'Delightful... filled with joie de vivre and love.' MEREDITH JAFFE

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BIRDS of a FEATHER

Would you open your heart to fate?

Chapter 1

Beth

I spent much of my childhood fantasising that I was adopted. While other kids were pretending to be princesses and superheroes, I was using my stuffed toys to play out a scenario where I found out there had been a mix-up at the hospital when I was born. It was the only way I could make sense of how I came to be a member of my family.

Now, at thirty years old, I no longer played with my toys, of course. But I was still searching for an explanation for my progeny.

My parents exuded an unbridled magnetism that made people want to be around them. Mum – an artist – had recently been commissioned to paint a mural on a toilet block in a park near their place. So many people stopped by to see her while she was working on it that the council received traffic complaints. They rigged up lights so she could paint at night, but then traffic issues became after-dark noise infringements when her friends and contacts descended for a party in the park. For Dad – a musician – a trip to the local shops to run even the most banal errand usually turned into a roaming street party, which, more often than not, involved an impromptu jam session.

Our surname – Dwyer – was used more as a descriptive noun than a proper one.

'Jarrah has such charisma; she's such a Dwyer,' they'd say.

'Did you see Elijah perform? He was amazing; he's such a Dwyer,' they'd gush.

'Have you met the *other* child? She's not a typical Dwyer at all,' they'd remark.

To be fair, I didn't know where 'they' ended and my inner dialogue started, but the sentiment rang in my ears like a case of unrelenting tinnitus. Being the filler foliage in a bouquet of blooms meant people who knew my family related to me in one of two ways. They'd either forget me entirely (I'd lost count of how many times people had said 'I didn't realise Rosie and Thorn had *three* children'), or they'd treat me like I was popular by proxy.

Even from a young age, I knew that when classmates asked for a playdate at my house, they were not seeking out my company (playing with ant farms and DIY crosswords has a limited appeal, apparently). They were hoping for a 'Dwyer experience'. A few times (and most likely out of obligation) my classmates would return the invite, and I got an insight into how their families lived.

I loved that they ate 'normal' food for dinner, not cocktail snacks, takeaway or 'Rosie's surprise', which was a bowl of cereal. I loved that when you rang their doorbell, a tinny chime sang through the house to signal a visitor had arrived. Our doorbell was an old bicycle horn covered in spider webs that sounded like it signalled the punchline in a slapstick circus performance. I loved that their parents wore 'normal' clothes and had 'normal' jobs. And I loved when their parents announced it was time for bed and then read us a story and tucked us in. My parents had raised us with a focus on self-determination and left it to us to choose when we went to sleep. (It wasn't nearly as much fun as you'd think.)

Fortunately, I had Gran – Elise Evans, nee Simpson. And, on the day that changed the trajectory of my life, I drove to Gran's house to collect her for Saturday lunch with my family, as I did every week, feeling grateful to have her as an ally. I was also pleased I'd be able to use her bathroom to wash my hands and rid them of the greasy, smelly petrol film that had coated them since I'd filled up my car – a white 1990 hatchback which was older than me.

My car had a few cosmetic blemishes and mechanical quirks but, more often than not, it got me from point A to B and back again without incident. The lock on the driver's side was broken, which meant I had to climb across the passenger seat to get in and out. Mostly, this was just a mild inconvenience, although, once, I did accidentally disengage the handbrake as I manoeuvred my legs into the footwell. I managed to stop the car before it rolled too far down the hill it was parked on, and perfected the act of scissoring my legs over the centre console so it wouldn't happen again. A few months earlier, on a particularly wet day – the sort when the ability to see out of one's windscreen was crucial to safely navigating the road – the windscreen wiper lever snapped off in my hand. Fortunately, I still had a screwdriver in the car from when the rear-view mirror fell off, so I jimmied it into the cavity and developed a technique to manually activate the wipers. It often took a couple of attempts to engage, so it wasn't ideal for sudden downpours, but it did the job.

Gran's house – specifically, her garden – was one of my favourite places in the world. Well before local councils gave cash incentives for people to plant native gardens, or gardening for wildlife was in vogue, Gran had established a spectacular native haven in an otherwise suburban concrete jungle.

At first (and maybe second and third) glance, the front garden looked haphazard and unorganised. Chaotic, even. But Gran had thoughtfully introduced every plant and arranged every log and stone to provide a sanctuary for birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects. Carpets of pigface,

with their pretty pink flowers and plump green leaves, sprawled over the ground, while the dainty white flowers of creeping boobialla scented the air in spring and summer. Bronze rambler and other creepers wound up a retaining wall made from quarry stones, which served as a multistorey apartment building for a thriving population of lizards.

The sharp spines and prickly leaves of the grevilleas and hakeas might have looked inhospitable, but they offered birds a refuge from prowling neighbourhood cats. The bottlebrush and banksia shrubs along the fence served as an all-you-can-eat buffet for birds and bees.

The birdbath in the centre of the garden attracted local magpies, willie wagtails and honeyeaters that splashed and ruffled in the water and fed on the insects it lured. After rain, the pond at its base was a stage for motorbike frogs that performed like an unruly orchestra in which every member vied for a lead part.

After dark, when the diurnal creatures had turned in for the evening, a southern boobook owl that my Gran had named Liber (the Latin word for 'book') emerged from the shadows. It would quietly announce itself with a 'boo-book' call, before assuming its position as nighttime sentinel in the firewood banksia.

The pièce de résistance of Gran's garden was the three-armed grasstree, or balga, as it's also known, which she'd salvaged from a development site. It was impossible to know exactly how old it was, but given the species grows as little as two centimetres per year, it could have been up to 600 years old. Its vibrant green spines contrasted with the charred black trunk; an ode to the hundreds of years it stood in its fire-prone environment.

As I made my way along the path, stepping carefully over a trail of ants and spotting a honeyeater overhead, I could feel my shoulders relax. Gran's house was one of the few places where I felt I could be myself.

My happiest childhood memories were of Wednesday afternoons, when Mum taught art classes and Gran collected us from school. While Jarrah and Elijah lounged on Gran's mid-century settee watching cartoons

and eating her delicious cinnamon twists or the Iced VoVos she bought especially for us, Gran and I could be found in her garden, or with our noses in natural history books.

One year, Gran gave me a flower press for my birthday. I carefully selected suitable specimens, which I gently placed between the cardboard sheets like other girls my age might tuck their dolls into bed. Then I would fit the top and bottom boards, replace the wingnuts and begin the excruciating wait for them to dry. After about ten days, I would open the flower press, and lift off the cardboard to reveal the perfectly preserved specimens. Gran – a botanist with the state's herbarium – would help me tape the specimen into a flower journal, describe its features, document its origin, and record its scientific and common name. By the time I had finished primary school, I had created an impressive botanical reference library.

Gran continued to collect me from school long after I was old enough to walk home by myself. By then, I had the whole batch of twists or the entire packet of Iced VoVos to myself because Jarrah and Elijah had given up afternoons with Gran in favour of hanging out in the local park or shopping centre with their friends. When I left school, I scheduled my university and work timetables so I could still visit her on Wednesday afternoons. It was the highlight of my week.

I reached Gran's front porch and called out to her as I opened the front door.

'Hello, darling.' She poked her head into the hallway. 'I won't be a tick.'

'No rush, Gran. I'm just going to wash my hands.'

I walked down the corridor towards the bathroom and breathed in the smell of the house – of Gran. Her house was perfumed by a subtle hint of dusty books, a whiff of her homemade (and sworn-by) vinegar cleaning solution and a trace of the Pond's Cold Cream that she'd used since forever. It used to smell like Grandpa's cigarettes, too, but that smell

had faded in the months after he died. The shelves, cabinets and mantles in her house groaned under the weight of the ornaments and trinkets she'd collected from op shops, garage sales and on her travels. And her walls were covered in paintings of flowers, birds, seascapes, landscapes, portraits, still lifes and life studies.

My favourite painting of hers hung at the end of the corridor near the bathroom. The painting depicted two adult Gouldian finches perched on a grass plant. The hues of their resplendent yellow bellies, violet throats and green caps had faded a little over the years, but their colours were still striking. A third bird – a comparatively dull-brown juvenile – was sheltering behind the outstretched wing of one of its parents. When I was younger, I would look to that juvenile and wonder if I, too, would transform into a more colourful version of myself as I matured. A glance down at my black jeans, black Converse runners and black T-shirt indicated that I had not.

I washed my hands, dried them on the stiff, sun-dried handtowel and glanced behind me at the tiny bathtub where Gran had told us fairytales as she gave us our weekly hair wash on Wednesday afternoons. I hunched to inspect my reflection in the mirror, which was positioned at the perfect height for my five-foot-one Gran and no one else. I used my still-damp hands to smooth the stray hairs that had escaped the low ponytail I'd tied at the nape of my neck, and performed an inspection of my chocolate-brown hair for any grey hairs that might have appeared since I plucked two out last week.

After leaving the bathroom, I found Gran waiting by the front door. I leaned down to hug her; her tiny shoulders slipped under my armpits and her short-cropped hair gently tickled underneath my chin. She always seemed tiny; I was taller than her by the time I was twelve. But lately she seemed even smaller, and the hunch she had developed through years of looking down a microscope had become more pronounced.

She had a light-pink silk scarf adorned with flowers draped around

her neck and was wearing a pair of silver gumleaf earrings from her extensive collection.

'You look nice,' I said. 'I like the earrings.'

She smiled, and jiggled her head to make her earrings dance below her lobes. 'You ready?' she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders defeatedly.

On our way out, we passed by 'Herrick', who Gran had rescued from a garage sale the previous month. Herrick was a jackalope – a taxidermied head of a rabbit, fitted with a large pair of forked deer antlers and mounted on a dark timber plate. Apparently, the myth of the jackalope began when American colonists spotted rabbits with warty growths on their heads and then some crafty taxidermists from Wyoming attached a pair of antlers to a rabbit's head and sold them for a lark. Now they hung in bars and tourist haunts all over Wyoming – and above Gran's fireplace.

'Goodbye, Herrick,' she called merrily.

'Goodbye, Herrick,' I echoed.

As silly as it was, I was a little jealous of him. He didn't have to deal with my family.