

## **Prologue**

### ***Pilbara Coast, Western Australia. 5<sup>th</sup> January 1980***

Dust blew into Brian Hudson's face.

Holding Rachel on his hip with one arm, he used his other hand to paw at his eyes for a moment, seeking to dislodge the grit that was blinding him. He felt the familiar kicks from his daughter, impatient with the desire to walk on her own. He blinked until he could see clearly. The gorge below was changing colour in the afternoon, and the sun low in the sky told him that they were at least an hour from sunset. They had time. He wanted them to see the view that waited at the top of the ridge. To see what he knew could be found when they trusted his instincts; that his own childhood memories held rewards like this.

“I want to get down, Dad!”

“Let's just get to the top of the path. I don't want you to get tired.” Brian stepped with patience along the rocky trail, careful not to lose his footing on the loose stones. He turned to check on the other two. His wife, walking behind his son, was bringing up the rear. She was puffing with the effort of the walk.

This family holiday was Brian's idea. In a few weeks Rachel would start primary school. The exhaustion of family life had been mounting, and Brian had resolved to try something new to refresh their spirits. Rachel's medical needs were taking their toll. Matt needed to be taught how to light a fire, pitch a tent and all those things that men were meant to teach their sons. He now realised a camping trip was too much. His wife had been tense since they packed the car. She was a cannon waiting for the fuse to burn. Brian constantly needed to tread carefully between her glances and pointed comments.

At the top of the ridge, he found the view he remembered. Letting Rachel down, he patted the red arching rock with his hand. The same open cavern waited for them, like a giant natural window in the clifftop, looking down into the gorges of the national park below.

His own father had brought him here as a young boy. Coming here was like passing a baton. His arrival at this rock was an effort to play out his own father's actions for his son, and in doing so, prove to himself that he was capable of this job – fatherhood.

Matt caught up to his father and stood beside him. Brian laid his hand on his son's shoulder and guided him to the cavernous opening in the rock formation. He heard Beth issuing cares and concerns to Rachel. She was busy untying and retying her daughter's shoelaces.

“See, Matty. Look but don’t touch. It’s rock art. How long do you reckon that’s been there?”

His son watched as his father explained the finer points of the shapes, and what he had been told they meant. After a few seconds, as he waited for these new thoughts to settle in, Brian pointed out towards the ocean in the distance. There was nothing but a glimmering blanket of open sea. His ten-year-old son was quiet. Brian knew that Matthew’s silence meant he was impressed. He watched as his son crept carefully to the edge, where the gorge dived sharply below. He gave him the space to find his confidence.

“Not too close, Matthew. Please!”

Brian glanced over at Beth catching her breath at the top of the path, her fists on her hips. He remained quiet.

Brian held out his hand to his daughter. “Come here, Rach.” She did as she was told. She hugged her father’s waist, holding on to him, not sure of the cliff edge below, but trusting him. Brian looked down at the descending gorge. He imagined for a moment his own body falling and landing like a bulky sack on the glistening rocks below. The seconds of silence on the way down. The dull thud. He pictured the shocked faces of his two children who would remain peering at him from the cliff edge. For a moment, he could hear the *wokka wokka* of a chopper, scanning the ground below for those drab olive uniformed bodies, the black stain that blood would make on a uniform. His mates were faceless now, in his dreams. He shook away the image, still fresh in his mind after so many years. Not today. Today was for making good memories for his kids.

“Wait there and let me get the camera out. I have to make this climb worth something, Brian.”

Brian held out his arm to his son and watched as he joined him in the open cave. Behind them the view took in the red gorge below, the glinting ocean that met the river system some kilometres away, and the pockets of water that remained after the recent rainfall. Brian dug at the memories of his own childhood. Safe and sure postcards from his early life. The same view, the timeless vista that he knew would comfort him, following his own father up that ridge. The security found in seeing forty-thousand-year-old paintings done by a man perhaps the same age as him, with his own son watching on.

“There’s a big ghost gum just under us, Dad. Just below in the gorge wall.”

His father nodded. “It was here when I visited at your age, too.”

“Brian, how do you get this thing of yours to work on its own?” Beth was fumbling with the Minolta in her hands. Brian did not answer her. He didn’t have that kind of energy

anymore. Instead, he sought to let her find the answers herself. After a few moments, Beth placed the camera on a small rock not far from where the rest of the family now sat.

“Quickly, quickly! Move over. I think it gives us ten seconds.”

Matt preferred to stand up on the other side of his father, where he could stretch his small arms up and just touch the top of the rock shelter, leaving more room for the other three to crouch together in the small cavern. Brian reached his arm out to place it around his wife’s shoulders. She brushed at it with a small squeal.

“Oh. Sorry love, I thought it was a bug.”

Brian looked away from her, and the whirr of the camera buzzed faster. He glanced down into the gorge below, listening to the tick of the camera speeding up and, in some shallow defiance of his wife, chose to ignore its impatient demand. Turning to look at his daughter seated in his lap, he found a little of that feeling he wanted to find here. The Minolta snapped.

Happiness captured.

## Chapter One

Watching Rachel's slow and careful breath, the smallest perceivable lift and fall of her chest had given Beth an anxious metronome with which to measure the silence. Rachel had occasionally returned to consciousness, only to disappear again for hours. It was exhausting, and Beth was working hard to cherish these moments, sitting beside her daughter alone in the quiet.

She had left two messages now for Matthew. He should have known to expect a call. Beth was aware that the hospital staff were doing their best to comfort her with their awkward smiles.

Twenty-seven years was a good innings for a cystic fibrosis patient, the doctors had told her this morning. When Rachel was first diagnosed as a baby, these same experts had told her that she would not live longer than eighteen, less if she sustained a severe infection. Beth had been a cautious and meticulous mother. She had always tried to ensure that her daughter's weak condition was never compromised. The house was always impeccably clean, as instructed by the doctors. Her food had been carefully planned and monitored. There had also been revolutions in modern medicine that meant life had become a little more certain. All choices had been considered and thoughtfully taken, together as a team, until this morning. Rachel had requested the ventilator be taken away. She had then turned to Beth and whispered something that Beth had at first not heard clearly. Just as she stood and asked her daughter to repeat herself, the words had sorted themselves in her mind and she'd carefully sat back down in the chair.

Rachel had asked for her mother's permission to die.

Beth remembered with somewhat compulsive clarity the day in 1975 when her daughter was diagnosed. It had been in a different hospital, but there was that same clinical antiseptic smell.

"What's taking so long?"

Beth didn't answer her husband. She was itchy with impatience. The waiting room was awash with neon lights and pale-blue vinyl chairs on spindly black legs. While Beth occupied herself with the baby, Brian stared at the floor, seemingly ignorant of the noise produced by Matt's repetitive swinging of his legs beneath the chair. A doctor entered the waiting room.

"Mr and Mrs Hudson? Will you follow me, please?"

In his office, the doctor's mouth moved as Beth tried to listen carefully, staring at the new words falling out.

“Rachel’s intestinal blockage that you alerted us to led us to do some tests on the nutrients in her system. Given that your child has been presenting a heavy and persistent cough, I’ve tested her for cystic fibrosis.”

“Cystic fibrosis? What is that?”

“It’s a rare and genetically transmitted illness, Mrs Hudson. It affects the secretory glands. They’re the ones that make mucus, sweat. The lungs are affected, the pancreas too, and hence intestinal blockages.”

“And what did your test say, Doctor?” Beth asked patiently while Brian remained quiet.

“It was positive, Mrs Hudson. Your daughter has cystic fibrosis. I’m very sorry.”

“Oh.” Beth looked at Brian. He didn’t glance back. Instead, he was staring just past the doctor’s ear. “So what treatment do you recommend to get rid of it?”

“Well, that’s the thing. There is no cure. There is treatment, yes. What we call CPT or chest physiotherapy. You’ll need to do this daily. And you should expect to administer large doses of antibiotics when infections take hold, to avoid what could become regular hospital stays. But Mrs Hudson ...” the doctor took his glasses from his face and leaned a little closer to her. “I’m afraid, it’s a terminal disease. Life expectancy for a patient with CF is about... eighteen years. Thereabouts.”

Beth stared at the doctor. His words were fat and bulky in her mouth. As realisations followed thoughts, her heart began to pound inside her chest. She started to sob. Quietly at first, and then with vigour. A door closed loudly in the hospital corridor.

A distracting commotion in the corner of the room had silenced Beth, as she had turned to look at her other child. Matthew was occupying himself with the array of Bakelite body parts on display in the doctor’s room, where a half-body anatomical model exposed organs that fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle. A kidney. A uterus. A lung. Matt had sought himself a task. Putting it back together.

Beth had stared at her husband and then back at her son. All that Brian could muster in that heavy blanket of grief, was a bark.

“Leave it alone, Matthew!”

Both parents were carriers of the gene, but it was their combination that brought this on Rachel. *Unfortunate* was the doctor’s terminology. The word had stuck in her mind, stubbornly repeating itself when she least expected it.

Now, in yet another hospital, Beth had held her daughter’s hand until her own had become numb, for nearly three weeks now. It was an infection that no antibiotic could fight. Acute viral pneumonia. Her heart was enlarged. Beth had read these words long ago, in cloth-bound

medical journals and had repeated them in her own handwriting in a well-worn notebook on her desk. She hadn't winced when the doctor confirmed the severity of Rachel's infection. Instead, she had excused herself, bundled up the news like wet washing, and had stolen away to the toilet in the hallway, careful not to drip the news on the freshly mopped floor. She had cried to herself in the privacy of the disabled cubicle. She had stifled her cries into her hands, only to taste, there in the safety of her own dark grip, the salt of Rachel's unprocessed chloride; the by-product of the wretched disease that constantly seeped from her daughter's skin. It had caught in Beth's throat, forcing her to vomit. It was so frightening that she could hardly move, held up only by her grip on the white porcelain of the toilet; thick dribble connecting her to something solid. Her gold crucifix necklace tapped against the bowl, making a metallic tinkle. The oddness of that sound had stayed with her. She imagined what she would have needed to do had the chain broken and fallen into the bowl.

Beth smoothed the hair around her daughter's pale face, eying her chest, searching out confirmation of the next inhalation. She tried breathing at the same pace. She found some connection to her daughter in that. It was her way of stepping inside the dark with her little girl. Beth's hand reached for her neck to feel the comforting smoothness of the crucifix. She rubbed at its cool mineral wealth.

Beth looked over to Rachel's own necklace. It was not there. She stood up, alarmed. When had her daughter stopped wearing the crucifix given to her on her twelfth birthday? Had it been recently? Years ago? She panicked a little. Perhaps it was just forgetfulness. Had a nurse removed it? She reached around, unlatched her own necklace and laid it around her daughter's neck. She carefully pulled the gold thread under her hair and hooked it together. There. Safe.

The familiarity of her mother's touch raised Rachel's consciousness above the heavy blanket of drugs. She opened her eyes very slowly. She felt groggy. The soft light of the hospital room was still too bright, even though they had made many provisions to make her as comfortable as possible. The light outside told her it was either the solemn dusk of evening or the early promise of morning. She wished it to be morning, in that moment when all seems possible: the blank canvas of the day.

Rachel looked over at her mother holding her hand. Her face was turned away, looking out of the hospital window, at the view across the suburbs. The curtain had been pulled back. Among those suburban rows of trees and tram tracks, Rachel knew that her mother could just make out the general whereabouts of their house in Glen Iris, one of the leafier Melbourne suburbs. Her mother looked tired. She was holding her limp hand on the edge of the bed. Beth's manicured nails were interwoven with Rachel's fattened fingers; clubbed with the lack of oxygen in her

body. Rachel summoned what little energy she had left and thought to squeeze her mother's hand. Her mother did not stir. Her body was no longer responding to her authority. She drew upon the small bank of energy that remained and gave way to a smile. She closed her eyes and felt herself give in again to the pull of her medication.

Beth looked around to movement on the other side of the room. A young nurse Beth had not seen before appeared at the door. She stood there in silence for a few seconds.

"Hello, Mrs Hudson." The nurse did not move from the doorway.

"Hello, nurse." Beth smoothed at the bedclothes.

Beth watched as the nurse checked on the machinery around them, occasionally smiling at her. She found her cheery disposition annoying. She must have been about the same age as Rachel. "I'm just going to change Rachel's sheets and her clothes. Did you want to wait outside?"

Beth glanced pointedly at the girl. She didn't respond. A male nurse entered with fresh linen and placed it at Rachel's feet. He whistled as together the two nurses began to undress the bed, taking care not to disturb Rachel's drip and heart monitor. Beth watched helplessly as the two nurses performed their daily ritual, bathing her daughter and removing her clothes and bedsheets, in several choreographed movements. Beth watched her daughter's naked body roll gently towards her as they dressed Rachel in a white hospital-issue gown. Her daughter did not stir. The nurses readjusted Rachel carefully on the bed and tended to the rate of the fluid drip. The girl left quietly with the dirty linen. The male nurse remained. He whistled to himself some more as he lingered for a few more minutes. Beth concentrated her gaze on Rachel's breath. She held fast to its rhythm.

"All done," he said, writing notes on the chart at the foot of the bed. He rolled up the blankets and lifted her arms to rest above the covers. As he dithered about the bed, Beth held firm to Rachel's hand.

"I'll be back in thirty minutes to check on her vitals. You take care, Mrs Hudson. Make sure you're getting enough rest too, yes?"

Beth smarted a little, pushing down the tears. She dared not let them out lest the moisture catch, pulling her in and soaking her through. A button had been pressed in her and she was unsure what it was.

"Close the door, please." She muttered under her breath. The young man did as she had asked.

Beth reached under the visitors' chair where a David Jones shopping bag had been hiding since her expedition to the city yesterday. In it was her bold attempt at salvaging some grace for her

daughter in her final hour, a designer dress complete with designer price tag and innocent disposition. She delved her hand into the bag, felt the softness of the cloth and lifted the garment to inspect it more closely. She eyed the expensive label. She pulled back the fresh covers of her daughter's bed. Beth sighed. The sight of Rachel's frail body always gave her a feeling of helplessness. She reached around under Rachel's light frame and loosened the cloth ties that held the hospital gown in place. It released with ease. Unhooking the drip from its metal hook, Beth threaded the clear belly of fluid through the armhole of the gown as the nurse had just done, leaving the gown draped over her daughter's naked body for a moment.

Retrieving the dress from the chair, she unfolded the floral garment and carefully tore the price tag. She unbuttoned the garment and pulled the drip gently through the short sleeve. Cradling her daughter into her own chest, she placed it around her small body. She felt down Rachel's arm and holding her hand, pulled her left arm through the hole carefully, with the clear plastic tube of the drip remaining undisturbed. Taking Rachel's right arm, she did the same and carefully covered her chest with the dress, buttoning it at the front. She pulled the silk fabric gently down over her slim figure. She held the weight of Rachel's hips up into her own chest as she tidied the back of the dress to be under her body. She pulled the covers up over her legs and neatly tucked the bedclothes in under her arms.

Beth opened the bedside drawer and took out Rachel's hairbrush. In gentle movements she tidied her daughter's hair around the elastic of the oxygen mask, letting it fall softly across her shoulder, tucked into two neat bundles. When she had done so, she stood quietly next to her bed and kissed her daughter's face.

"There you go, my love," Beth whispered, as she smoothed the sheets. "Dressed for heaven." Easing back into a passive stance for a few minutes and staring at nothing in particular, Beth took her seat and resigned something to herself. She rested her head on the edge of the bed and closed her eyes.

Beth waited patiently for Rachel's heartbeat to signal a protest for oxygen. The male nurse returned to meddle, prod, record and write. He left and silence reigned between mechanical machine utterances. The heart monitor beeped in response to a constant query to measure life.

Beth gripped Rachel's hand. She hoped that her son Matthew would hurry, as the long minutes stretched into hours. She was fearful that Rachel might go before he arrived.

The moments passed and Beth prayed. She prayed for strength and guidance. In a moment of selflessness, Beth found herself praying for an end to her daughter's pain.

In the quiet folds of Beth's murmurings, the heart monitor finally hiccupped a final flat green line. A voice in Beth panicked out loud.

“Oh ... God!”

Beth leapt to push the emergency button, fumbling awkwardly for the red switch on the headboard, staring down wide-eyed and desperate. The floor beneath her had fallen away.

Behind them in the doorway, Matthew stood blinded by the freshness of his mother’s grief.

## Chapter Two

Jack Behan read over the document one final time. For the last couple of years, he had kept contact with the young woman whose name appeared on the front page. After a conversation in a bar late one night, she had taken his card and challenged him to hold her to a drunken idea. This he had done, and in the last few months he had finalised the paperwork. Having attended her funeral just four weeks ago, he felt a moderate attachment to the outcome of this particular case.

The family would be arriving in several minutes and he quickly rehearsed his words again. His receptionist buzzed him on the intercom.

“Jack, Mrs Beth Hudson is in reception.”

He pressed the intercom button. “Thanks, I’ll come out.”

As Jack stood up, he knocked over his half-cup of cold coffee with his cufflinked sleeve. He quickly dived to the will documents and rescued them before the milky brown river reached them. Holding them hopelessly above his desk, he looked around for something to clean up the mess before the family entered his office. He reached into his sports bag below the desk and pulled out his gym shirt. He could only hope that the morning would progress a little more smoothly.

Jack placed the copy of Rachel’s will back on his desk with the other two copies he had made for his arriving clients. After straightening his shirt and putting on his suit jacket, he went out to the reception area of his small suburban legal practice.

In his waiting room he found the mother of his client. She was taller than he had expected. Her mousy brown hair was flecked with grey strands. It was thick and cut to sit below her ears; its unruly sense of wildness had been brushed repeatedly to coax it into submission. She was slightly round with ageing, and wore comfortable but elegant clothing, her floral blouse tucked neatly into dark trousers beneath a belt. She fulfilled the image of mother that Jack had created in his mind. She stepped into it easily, but Jack sensed she had taken time with her appearance. She had applied a deep red lipstick and no other make-up – the guise of a woman in grief. This, Jack decided, lent Beth Hudson a youthfulness that defied her fifty-two years. Her shoes, however, spoke of tiredness.

Beth stood as he entered the waiting room. She pushed her glasses back on the bridge of her nose and looped her handbag over her shoulder.

“Hi, Mrs Hudson. Thank you for coming.”

“Thank *you*, Mr Behan. Thank you for coming to Rachel’s funeral. It was kind of you.”

“That’s quite all right. I do feel your loss Mrs Hudson. I came to know Rachel quite well.”

Beth gave a perceptibly curt smile and glanced down the hallway towards the street, so as to keep the honesty of the grimace from the lawyer.

“Matthew is parking the car.”

The receptionist appeared from a kitchen at the rear with a tray of plunger coffee and some gourmet cookies as the bell above the front door tinkled. Matt entered the waiting room and the small gathering noted the silence settle. Jack acknowledged him with a nod. The young man bore a striking resemblance to Rachel. He held his shoulders forward as if crouching away from something behind him. His clay-splattered flannel shirt suggested that he had come from some form of manual labour, in order to be here for this appointment. Keeping his hands in his pockets, he avoided eye contact.

Jack took an inaudible breath and swallowed his nerves. He rocked a little on his heels as he prepared himself for his task.

“Shall we go through?” he indicated towards his office door and the receptionist walked through in front of them, placing the tray of coffee on the table in the centre of the room. As the pair took their seats on the leather lounge suite, she asked them each, almost too quietly, how they preferred their coffee. Her repressive demeanour set an uncomfortable vibe in the room as she struggled to pour the coffee without spilling any on the delicate china saucers.

“Leave it with me, Tanya.”

“Are you sure, Mr Behan? I’m almost finished.”

“I’m sure, Tanya. Please close the door on your way out.”

She smoothed her crumpled skirt as she left, accepting a kind glance from Beth as she closed the door carefully. Jack realised that he did not possess any rehearsed small talk for this morning’s meeting. He continued pouring the coffee in silence, presenting each cup to his guests.

Jack collected the documents from his desk. He sat carefully, watching Mrs Hudson as he placed the documents face down on the coffee table in front. He checked where he had placed his cup. He smoothed his tie. He remembered that he had left his tie clip on the kitchen table at home.

After a brief pause, he spoke. “Thank you for coming today to discuss Rachel’s will. She took some time in drawing up this document with me. Indeed, it has also taken a lot of time to organise what I am about to discuss. Rachel has left behind some rather different instructions to what usually happens in someone’s will. She has chosen to leave behind some final wishes.” Jack cleared his throat and paused. “She did manage to save some money from

her working years, a sum which was invested for her several years ago. You might remember when she invested in some shares? Anyway, it leaves her with a small estate of almost twenty thousand dollars.”

Beth and Matt remained still as Mr Behan delivered this news. Beth broke the silence.

“That’s wonderful, Mr Behan. I’d like to donate the money to charity. To research,” she glanced at Matt in the seat next to her and reached for his hand. He let her take it, but he did not take his gaze off the floor. “Research into cystic fibrosis. It’s what she would have wanted, I’m sure.”

Jack looked at the mother of his client. He hadn’t asked a question as yet and for her to begin changing the script was not something he had anticipated. He was unsure as to how he should progress from here. He returned to the papers in his hands, searching for his lines.

“Actually, the way in which these funds are to be distributed shall be governed by this document.” He handed them each a copy of the will. “Please read right through before we discuss this any further.”

Jack watched as the two visitors read through the document. He watched their expressions closely, searching for some indication that would support what Rachel had discussed with him, about her fears for their initial reactions. Matt’s lip curled with misapprehension. Jack waited patiently. He noted the changes in their body language. Tension pricked the air. Matt sat forward, straightening the document with a stiff fold to keep it upright in his hand. He lent his face on his closed fist, supported by his knee. Obviously having read enough to comprehend its contents, he placed the paper on the table and reached for the coffee with a sigh, loud enough for it to be perceived as intentional.

Beth began to stutter. “I want to know why Rachel didn’t discuss this with me before ...” Her face puffed with confusion as she started to cry and Matt extended a hand to hers, but the mechanics of the motion were all that he could muster.

“Mrs Hudson, Rachel was adamant that this was to remain a secret until now. She believed strongly in what she has written here and was aware that it might cause distress for you. She did however, as written here, put in a clause that you may choose not to take part.”

“A *clause*?” scoffed Matt.

Jack remembered now the image Rachel had painted for him of her brother. He was a stubborn sort she had told him. He was fiercely opinionated. He was as faithless as their mother was devout, and not one to engage in pleasant conversation. Looking at his shirt, Jack now remembered his job. He was a builder’s labourer. Jack felt uncomfortable in his own crisp-collared shirt. He shifted in his chair and returned his coffee cup to the table.

“Shall I explain to you how this will work?” His guests made no verbal indication so he continued. “Rachel’s ashes are to be divided into two urns. She has chosen two destinations that she feels were important to her in her life that she wishes to share with you.”

Jack was careful to allow measured pauses to slide in between the obvious and expected thoughts of his clients. He had executed a will many times. With this one he had found that he had to concentrate carefully on his delivery, and he was patient with their absorption of the information before them.

“I have set up an account for each of you, to provide some spending money and for associated travel costs.”

Beth’s mind reeled. She had tolerated her daughter’s crazy ideas in life. Despite her disease, Rachel had not resisted the travel bug; instead, she had packed her illness into her luggage like a bulky and inappropriate souvenir bought too early in one’s journey. Her medication and her portable vaporiser packed into the top of her backpack, she had set off to Europe and Asia. Beth had carefully placed the postcards that accumulated on the fridge in a shoebox under her bed. She had wondered if this shoebox might one day be some tangible object that she might need to caress in the absence of her wild daughter, found dead and raped in some horrendous city on the other side of the world. Rachel’s travel insurance costs were higher than for other people. A lung infection had seen her admitted to a Bangkok hospital once, and a pancreatic blockage meant she had to have surgery in London. Beth had spoken sternly to her daughter about her illness and her limits at each airport departure lounge, but Rachel would return home only to talk of more work visas for far-off lands. Rachel had an answer for every argument her mother proposed. Beth’s nerves were shot long before the final days of her daughter’s life, and now it seemed Rachel wanted to call it all up again.

“Where the hell is Tarlinga Creek?” Matt interrupted.

“It’s in the Kimberley region of Western Australia.”

“Right.”

Beth spoke quietly to her son. “It’s where she worked, Matthew, remember? When she went up north to work for that university?” Beth’s face curled with a fresh sense of grief. “Even when I asked her not to go gallivanting around like that with her condition.”

Jack continued. “Rachel has given me some background information to give to you, Matt. It’s a remote community. You’ll be travelling via plane to Broome, and then a smaller plane out to a remote town called Fitzroy Crossing, and then travelling by car.” Jack glanced again at the particulars of the document. He ran his finger over the words on his own paperwork – words he knew well from writing and rewriting this document, but he found himself wanting

to play the novice actor. “In fact, someone will be picking you up at the airstrip. That is, if you agree to take this journey for Rachel?”

“I guess,” he mumbled.

“Please ask me questions, Matt, if you are not sure of anything.”

“I said yes, okay? Jeez ... Just get on with what Mum’s got to do.”

Jack nodded. “Sure. Now. Mrs Hudson. Your destination ...”

A painful pause descended on the group as Jack eyed his client’s mother and thought about his lines. Beth leapt ahead of him.

“Firstly, Mr Behan, I want to know what happens if I don’t do this.”

“Well, Mrs Hudson ...” Jack gathered his words carefully. “Should you opt out, Rachel has chosen that the money will be given to the Tarlinga Creek Community School.” Jack cleared his throat again and glanced down to his papers for reassurance. He looked up, only to see Matt rolling his eyes and leaning back into his leather lounge in his concrete-dusted shirt.

Beth wept. She clutched at a crumpled tissue in her hand, which she dabbed behind her glasses, gracefully removing each tear as it arrived. Occasionally a little stifled whimper would erupt as she gasped for clarity. Jack waited for Beth to look up at him, but she did not. She suddenly appeared like a child to him. He turned to Rachel’s brother, seeking some support to navigate this situation.

“Matt, shall I go on?”

Beth sighed and Matt looked from Mr Behan to his mother, feeling that the need for him to respond was dispersed with that sigh. She appeared to have returned to the stupor she found herself in at the hospital when her daughter had just died. Beth now stared straight ahead, her mouth hot and open. She was aware that she was commanding the attention of the others. She figured she was allowed. She had been through enough already. Why did her daughter want to subject her to a dangerous and confronting ordeal? She had expressed her opinions to Rachel. Why this now when she was already dealing with losing her little girl? She tucked her hair behind her ear. It fell forward again.

“If Rachel wanted something from me, she knew that she only had to ask. I’m upset that she didn’t explain what she had planned. Why couldn’t she just ask me in person? She knows ... she knew how I felt about her funny ideas.”

“Mrs Hudson, I’m sure that Rachel was aware of these things in making her choices. I know that this is strange for you, I assure you,” Jack picked up the document and used it to indicate his point. “This is a first for me, too. I can’t tell you ... that first day I discussed with Rachel the details and the consequences of this will, I ...”

“Oh!” Beth said spitefully. “I see now. It’s been your little game with my daughter for the past God knows how long, has it? Were you there this past year, when we had to rush to the hospital every month, not knowing what was going to happen next? Have *you* ever lost a child, Mr Behan?”

Jack summoned his professional strength. He thought of his wife and their failed attempts at conception, the miscarriages that had frequented their past few years together before they finally chose to stop throwing themselves at the repetitive pain. Sex with his wife had become a reminder of their pain. He wasn’t a parent, and he knew that he couldn’t truly imagine Beth’s anguish. Grief made people do strange things. He had come to witness that often enough in his career. He searched his mind for a reply to Mrs Hudson’s outburst and assumed that silence was a safe response for now.

Beth let the words fall out sharply. “I didn’t think so.”

Matt leant over and touched his mother’s arm as she cried into her already soggy tissue. She pulled her arm away from Matt and stood up.

“Come on, Matthew, drive me home now.” Jack stood and followed Rachel’s mother and brother outside to reception.

“Take some time to think about this, Mrs Hudson. It’s what Rachel wanted, and while it may seem a shock at present, let the idea settle. It’s a journey she is asking of you, and her last request.” He looked at Matt for some support in getting his mother through this conversation. Matt looked out to the busy street through the window. He rattled his keys.

“I’ll call you in the next few days, Mrs Hudson.” Jack watched as Tanya let them out the door.