# GONE

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*To Alistair*

It was bad luck that my sister, Rebecca Bundy, disappeared in the week before Christmas in 1984. Most people were distracted with last-minute shopping and catering plans for family visits. Others were probably preoccupied with getting as far away from the good cheer as possible.

Then, two days after Rebecca went missing, Jacob Healy, a local sheep farmer, shot and killed his pregnant wife and their three lovely blonde-haired kids. When he'd satisfied himself they were all dead, he drove his ute to the dam, walked into the centre of it and turned the gun on himself. A murder-suicide investigation followed. Perhaps because of the time of year it became one of those stories that made world headlines. Family photos covered the front pages of all the newspapers, and it was the lead story on radio and TV news. It seemed to go on for weeks, even after the funerals. White coffins buried in the Maryhill cemetery.

The Healy investigation took its toll on the local police resources, and perhaps their empathy was stretched thin too. It meant that Rebecca's disappearance quickly became a cold case. Those two events – Christmas and the Healys' murder-suicide – worked against my family and had devastating long-term consequences.

The other point I'll make about the lack of police interest in Rebecca's disappearance was that she'd run away once before, and came home when she'd cooled down. It's true she'd been talking about going to Queensland over the school holidays. That possibility was always a live option. But as the days and weeks went on other leads emerged that added to the confusion and uncertainty. Anyway, Rebecca slamming the back door behind her always followed an argument with our mother.

I was fourteen years old when Rebecca vanished. I was young, and a lot of what was going on around me didn't make sense until I was older, particularly relating to my mother's mercurial and increasingly alarming behaviour.

But I was there on the day Rebecca disappeared. I watched her hurry away. If I close my eyes I can still see her, the way her hair seemed to float behind her as she fled behind the toilet block at the showgrounds.

That was thirty-eight years ago.

I'm now ready to share my story from the beginning about what I knew and what I've found out since.

# ONE

*1984*

On the last day of the school year the bell rang ninety minutes early. It was a hot day, and the Gyle–Maryhill bus wasn't due for ninety minutes, which meant that twenty-three of us had a long time to wait. It was Rebecca who suggested we all go to the showgrounds to hang out in the shade of the Moreton Bay figs. She picked up her schoolbag and headed off without looking back to see if anyone followed.

The showgrounds were a short walk from school, along a concrete path beside the Deveron River and across the railway line. We filed through the granite pillars and quickly settled under the row of giant trees. The boys organised themselves to play cricket. Andy Knightly propped up his schoolbag to be the wicket and someone produced a bat and ball. I perched on a concrete bench with Rachel Cooper and Andrea Goodman to watch them play.

Rebecca sat away from us, her head bowed to a book she held against her chest. None of her friends caught our bus and it had been a long time since she'd been bothered with any of us, including me. That wasn't always the case. Rebecca and I had been close for most of our lives. She changed when she started thinking of herself as grown-up and me still as a kid. By the time she turned

seventeen the three-year age gap between us somehow seemed much greater.

As if Rebecca felt me looking at her, she raised her head and for a moment we held each other's gaze. Nothing in particular was communicated between us, perhaps a silent acknowledgement that we were there together in the shade, and that night we'd sleep under the same roof – with our long history as sisters ahead of us. When Rebecca turned back to her book, sunlight filtering through the branches caught her auburn hair and I noticed again how similar she looked to our mother. That's what was always said in our family, that she took after Mum, and I took after Dad.

I turned away from Rebecca when the boys started arguing whether Shaun Taylor had been caught out, or the ball was dropped. The smell of cigarettes wafted from behind the toilets. In the mid-distance, a bearded man and his black dog wandered across the exhibition ring towards the pavilion, where every year one of Mum's decorated wedding cakes was displayed at the show. I was hungry and thought of the fish and chips I'd eat later at Maryhill's local shop where I worked three times a week. Warm air touched my skin and, in that moment, I remember being happy.

Then through the showground's granite pillars dust rose behind a yellow Volvo. There was no mistake, it was our mother's car because we were the only family in the district to own one in that egg-yolk colour. She was driving fast towards us, and I didn't understand how she knew we were there. I felt uneasy. Out of the car, she slammed the door and strode towards Rebecca. Our mother's nostrils flared, and her mouth was open as if trying to take more air in to her heaving lungs. The cricket game stopped. All the kids became still, staring.

Everyone knew our mother, Diane Bundy. Not only because she baked and decorated all the wedding cakes for the local brides, but

because she was beautiful and glamorous. That's what we all saw when she zeroed in on Rebecca. Even in rage it was possible to see how striking she was, in a sleeveless white-and-yellow polka-dot dress and white patent leather sandals, her thick auburn hair tied up high on her head and kept in place with a green scarf.

I felt afraid and wished Dad was there because he knew how to handle Mum and Rebecca. At home they fought constantly. A few days earlier they'd argued when Rebecca said she'd like to go to Queensland with her best friend, Jasmine Vasilakis, for the Christmas holidays. I didn't think she was serious, just talking out loud about an idea. But Mum shouted at her, told her she was forbidden. Rebecca yelled back saying she was seventeen and could do what she liked. The arguing only stopped when Dad came inside.

Rebecca closed the book, then stood and put her shoulders back as if bracing for whatever was coming from Mum.

'You stole money from my purse,' Mum said, stabbing the air in front of Rebecca's face. 'One hundred and seventy-five dollars is missing. The cash payment from Lauren Reinhart's wedding cake is gone. It was in my purse last night.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Rebecca said.

'Don't you lie to me. Where's the money?'

'What is wrong with you?' Rebecca replied, eyes darting to see who was watching.

'Get in the car, right now,' Mum said, then turning to find me, she yelled, 'Eliza. And you too.'

I picked up my schoolbag.

But Rebecca wasn't going anywhere.

'Rebecca, get in the car right now,' Mum snapped.

'I'm catching the bus.'

'What's got into you?'

'Nothing. What's got into you?'

Mum's voice was low and slow, a dangerous sign. 'What have you done with my money?'

'I haven't got your money.' Rebecca replied so normally she sounded convincing.

I headed towards the car hoping they would follow and the public scene would end.

'Come on,' I called.

They ignored me.

'Let me see inside your bag,' Mum demanded.

Rebecca snatched up her schoolbag and dropped it behind her. 'Don't you dare touch it.'

'Give it to me,' Mum said, stepping forward.

'Just leave me alone, for fuck's sake.'

Mum was crazy if she thought she could physically wrestle Rebecca's schoolbag off her, or force her into the car. But she tried. With a lunging step, she grabbed Rebecca's arms, pulling her forward. I couldn't think what to do. I was startled, stopped breathing. Rebecca was hard-eyed when she yanked away, forcing Mum to fall onto her knees. I've never forgotten how demeaning it looked, as if Mum was begging at Rebecca's feet. Then to my horror Mum's body went completely limp as she dropped onto the talc-like dirt and started crying with bursts of screaming, something I had never seen or heard before.

All the kids openly gaped down at her. The white dress Mum was wearing with the yellow polka dots was filthy in the dirt. The green scarf that tied up her long hair was loose; strands fell across her wet face. One of her sandals had come off.

I still didn't move. Should I have helped my mother to her feet? Told her to shut up? Instead, I took in all the staring faces, wondering what they were thinking. Then, as a ripple of wind moved

through those mighty trees, Andy hurried forward, put his hands under Mum's arms and lifted her up. She was looking around for her missing sandal when Rebecca backed away.

So Mum didn't see Rebecca disappear into the deep shadows of those Moreton Bay figs and vanish behind the toilet block. But I did. I saw the way her hair sat lightly on her shoulders as she went. A thin girl wearing a too-short blue-and-white check school uniform. In her right hand she gripped her schoolbag, and in her left she held the book she'd been reading. She didn't look back, but walked fast and with purpose.

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I followed Mum to the car and sat in the front passenger seat. Behind the wheel she snapped down the visor and stared into the mirror. She clicked her tongue, sniffed and blinked as she studied her face. Then she reached into the backseat and plucked a tissue from her black shoulder bag.

'Do you want me to go and get her?' I asked.

'She can get the bus,' Mum said, dabbing watery mascara stains from under her eyes.

All the kids had moved deeper into the shade and gathered around each other. Shaun was waving his arms acting out the pulling and pushing between Mum and Rebecca. Andrea's head was back, laughing. Rachel was flat-faced, staring at me in the car. What they had witnessed was a rare thing, gossip fodder, and I hated my mother for what she had just done to me and our family.

'How could you do that in front of everybody?' I asked.

'Rebecca's a thief and needs to be held to account.'

'What makes you think she took it?'

'Simple. Because I had the money last night and now it's gone.'

I thought of Mum's red purse that she kept in her shoulder bag. 'That doesn't mean Rebecca took it.'

'You know she's been carrying on about going to Queensland with that Greek girl, Jasmine whatever-her-name-is. So she would've taken it for that. It's obvious.'

When Mum turned to face me she exaggerated her grin by raising her eyebrows, clown-like, as if something was funny. A whiff of her Chanel No. 5. There was lipstick on her teeth and her makeup had mostly worn off. I always thought she looked better, or less complicated, without it. She turned back to the mirror and gathered her hair in her hands, retied the green scarf and tugged it tight. She was acting strangely and I understood then, perhaps for the first time, something wasn't quite right with her. I wanted Dad.

With the air-conditioning on high we drove out of the showgrounds. As we passed the pavilion the bearded man and his black dog, who I'd seen about fifteen minutes earlier, were there. The man, wearing a blue shirt and jeans, was standing beside a tap while his dog lapped from a stream of water. For certain he'd seen the fight between Mum and Rebecca. I turned, as he did, and we looked at each other. Dark eyes, narrow face, trimmed beard, shorter than my father. I'd never seen him before, which was unusual in a small country town. As Mum drove through the showground gate I turned for one final look at him, and was surprised to see he was still watching us.

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The way Mum clenched the steering wheel she could've powered us up the mountain with the sheer force of energy in her body. We sped under the double-bridge overpass that carried all the traffic between Melbourne and Sydney. We passed the familiar horse

studs, farmhouses, rusted cattle yards, and the views across dry hills dotted with granite rocks and eucalypts that had survived for months without much rain.

Up ahead was a straight stretch of road, just past Hedge End Lane, where the locals knew they had a good kilometre to safely overtake a slow vehicle. It happened all the time: a revved car suddenly appeared from behind to pass an unhurried driver or a heavy truck. Even though Mum was probably on the legal speed limit, a black ute with a roo-bar and P-plates came up behind, tailgating, edging close to pass. Back then, those bitumen roads were too narrow to carry two vehicles so it was common practice for the driver in front to move partly onto the verge allowing the passing vehicle to overtake safely.

'He's an idiot driver,' Mum gasped, as the Volvo tyres gripped the gravel.

We both knew it was Bull Tennant driving that ute. No one else on the mountain drove like him, as if galloping a stallion into battle. In the seconds it took him to power ahead, I glimpsed his forward-looking stare, a man trying to put distance between us as fast as he could. His arm moved down as he went up a gear.

'He should have his licence taken off him before he kills someone,' Mum said.

Bull wasn't his real name. Until Cheryl, his grandmother, gave him a second-hand .22 rifle for his thirteenth birthday, we called him Ashton which, at the time, was a posh name for a country kid. Armed with a gun to shoot foxes for the bounty money – ten dollars a scalp – his nickname quickly became Bull when it was obvious he was a bull's eye shot. He lived with Cheryl in an old weatherboard house down near Earls Creek, on a bend where willows bowed low into the shallows. I'd heard the rumours how Bull's mother left him with Cheryl when he was a baby saying she'd be back in a couple of weeks, but she didn't return.

From early on, Rebecca and I knew we weren't to have anything to do with Bull or Cheryl, *those people*. I don't remember Mum ever explaining why, we just understood to steer clear of them, and for a while we did. There were obvious differences between them and us, things to judge and be wary of. Bull's school uniforms were always second-hand and either too big or too small. His school lunches were basic, white bread, no fruit, never anything homemade. There was also Cheryl's noisy, dented green Cortina. And their only toilet was outside. It was never said out loud that they were poor, lesser. Even so, a shameful prejudice was instilled in us.

But we caught the bus with Bull every day, and until he quit school at sixteen, we got to know him and worked out for ourselves that he was all right. Better than all right. He was smart and funny. During those bus journeys up and down the mountain the three of us bonded. No, that's not quite right. It was more that Bull and Rebecca hit it off and I was the little sister hanging around, taking everything in. Either way, the three of us accepted each other and having a secret from our mother elevated our friendship, made it all the more important or special.

There's something else I should mention about Bull. At school he was often in fights with other older and bigger boys. He had a temper, but from the way I saw things, it was because he was provoked. Perhaps Bull was a target because he was a natural threat. What I mean is, he was strong and defended himself like a street fighter, played dirty, kneed balls, broke noses, twisted arms, cracked ribs, bent fingers. He'd been suspended a few times, once for bringing tinnies of beer to school. Another time he was thrown off the school bus after bashing Ryan Taylor for saying something about Cheryl's Cortina. No one ever dobbed, otherwise he would've been expelled from school, for sure. By the time he left, when he was sixteen and just completed Year 11, he had a reputation for being the

undisputed toughest kid in the school, which rendered him immense respect among all the students. And that hard-earned deference carried right through to when he was older, until he eventually left the mountain and never returned.

Bull was a couple of years older than Rebecca – and when his shoulders broadened and he grew to six foot four, bought his ute and started smoking Marlboros, all that maleness packaged together was something to take notice of. For sure, every girl in the district noticed him, including me, but it was Rebecca who Bull always adored. Sometime earlier in the year, perhaps it was in February, she started seeing him on the sly. It was also around that time Bull was questioned by the local police, something to do with his gun licence. I know that afterwards he tried to avoid the cops, but whenever they came across Bull on the road, he was pulled over so they could check out his car, hassling him about how roadworthy his ute was.

In those days, Rebecca used to confide in me so I could cover for her, tell lies to our parents about where she was when she was with Bull. I knew that sometimes they went to the deserted workman's cottage on our apple orchard, or even to Bull's place. If they went to other places I wasn't told.

Up ahead, Bull's ute grew smaller, red tail-lights flashing as he disappeared around the next bend. His sudden appearance on the road behind us, then overtaking, all happened so fast it wasn't until he was out of sight that I wondered if Rebecca was in the passenger seat beside him. Was she slouching down, hiding from us? It would have made perfect sense if she'd gone to a public phone and asked Bull to pick her up in Gyle and drop her off at the bottom of our driveway. The more I thought about it, the less certain I was about what I actually saw.

'Does he come into the shop?' Mum asked.

'Who?'

'Bull.'

The answer was occasionally. He bought Marlboros, Coke, sometimes a hot meat pie with sauce. I only worked in the shop Tuesdays and Fridays after school, and all day on Saturday which meant I didn't see him very often.

'He must come into the shop sometimes,' Mum insisted.

'Not that much.'

'Have you ever seen him with Rebecca?'

I acted like I didn't hear the question and stared out the window. Paddocks flew by, cows were sitting under the shade of peppermint gums.

'Have you?' Mum repeated, kneading the steering wheel with her hands while glancing at me.

'What do you mean?'

'It's a plain question. Have you ever seen Bull Tennant and Rebecca together?'

'Of course not,' I said, but in my mind were flashes of the times I'd seen Rebecca get into Bull's ute after school. He always parked in the same spot, across the road and down about a hundred metres towards the BP service station. And I knew their weekend meeting place was a twenty-minute walk for Rebecca up to the corner of Fosters Lane and Marion Road. It wasn't far from Bull's home, perhaps a half a kilometre or so.

The shop was up ahead, on the right. The grapevine threading along the verandah railings was heavy and overdue for pruning. Long free-hanging green tendrils were searching for something to cling on to. A decorated pine Christmas tree was in the window, fairy lights flickering.

When Mum pulled up out the front, she asked if I wanted my dinner put aside.

'I'll eat here.'

'Greasy fish and chips again?'
'They're not greasy,' I said.
'It's your waistline, not mine.'
I closed the car door and Mum accelerated away.