

## CHAPTER THREE

As she navigated the Friday evening traffic, Hannah felt the restlessness that visiting her old neighbourhood always brought. The Indian restaurant she passed offered a perfect example of her discomfort. Australian-flag bunting hung from the awning like an apology for being anything other than white middle class. Open gratitude for being tolerated. It was freaking tragic.

Everything around the hilly suburb was controlled. In her teens, the lack of public transport had felt like a conspiracy to keep her there. Trapped in the endless, facile dramas of her peers. The break-ups and make-ups she was supposed to care about, as though there was nothing outside their bubble, no wider world to explore except in a day trip.

Stef's teen years had been the opposite. Boys adored her. She was soft-edged while Hannah was sharp angles. Of course, Hannah had envied her ease, her curves. But Stef had bought the whole, insular package. When she and Liam got married, they didn't even consider other places to live.

Hannah had always fantasised about something else. Now she had it. A townhouse in Carlton. Job as a lecturer. Travel. Rex.

There had been a twenty-year reunion a few years back. Hannah couldn't quite believe how many of her old PLC and Scotch College acquaintances had either stayed put or gravitated back to the area. Though it certainly seemed there was a defensive edge to their collective choice.

'It's a good safe place to raise kids,' Leah Graves had told her, apropos of nothing. Her assertion seemed to attract a herd of ex-classmates to bleat their agreement.

'I understand what you mean,' Hannah had offered. 'Though of course, having children isn't a given.'

Leah, two down and one on the way, had looked at Hannah as though she was nuts. The others had backed away slowly.

Since she was running ten minutes late to pick up Stef and the kids, Hannah texted from the car. When she pulled up out the front, Rosie emerged from the house first.

Even in the semi-darkness, she looked different. Stef was an open book, so Hannah would know if Rosie had got her period. But the realisation that it wasn't far off was jarring. Little Rosie, their prickly tween.

'Hey, you,' Hannah greeted, giving her niece a quick hug as she slid into the passenger seat. 'You don't think your mum might want to sit in the front?'

'Mum won't care,' Rosie said firmly as Stef and Heath got in the back.

Hannah turned to her sister. Stef's eye roll said *don't ask*. She looked knackered. And like she'd stacked on weight, even just in the last fortnight. Working retail in that furniture barn place would be sedentary as well as banal. Stef wasn't one to

exercise regularly. She loved her food too. The combination was showing – Stef looked set to burst out of her leopard-print wrap dress.

‘I just beat my game, Han!’ Heath announced. ‘It took me two weeks. I’m a legend.’

Hannah wasn’t big on kids, but God this one was cute. He was always bursting with the latest news. It was Heath’s particular gift that the content never mattered as much as the delivery. Hannah high-fived him.

‘Whatever,’ Rosie mumbled.

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The wrought-iron gates were open and the porch light on, timed for their arrival. The Fidlers had an aversion to showiness. The security surveillance sign on their neighbour’s stucco fence was showy, in Marg and Jim’s shared opinion. And pretty much all of their opinions were shared. It was also counterproductive – an indication there was something worth robbing.

As soon as Marg opened the door, Rosie barged through. ‘Gran, can you take up my new school dress? Lara put a chalk mark on the right length,’ she said, holding up foot traffic as she produced her PLC uniform for next year. Of course she was going to PLC, because Hannah and Stef went to PLC. That’s what you did. Even if it meant the grandparents had to pay the fees.

‘Well, hello to you too, Rosie,’ Marg said, bypassing Hannah to give Stef a motherly, in-the-know wink that suggested the chalk mark might magically go south.

‘I beat the game, Gran!’ Heath cried, scooting around legs and under the school dress. ‘I only had it for two weeks and—’

‘Oh my God, loser. Can you shut up about that stupid game for one second?’ Rosie’s shrill voice flew into the house, luring Jim up the hallway to rescue his grandson.

Jim planted kisses on the tops of heads, starting with Hannah.

‘Now Heath, matey,’ he said, ‘is this the game where you only had two more villains to defeat before you saved the world?’

Hannah watched their backs as they walked down the hallway and outside towards the shed, deep in discussion.

She kissed her mother’s powdered cheek.

The hall was lined with photos. Marg and Jim had always been scrupulously even-handed. A baby photo of Hannah was paired with one of Stef. Hannah in her academic garb was followed by Stef’s crowning glory – motherhood. Stef with Rosie as a toddler, Heath as a baby, with Liam’s hand supporting baby Heath’s head. But the portrait of Stef and Liam with the kids had been relegated to the second shelf of the bookcase in the lounge.

Further down, in a bold move of mixing up chronology, there was one of the Fidler family. Hannah must have been about six and Stef four. Hannah was a mini Marg, pale and fine-featured. Stef had her dad’s colouring – olive skin and brown eyes.

‘So, what happened to Rex?’ Marg asked. ‘I made his favourite slow-cooked lamb casserole. And a pavlova for dessert.’

‘Yum, I’m starving,’ Stef said.

‘Hmm, my darling, I don’t think so,’ Marg responded, looking Stef up and down before walking towards the kitchen.

‘Hmm, my darling, I don’t think so,’ Hannah whispered-echoed.

Stef rolled her eyes. ‘Your turn will come,’ she said and Hannah chuckled, because of course that was true. Little barbs designed to encourage self-improvement from Marg were as reliable as their dad’s head kisses.

‘Rex had two PhD students who needed extra time with him tonight, Mum,’ Hannah replied, following her into the kitchen. ‘Exams are coming up.’

Marg nodded. ‘So what will Rex eat?’

Hannah glanced back. Stef and Rosie had already bagged seats on the nearside of the table. This meant that Hannah would be relegated to the far side, heavy curtains weighing against her back whenever she moved. It was a familiar game of musical chairs and Hannah had lost.

‘Yes, what will Rex eat?’ Stef asked pointedly, leaning back on her chair. Hannah gave her the finger.

‘Rex can cook, Mum. He doesn’t need me to do it for him.’

‘Easy, tiger,’ Jim said, checking the scores of a footy game on the muted TV screen before switching it off. ‘That kind of thing could be contagious.’

‘Well, Rex is terribly dedicated, isn’t he?’ Marg replied, emerging from the kitchen with a casserole dish in one hand, rice in the other. The placemats were already down to protect the table. After they’d gone home, Marg would reset the table for tomorrow’s breakfast. And so on, ad infinitum.

‘Yeah, Rex is dedicated, Mum,’ Hannah said, ‘but he’s also sorry he couldn’t make it. He asked me to give this to you.’

Marg remained standing. She stroked the cover of the old book reverentially, then held it up for everyone to see.

‘*The Christopher Robin Verse Book*,’ Rosie said. ‘We’ve read loads of those poems. Like “Halfway Down”, right? And that guy also wrote *Winnie-the-Pooh*.’

‘I wanna go to the Book Parade as Winnie the Pooh,’ Heath said. ‘How cool would that be?’

‘If you go as Winnie the Pooh, I will literally kill you,’ Rosie said. ‘But wow, that book looks ancient.’

As everyone helped themselves to casserole, Marg opened the cover.

‘Why are you making that face, Gran?’ Heath asked.

Hannah, partially draped by floral curtains, looked over at her mother. Marg’s hazel eyes looked strangely empty. As though her mind was suddenly somewhere else.

Her dad stood. He put his hand on Marg’s shoulder and she started coming back to them. ‘Honey, are you all right?’ he asked. He helped lower Marg into her chair. Then he poured her a glass of water from the carafe on the table and handed it to her.

Marg took a sip. She wiped her mouth with a napkin. Slowly her eyes went back to normal. The feeling in the room didn’t.

‘I’m fine, love,’ she said. ‘But please, can you turn off the radiator? It’s too hot in here.’

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Jim and Marg walked them to the car as usual. They checked Heath's seatbelt and doled out plastic containers of leftovers, one for each daughter. Marg gave the largest one to Hannah with an offer to email her the recipe. She asked Stef if she'd like them to mind the kids over the weekend so she could squeeze in a hit of tennis or at least a long walk.

Things were back to normal.

Hannah pulled out and they travelled a couple of hundred metres before she stopped so Heath could retrieve a toy from the floor.

She adjusted the rear-view mirror. 'Look, Stef,' she said.

They watched as their parents held hands to cross the road.

'What? What is it?' Heath asked, his little neck swivelling. 'Oh, I know what you're looking at. Gran and Pop are holding hands.' He leaned forward. 'Like you and Dad used to do,' he offered.

'Yeah right, loser,' Rosie scoffed. 'Mum and Dad were the perfect, lovey-dovey couple. That's why they got divorced.'

Hannah could practically feel the arrow piercing Stef's heart. Rosie could be so brutal.

'Hang on, Rosie,' she said, 'there were loads of times your mum and dad were happy together.'

No matter how much her sister pissed her off sometimes, Hannah couldn't bear it when anyone hurt her.

Stef smiled weakly. Squeezed Hannah's leg.

'Whatever,' Rosie yawned.

'Hey, Han,' Stef said, already unhooking her bra as Hannah pulled up outside her house. 'Wanna have a sleepover?'