

One

Lottie Fairchild stood barefoot on the front verandah of the little old cottage at the top of the hill and sipped her morning coffee. She loved this view, her hometown stretching from the top of the road down through the main street and along to where the old church sat, stoic and proud, at the other end. The church had once been the hub of the small town, in its church-on-Sunday era, until it suddenly wasn't and the parish decided to sell it off. Now the tourists flocked to it for its cafe and restaurant like the parishioners had once done for sermons. These days, the only sermon that took place in there was the occasional author talk that the book club managed to throw together.

The cool morning air smelled like eucalyptus and wattle, and Lottie breathed in deeply. Soon it would start to heat up, the sound of traffic would replace the call of magpies

and the odd kookaburra laughing and the brief moment of serenity would be gone.

The little cottage, with its fresh lick of paint and the newly weeded garden her grandmother had planted years before, looked like something from another time. It was old—built when the first pioneers settled Banalla, around 1855, when small towns had started popping up all across the country, almost overnight, during the gold rush era. In the hallway was a framed photo of the house that had been taken in the late 1800s. It showed a horse and cart parked out front, and a family was posing on the front verandah. In the photo, the newly sawn timber hadn't yet been painted and there was a rustic, almost primitive look to the little place. Lottie loved staring at the image, imagining herself somehow thrown back in time.

She loved history—always had. She had a passion for anything old, which was why, when her mother decided to sell the family antiques store, Lottie had left her government HR job in Sydney and returned home to save it. She couldn't bear the thought of the store being run by anyone else—it had been her grandmother's pride and joy. Not to mention a dream come true for her. There hadn't been enough money in the business for two people, but for one it brought in a tidy income. Lottie had grand plans for growth over the next few years, going into larger furniture and more expensive collectables.

As she finished the last of her coffee, Lottie headed inside, the screen door giving the slightest of squeaks as it

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closed behind her. Over the few years since she'd been back, she'd been lovingly restoring the old house to its original condition—or as close as she could. The results were stunning, with the original timber flooring, doors and timber panelling finally able to shine through from beneath generations of paint—especially the last coat, a canary yellow her mother had decided would cheer up the place. Lottie loved her mum—she really did—but they were like chalk and cheese.

Lottie's gran, Rosemary, had been a raging hippie prior to marrying a handsome soldier she'd met while attending a peace rally in Sydney. Six months after her new husband had been shipped off to Vietnam, he'd been killed in action and Rosemary, pregnant and widowed, had returned to Banalla to raise her child. Hannah had, from all accounts, been a bit of a wild child growing up, and at eighteen she'd left home and headed for the city.

As a child, Lottie had never seen her mother as anything other than a city dweller. Hannah had only returned to Banalla to drop off and pick up Lottie when she'd stay with her gran during school holidays. Hannah had been a hard worker, working as a barmaid during the day and cleaning offices at night to provide for the two of them, but she had never given up the party girl life. Hannah had never been the stay-at-home and work-at-the-school-canteen kind of mum. She didn't believe in marriage and she rarely had boyfriends long enough to bring them home. Lottie's father had been a one-night stand back in the nineties. Hannah had never kept Lottie's conception a secret—she'd

always been open about the fact her father had been some stranger who played no part in their lives—and the two of them had been just fine.

Hannah had been a social butterfly, constantly needing fun and new people around her. There was always a party at their place on weekends. Lottie didn't mind. Her mum always had plenty of friends with kids and she was never lonely. She only ever remembered happy times with people dancing, laughing and having fun, although, looking back now, some of that could be attributed to copious amounts of drinking and the odd joint that most of the adults enjoyed.

Hannah had always been a good mum. There were plenty of cuddles and bedtime stories, and the odd crazy adventure—spontaneous late-night road trips to watch the stars over a moonlight-bathed beach, sleeping in the back of their battered old station wagon, just the two of them. It was only once Lottie had gotten older that she sometimes felt more like the adult than the child. She started to turn down the late-night trips to the beach and camp-outs in favour of studying and worrying about a career. Hannah's free-spirited ways occasionally clashing with Lottie's more practical personality, and she and her mum had drifted apart for a few years.

When Rosemary became ill, Lottie visited when she could, between lectures and exams, but Hannah had come back to Banalla to take over the shop and ended up staying. For a long time, Lottie couldn't imagine her independent, city-dwelling mother back here in quiet little Banalla, but over the years,

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her mother had slowed down and become drawn to spirituality. She gave up the wild parties and instead, embraced clean living with a focus on healing.

Years later, when Rosemary passed, Hannah decided to sell the shop and follow her own dreams, buying a small property on the outskirts of town and creating a wellness retreat, Riverstone Serenity Retreat and Day Spa.

Lottie had never seen her mother happier. The only thing that worried her was the fact her mother was adamant she would never fall in love. It was about this point when she realised her mother's choices in the past had been somewhat . . . extreme. One day, as they were finalising the handing over of the shop, she asked her mother about it.

'The women in our family are cursed,' Hannah had told Lottie matter-of-factly. 'Or rather, our relationships are. You know the stories.'

'Yes, but cursed?' Lottie replied, sending her mother a doubtful look.

'It's true.'

'I know that's what Gran thought, but there's no such thing as a curse, Mum.'

Hannah gave a slight tilt of her head. 'Believe what you want, but the record speaks for itself. Women in our family have a habit of losing their husbands.'

Lottie started to scoff at her mother but then realised she was serious.

'Your grandmother was married for six months before she was widowed,' Hannah said, picking up the delicate teacup

to sip her herbal tea, ‘and *her* mother was only married a year. Not to mention the two generations before them. Every generation of women in our family has soon become a widow, left to bring up a child after their husbands have died.’

‘That doesn’t necessarily prove anything. My grandfather was killed in Vietnam and *your* grandfather was killed in a mining accident,’ Lottie pointed out. ‘Both were kind of high-risk occupations. All the way back through history, wars, disease and work accidents in a pre- O, H and S era meant that lots of people died young. Besides, your grandmother remarried and went on to have more kids, and her husband outlived her, if you recall.’

‘Maybe, but the pattern can’t be a coincidence.’

‘Then I guess we have to hope all the bad luck has run out by now,’ Lottie said with a shrug.

‘Oh, I’ve made sure of it,’ Hannah said breezily.

‘You’ve made sure of it?’ Lottie asked slowly.

‘I’m not passing down the ring to you. I’ve planned that it will be buried with me, so you’ll be fine.’

‘Gran’s opal ring?’

When Rosemary had passed away, in the belongings she’d left Hannah was her beautiful opal ring, which had been passed down through generations of her family.

‘The common factor in all those tragedies was that ring,’ Hannah said. ‘Once it’s been handed down to you, you find true love . . . and it gets taken away.’

Lottie remembered the ring. It was a huge blue opal, and she’d been fascinated by the way it changed colours in the

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light—the little flashes of colour almost seemed to move and swirl inside the gorgeous stone, and as a child it had somehow felt magical. It wasn't a piece you wore every day, but whenever her gran got dressed up or went out to a special occasion, the ring had always been on her finger.

That ring had always meant so much to Gran. But her mother had never worn it, and it was stored in the safe custody box in the bank, where it was apparently destined to remain.

'Your gran refused to believe it too, but I'm telling you—it's the ring.'

'A ring can't be cursed,' Lottie said, trying not to roll her eyes.

'I have a healthy respect for anything supposedly cursed. The same way I wouldn't use a Ouija board at a séance. Why tempt fate?'

Lottie didn't particularly care if she ever got the ring or not—if her mother wanted to be buried with it, then so be it, although she thought it a tad dramatic—but what did concern her was that her mother was so worried about this stupid curse that it had shaped her beliefs in love and relationships to the point that she refused to allow herself to fall in love. *That* was not healthy.

She hated the thought of her vivacious, beautiful mother spending the rest of her life alone simply because she believed finding someone to love would somehow kill them.