Pat Turner, the head cleaner. I don't let the teachers come in this week. How did you get the key?'

She doesn't let them? Gemma raised her eyebrows and stared back. 'Jeff gave it to me. The principal. Along with his permission to come in this week.' As soon as she justified her presence in the school, she was angry with herself that she'd found it necessary.

'I know who Jeff Thompson is.'

'I imagine you do.' Gemma couldn't help the coolness in her voice. If there was one thing she wouldn't tolerate, it was bullying and this woman was trying it on.

'So, are you going now?'

Even though Gemma had been about to leave, there was no way this woman was going to harass her out of her own classroom. 'No, I have a few more things to do. I'll be here a while yet.'

Pat folded her arms and sat on the edge of one of the low tables. 'I'll wait here until you're done. We're going to polish the floors in these rooms this afternoon. There's a mess of paint on the floor in the wet room. I hope you've got more control over the kids than the last one.'

'There's no need for you to wait.' The pursing of the woman's mouth reminded Gemma of her mother and that made her all the more determined not to be bullied. The days of being cajoled into doing what everyone else wanted were long gone. She held her gaze steady. 'I'll let you know when I'm finished.'

The woman shook her head. 'Jeff had no right to give you a key. You don't officially start until Monday.'

A great start to my time at Trephina. Then common sense kicked in; there was no point pushing the issue. If there was one thing Gemma had learned about the politics of schools over the past three years, it was the importance of keeping the cleaners on side.

'Okay. I'll get out of your way.' Gemma forced a smile, keeping her voice sweet. 'My preparation will have to wait. It was good to meet you, Pat.'

The woman's eyes widened as she stood. 'Hang on ... Gemma Hayden? You related to Ethan Hayden?'

A tremble ran through Gemma and she lifted her chin. 'Why do you ask?'

'He was good mates with my Jed.' For the first time Pat's face lost its belligerence. 'You're his sister? You look like him. Twins, weren't you?'

'Yes, we are.' Gemma's interest quickened. 'I didn't know Ethan had a mate called Jed. Did the police talk to him back then?'

Pat shook her head. 'I don't know. Jed—the boys called him Screw—had already gone to work on a cattle station in the East Kimberley when I heard Ethan went missing.'

'Oh, I remember Screw!' Ethan, Screw and Saul Pearce had been tight from their first day at high school. They used to do everything together, and Gemma had been terribly jealous. They were allowed to go bush and she hadn't been allowed to tag along. Her dad had allowed Ethan to go

because Saul was a couple of years older, but Gemma had long suspected he hadn't wanted his little girl camping in the outback. 'How is he?'

'He hung around for a while when you all left school, then took off to Roselyon.'

'Where's Roselyon?'

'Some bloody huge cattle station near Lake Argyle. You know, that bugger hasn't been home once since he left. But that's kids for you.' Pat's tone was friendlier. 'So, you're a local girl, hey? The school community'll like that.'

'I am. It's good to be home.'

'Come outside with me, love. We can chat while I have a smoke.'

Gemma picked up her bag and followed Pat outside. 'Where are you living? Your parents aren't here anymore, are they?'

'No. Dad lives in Darwin. I moved to the east coast with Mum when they split up, and I finished my teaching degree there. I've got an apartment out near the university now.'

Once they settled on one of the box seats surrounding a pretty garden with a small lemon tree in the middle, Pat lit up. 'Move further up so the smoke won't bother you.' She waved to the far end of the wooden bench.

'No, it's okay.' Gemma didn't care how much smoke there was if Pat wanted to talk about Ethan. 'So, the police didn't talk to Screw, I mean, Jed, back then?'

'I don't know. I'll be honest with you, we had a blue before he left, and we haven't talked since then. Maybe they did contact him, who knows?'

'So, is he still there?'

'I got a Christmas card from him the second year he was gone, from a cattle station up in the Gulf. Who knows where he is now? Bloody kids. Don't even have his phone number. Never hear much from his sister either. She lives in Cairns. Haven't even met my first grandchild yet.' Pat shrugged.

Gemma gave a sympathetic murmur. 'Do you think Jed might have known something? Did he leave home before Ethan went?'

The woman puffed a cloud of smoke. 'Listen, love, I can't remember what I had for breakfast most days, so I sure as hell ain't going to remember the date he took off. What was it? Five years ago?'

'Six.' Gemma tried to contain her frustration. 'Do you remember my brother? He went to Screw's house—I mean, to your place—a lot when they were at school.'

'Of course I do. The three of them used to hit the fridge like a plague of locusts. When I'd had enough of them, I'd hunt them off to the Pearce place.'

'I didn't know they went there too. Ethan never said.' Gemma knew her voice was dull. She'd managed to put Saul Pearce out of her mind after he'd left her without a word. Don't think about it now.

Pat nodded. 'Ethan was a good kid. Always polite and knew his pleases and thank-yous.'

'He spent a lot of time away after we turned eighteen, but he always texted me and stayed in touch. Mum used to get really angry with him because he didn't enrol in uni when we left high school. You might remember she was principal at St Mary's.'

'Yeah, I remember your mum,' Pat said, her tone indicating they were not friendly memories.

'I thought he'd gone away to keep the peace, but when he didn't come home and we couldn't contact him, we knew something was wrong,' Gemma blurted, unable to stop herself. 'Even after three months the police refused to list him as officially missing. "Ninety-eight per cent of missing persons turn up, and if they don't, there's a good chance they don't want to be found," they said.' Gemma's voice shook. It was still hard to talk about it. She and Mum rarely did. As for Dad ...

'Slack bastards.' Pat put her head back and blew out a stream of smoke.

'They just didn't seem to care. They told Mum he was just another young guy who wanted to get away from home and was probably off working somewhere.' Gemma swallowed and sat up straight. 'I knew there was something wrong. It wasn't like him. Even though he and Mum fought, Eth was thoughtful. He'd never take off without telling us. Dad spent weeks driving around and putting up posters of him and his red Land Rover at every rest stop from here to Western Australia, then Queensland. Not one person ever contacted us.' It had broken Dad, waiting for Ethan to come home.

'I wondered where your dad had gone,' Pat said thoughtfully. 'I used to see Tony at the Gidgeewalla pub. I worked there for years before I got the job here at the school.'

'Mum said she knew Ethan was dead and that he wouldn't come back. That's when Dad took off.' Gemma closed her eyes as she remembered the massive fight she'd had with her mother when Mum had announced they were moving to New South Wales. She'd dragged eighteen-year-old Gemma with her, away from her university course. 'I knew ... I mean, I know ... I know Ethan's not dead. I'd feel something if he was.' Wouldn't she? He was her twin, after all. Gemma was determined not to give up hope. The sooner she could get out to Ruby Gap, the happier she would be. Her only regret was that she had left it for so long to go back out there.

Pat pushed her cigarette butt into the dirt before leaning down to retrieve it and pop it in her pocket. 'I'm sorry you've been through the wringer, love,' she said kindly. 'Anyway, I'd better get back to work. And listen, if there's anything you need here at the school, you ask me. Okay?'

'Thank you, Pat.' Gemma pulled out her phone. 'Can you tell me the name of the cattle property Jed's at now?'

Pat shrugged. 'The only one I ever knew was the first place he went to. Roselyon.'

Gemma nodded, making a note in her phone. 'Okay, thanks.'

It was a start; she'd see if she could contact the property, and maybe they'd know where Screw had gone. She was not going to give up until she found Ethan.