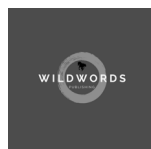


CROSS MY HEART - FIRST THREE CHAPTERS ONLY

SAMPLE

PAM COOK



PROLOGUE

Do you remember the time we found that baby bird?

We were sitting on a rock by the creek. Cicadas were singing and the bush mint was making my nose itch. There was a shrieking noise from over near the scribbly gum. I jumped up and ran over, and there he was all puffed up in a ball. You reached down and picked him up. A magpie, you said, or maybe a butcher bird. It was hard to tell because he was so young. His body was grey, but his tail feathers were black and white. You held him so gently, and he stopped squawking and watched us, with eyes like rusty pebbles. There was a cut in his chest and he'd been bleeding. We looked around, but his parents were gone. He was an orphan, you said. I held out the bottom of my T-shirt like it was a hammock and you rested him in there, and he just sat like that all the way home.

Remember we dug up worms from the garden and tried to feed him? Except he wouldn't eat. We put him in a shoebox with some straw and I tried to stay awake to look after him, but I fell asleep. When I woke up he was still and cold.

Like you.

CHAPTER 1

Even now, the click of a closing door could make her flinch. One long, deep breath, and the familiar citrusy scent of furniture polish was enough to pull her back.

Home.

Safe.

A faint glow softened the darkness beyond the hallway. The proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. She hurried towards it, the heels of her boots beating a staccato rhythm on the polished timber, the wheels of her suitcase drumming along behind. She stuffed her keys into the handbag dragging on her shoulder, dumped it on the living-room floor and heaved a sigh of relief. Her hands found the nape of her neck, rubbing out the kinks—the usual long-haul gremlins. Something cracked beneath her fingertips—sinews, bones, muscle, maybe all three—and she groaned. A massage would be perfect right about now.

Finally, a movement from the far corner of the room. Josh spun around in his chair, pulling the headphones from his ears, the screen of his laptop shining brighter as he turned.

‘Shit, Tess, you scared the hell out of me. I didn’t even hear you come in.’

The knot between her shoulder blades tightened. ‘Yeah, I noticed.’ She dropped her hands to rest by her sides. The last thing she wanted right now was an argument. ‘What are you doing working so late?’

‘Trying to make some headway on this project. Not getting very far.’ He swivelled his chair back to the desk in front of him. ‘How was the conference?’

Same old question, but at least he bothered to ask. ‘Fine.’ Same old answer, but it was too late to bother with details. She walked over and stood beside him. Once upon a time, she would have laid an arm across his shoulder, leaned down and brushed a kiss to his lips. Once upon a time, Josh would have greeted her at the airport—or at least the door—with a dozen red roses. She’d never had the heart to tell him the scent of them made her gag. It was crazy how some things never changed even when so much time had passed. She swallowed down the burn in the back of her throat.

‘Did you dazzle them all with your brilliance?’ A smile in his voice. His eyes glued to the screen.

She coughed. ‘Naturally.’

‘Have you eaten?’

‘I picked at a few things on the plane.’ To be honest, she could do with something decent in her stomach, something that didn’t come from a foil container and smell like it belonged in a soup kitchen. Something they could share over a chilled glass of wine while they sat side by side on the couch, catching up on their respective weeks. Laughing. The fridge, no doubt, would be empty, and in all probability she’d be eating alone.

She gave her neck another twist, closed her eyes and waited

for the pop. Blinked her way out of her daydream. It was late and they were both tired. 'Might just have a shower and collapse into bed.'

Josh half turned, one of his hands hovering on the touch pad, the other cradling his chin. Had he sensed the note of disappointment in her voice? Was he about to shut up shop and suggest a nightcap?

'What?' His head angled slightly in her direction.

'Nothing.'

'I won't be long.' He was already back to work, fingers tapping against the shiny surface of the desk.

How many times had she asked him not to do that? And it was a lie, of course, about not being too long. He'd be up all night. As always when a deadline was looming. Then again, when wasn't one?

She lifted her suitcase, a cramp stabbing at the arch of her foot, and grabbed the bundle of unopened mail from the island bench. A veritable mountain.

Was it that damned hard to open a few envelopes?

She glanced back to where he sat, completely absorbed with the numbers on his spreadsheet. She could strip off and dance naked around the room and he probably wouldn't even notice. The suitcase thumped against each step as she dragged it upstairs. She didn't bother lifting it to dampen the noise. Josh was totally in 'the zone', with any extraneous distractions, including his wife, completely blocked out. It wasn't like she could complain. They were as bad as each other when it came to work. Focused. Determined. Driven. It was what had drawn them together in the first place. Five years of marriage and they were both still the same in that sphere of their lives.

Even if other things had changed.

There was no point thinking about it all now. Not when the spray of hot water on her skin was beckoning, closely followed by the cool weight of high-thread-count sheets against her arms. She tossed the mail onto the bed, the dozen or more envelopes falling like a hand of cards across the crisp white doona. Probably bills or bank statements; nothing that couldn't wait. She undressed and headed for the ensuite, her bra and knickers hitting the tiled floor as she stepped into the shower. Hot water, almost scalding, streamed onto her scalp and she moaned. She sounded positively R-rated. Luckily there was no one around to hear.

Certainly not Josh.

Oh, the irony. Over a week, she'd been away. They'd shared plenty of phone messages, some of which could only be described as sexting, and now here they were under the same roof barely able to utter two words to each other. Not that she was up for anything anyway, it's just that the option would have been nice. Having *some* sort of conversation would have been even nicer. How long had it been since they'd talked about anything meaningful? She tipped her head back and let the heat pummel her face, to wash away her question. A few more minutes of mindless soaking and she turned off the taps and reached for a towel.

White, thick, fluffy and perfectly arranged on the rail. She gave her body a quick once-over before rubbing it across her head. As a kid she'd been scolded for going to bed with wet hair, told she would catch 'her death of cold', whatever the hell that meant. It had stayed with her, though. That grandmotherly warning still niggled behind her closed lids whenever she defiantly pressed her freshly washed head against the pillow. Now that it was cut short it hardly mattered. A quick shimmy and just like that, it was almost dry. The bathroom was surprisingly clean considering Josh had been home alone. Everything gleaming and in its place—no

smears on the mirror, floor without a mark, the lid down on the toilet seat. Of course. It was Thursday, so the cleaner had been. Yes, it was an extravagance she'd justified to her mother on more than one occasion; the office hours they both kept didn't leave much time for household chores. Hard work might be its own reward, but a floor you could eat off and clothes pressed by an ironing service weren't too shabby, either.

She tossed the towel in the laundry basket and pulled on her pyjama top. The usual remnants of airsickness lingered from the flight; she knew they'd be gone by morning. Once she'd had a good night's sleep and sorted out her body clock.

Lamp on, light off.

There was something so comforting about your own bed. Even if you were in it alone. She sank into it, pulling the covers up to her chin as she curled into a ball on her side and closed her eyes. Serious bliss. A rustling noise had her eyelids flickering: the unopened envelopes scattering to the floor. No problem, they could be dealt with in the morning. Everything was easier to deal with in the bright light of day.



'MISSED YOU.'

Josh's breath was damp on her cheek and the evidence supporting his words firm against the small of her back. Tess shifted forward, struggling against the heaviness of an arm draped across her middle. She cracked open one eyelid. Then another. Watery pre-dawn light leaked through the blinds. How could it be tomorrow already? Hadn't she just gone to sleep?

She reached over and switched off her bedside lamp. 'God, what time is it?' Her voice had the groggy, slurred sound of

someone who'd stayed at the bar long after closing time. Jet lag was a bitch.

'Time we said a proper hello.' A hand rubbed at the underside of her breast and his mouth against the curve of her neck made her rouse. She could argue it was his fault their reunion last night had been more like colleagues passing in the coffee room than a married couple who were actually pleased to see each other. But at least they were connecting now.

She closed her eyes and drifted as his fingers floated across her skin, a warm, familiar thrum between her legs. Blood heated her cheeks, and the other parts of her body with which Josh was quickly becoming reacquainted. She dropped her hand to join with his. Her habit of wearing no underwear to bed and his of sleeping naked, often led to early-morning sessions. Not that she minded. Not at all. She pulled the singlet over her head, tossed it onto the floor and rolled over to where he lay, propped up on one elbow.

'Hello there.' She looked up at him, a smile forming.

He replied with a wicked curl of his mouth and a raised brow. His eyes, normally a sweet shade of caramel, had darkened into something more like treacle. Something in which she could happily drown. 'Is that the best you can do?'

She ran a hand greedily through the silky strands of hair at the back of his neck and followed up her earlier perfunctory greeting with a longer, deeper kiss.

'Hmm ... that's more like it.'

His body engulfed hers and she arched into him. Gripping his shoulders, she hooked one calf around his and gave him a quick shove, flipping them both over so she was the one looking down. She reached between his legs, positioning him in just the right spot, and with one single, sharp upward thrust he was inside her.

Her chest billowed. She flattened her hands against the hollows below his shoulders and he rocked beneath her until they became a sweaty, ragged tangle of limbs, and she was completely overwhelmed by the glorious bone-shattering ache she'd been chasing. Josh followed quickly after, his palms searing her hips, his limbs rippling. She collapsed on top of him, her forehead nestled against the dark stubble of his jaw. Even after hours at the computer, minimal sleep and a sweaty round of wake-up sex, he had that just-washed, deliciously minty smell.

She rolled over and lay on top of the sheets, her hands tracking the rise and fall of her ribcage as she waited for her heart rate to return to somewhere this side of normal. The room heaved with their tandem panting. A horn bleated from the street outside, and another echoed back. The world was out there, ready and waiting, demanding attention, but she remained still, eyes closed, willing it away.

'Now *that's* a good morning.' Josh sat upright, reached for his phone from the bedside table and switched off the beeping alarm. He looked like a Cheshire cat. 'Best I've had all week.'

She stretched her arms above her head with a languid yawn. 'Certainly beats *Good morning, ma'am, this is your five am wake-up call.*'

'You've got the accent aced.' He laughed. 'I'd better get moving. I've got an eight o'clock meeting.' He threw her a wink before sauntering off for a shower, wiggling his bare backside more than was strictly necessary.

Tess snuggled back under the covers, any sign of the tension her body had stored up during the flight—and afterwards—now vanished. Sex had always brought them closer, stitched them back together even when their relationship had frayed. Her mind leap-frogged to those looser threads—the days, nights and weeks that

sometimes rolled by when they barely saw each other. Hours spent working or doing their own thing: Josh with his cycling crew while she procrastinated about the gym by watching mindless reality-TV shows. More and more it felt like the seam holding them together was splitting, yet they were always able to patch it up with a workout between the sheets. It was how they found their way back to each other.

But was it enough?

She stared at the vacant space beside her, placed her hand on his empty pillow, the cotton cold beneath her palm. A weight heavier than the doona settled on her. She shook it away. There was nothing to worry about. Life had its ups and downs. They were all good.

Something crinkled under the sole of her foot as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed: the mail she'd been too tired to deal with last night. She gathered it up and shuffled through the envelopes. As predicted most were bank statements addressed to them both, one was an electricity bill—overdue—and a few were for TDS. A thrill tripped through her veins. It was the same whenever she saw the acronym, especially in logo-form, the letters entwined with a rough sketch of a heart: *Team-Driven Solutions*. A play on her own initials joined by the *heart* of her own human resources consultancy, which just happened to be going gangbusters. Not bad for a thirty-five-year-old. Even if it was Plan B. One last envelope fell from her lap as she stood. This one addressed to Ms T. De Santis, her full name, and while it looked official, it didn't seem to be a bill. She slid her finger under the seal and ripped, unfolding the single-page document.

FACS, Department of Family and Community Services.

Why would they be writing to her? Her stomach hollowed as she skimmed over the first few lines, and she dropped back onto

the bed. She needed to read from the beginning, but each word sucked her a little further out of her own skin, so by the time she reached the end of the letter she was watching herself from somewhere outside her body.

She stared down at the signature and the department-speak at the bottom of the page, the muscles in her chest tightening as if a too-small elastic band had been wrapped too many times around her heart.

This could not be happening.

No.

It was *not* happening.

She folded the paper back into the torn envelope and placed it deliberately on the bedside table, pinching the points of her elbows tightly as she crossed her arms, holding herself together.

‘Tess?’ Josh’s voice came to her through a cotton-wool fog. ‘What’s wrong?’

Somehow he was right there, standing by her side, already showered, the brown waves of his hair wet and towel-ruffled.

‘It’s ...’ She tried to pick up the letter, but it fell from her grasp like a hot coal. Her hand flew to her mouth. If she didn’t say the words then they wouldn’t be true, would they?

‘Tess ... what is it?’

As much as she didn’t want it to be real it was right there at her feet, black print blurring into a haze of grey. She pressed her fingers against her palms, scoring the soft pads of flesh with her nails.

‘It’s Skye.’ The name was foreign on her tongue after all these years, like a rare fruit she’d tasted long ago, in another lifetime, and then forgotten. But it wasn’t as strange as the answer to Josh’s question. It came out quickly in a strangled cough, a bitter seed she couldn’t stand to swallow. ‘She’s dead.’

CHAPTER 2

A crescent moon of white arced at the base of her thumbnail, below the navy gloss. Regular manicures might draw attention away from her ravaged cuticles, but they didn't change her disgusting habit. One day she might stop chewing the skin until it was raw and red. One day. Not today.

Josh leaned over, picked up the letter and sat beside her, the paper taut between his hands. 'Jesus.'

Somewhere outside a garbage truck rumbled, the bang and clatter of bins reverberating like a set of cymbals. Tess coiled back in on herself as the noise ebbed away.

'What happened?' Josh's voice was muffled, as if he was speaking from a distance. 'Tess, when did you last talk to her?'

She shook her head and let out a long, slow breath. 'I'm not sure. Six months ... longer maybe.' It was July now. Had it been this year or last when she and Skye had spoken? 'She wrote to me, a while ago.' But was that letter before or after the Christmas card? The one she'd replied to with a promise to visit soon. The same

promise she'd been making for the last eight years. Her stomach plummeted.

Josh moved closer and tried to draw her into his embrace. She pulled herself upright, and he settled for resting his arm across her shoulders. 'I'm really sorry. I know how much you cared about her.'

Did he know? Really know? How could he when Josh had only met her friend once, when she had barely mentioned Skye in the entire time they'd been together. Not talking about her didn't mean she didn't think about Skye, though. Her memory hurdled over the intervening years back to earlier days, a series of disconnected images flickering like an old home-movie reel to a soundtrack of childhood laughter. Those dark spiral curls, the pale, freckled face, eyes that shifted like the sea on a hot summer afternoon—clear and blue one minute, grey and stormy the next.

'Guess you'll have to call them first thing. The letter's dated almost a week ago.'

The letter. She clenched her teeth until her jaw ached. If he'd bothered to tell her about it on the phone, she might have asked him to open it then and there. She jerked at her shoulder, forcing his arm to fall away.

'So what will you say?'

'I'm sure you have some suggestions.' The words came out in a hiss and Josh sprang from the bed, the towel around his waist slipping to his knees. He secured it back into place, hooking one thumb into the fold below his hip. 'Well, I mean you'll have to tell them we can't do it.' He was floundering now, flapping the letter around in the air, but a sharper, more defiant edge had crept into his voice. 'You either do that over the phone or go in and see this person. End of story.'

He'd already made up his mind. Presumed she agreed. That

piece of paper in his hand was asking about *her* intentions in regard to Grace, asking if she would be honouring the agreement *she* had made to be the child's legal guardian. Skye was dead; her daughter was now Tess's responsibility. This was her decision.

She pushed herself up from the bed. They were almost exactly the same height when she wasn't in heels, making it easy to stare him down. 'So we're not even going to discuss it?'

'Tess, come on.' He dipped his head, raked a hand through his hair and snorted—actually snorted—as if this was some kind of joke. 'There's no way we can take on someone else's kid.'

'It's not just *someone*. It's Skye.'

'No, it's not Skye. It's her daughter. Shit, the kid is ten years old. When was the last time you even saw her?'

She couldn't look at him anymore. Couldn't stand that I-know-better-than-you jut of his chin and the tell-me-I'm-wrong tone in his voice. She covered her bare breasts with one arm and bit down hard on the inside of her mouth. The last time she'd seen Grace the little girl had been a pre-schooler, but so what? It didn't change the facts. 'That's not the point. I signed the papers when she was born.'

'Well, that was your first mistake.' And right on cue, there it was, the pointing finger. 'You should have thought it through more carefully in the first place. That was a legal document.'

'Skye didn't have anyone else.'

'A simple no would have worked.'

His same old attitude, everything black and white. She was the one who'd signed the papers, made the promise, not Josh. This was not his call to make. She wanted to grab a handful of that dripping hair and yank it out of his stupid fucking head. Not that it would change anything. Josh had total tunnel vision when it came to his life plan, and right now he was on track to corporate

stardom. Nothing—and no one—would be getting in his way. She whipped her top off the bed and pulled it on, shoving past him as she stalked to the window.

The padding of feet on carpet signalled his retreat to the ensuite. Tess folded her arms and peered down at the street. People were out there as if nothing had changed. Women in coats and scarves braced against the winter wind. Men in smart suits striding along the pavement, mobiles to their ears, brows furrowed as if the future of the world depended on their every word. All of them going about their lives, oblivious to what had happened. Skye was dead and yet everything outside was completely normal.

Across the road Rocco, her favourite barista, popped up an umbrella out the front of his cafe. A young woman in a short denim skirt, black top, fishnet tights and Docs pulled up a chair. Rocco tossed his head and laughed at whatever joke passed between them, before he gave an exaggerated bow and ambled back inside, leaving the girl to her phone. A peacock tattoo covered the bare skin of her upper chest. Her short-cropped hair was dyed the darkest shade of black. Boots and tats. Almost a replica of Tess's own teenage self. Light years ago, well before Skye had asked her to be Grace's guardian. The request had seemed so lovely at the time, but she'd never considered it legally binding. Could she actually turn around now, a decade later and change her mind? Apparently, Josh thought that was perfectly fine. From the sounds of the opening and closing of drawers in the room behind her, he'd already moved on with his day. She turned to watch him do up his tie in the full-length mirror inside the wardrobe door.

Almost fully dressed now, he stuffed his wallet into the back pocket of his perfectly pressed pants and shrugged on his suit jacket. 'Tess. I get that you're upset, but you need to be practical.

We both work crazy hours, live in an apartment, don't have any children of our own. There's no way we're equipped to look after a kid we don't know, who doesn't know us. I've never even laid eyes on her.'

She edged back towards the window, let his words percolate through the layers of emotion the letter had exposed. *Was* it stupid to even be entertaining the idea? She'd really only seen Grace a few times herself: when Skye came down to the city to buy her first lot of school supplies, briefly as a toddler at Skye's grandmother's funeral service, and before that in those early weeks of her life as a newborn. A tiny baby with fresh pink skin and that puzzled where-am-I expression. Totally helpless and completely dependent on her mother. Who could she depend on now if Tess didn't step up? 'She's going to be fostered out to total strangers.'

'Babe, to her, we are total strangers.' The cloying scent of his Armani aftershave was suddenly too strong, too close, but at least he was smart enough not to attempt to touch her. 'Don't you think she'd be better off with a real family? People who actually know what they're doing.'

Tess closed her eyes as the shrapnel from his 'real family' grenade cut deep. Kids had never been on his agenda. He'd made that perfectly clear the minute they'd become engaged. He didn't want to risk creating another broken home, he'd said, like the one he'd come from, and it had suited her at the time, when the concept of bringing innocent children into the world had made her insides quiver. They hadn't discussed it since, had rolled their eyes and changed the subject when others had brought up the b-word, but never seriously talked about it again. So when she'd married him, hadn't she implicitly agreed to the no-kids deal? Anyway, they were a pair of workaholics who had hardly any free time and lived in the inner city with designer furniture and white

walls. None of it was conducive to raising a child, and if it didn't work out it wouldn't be fair to dump Grace back into foster care, would it?

Across the street the peacock girl's perfectly gelled hair gleamed in the winter sunlight. In ten years' time she might regret that tattoo, or other choices she'd made. People's lives can take such different directions to what they'd imagined. The Tess who'd signed the guardianship papers had been living out some kind of Disney godmother fantasy, but now that bubble had well and truly burst, leaving behind the cold, hard stain of reality.

'I'll call the woman ...' She cleared her throat. 'Tell her to make other arrangements.'

'I am sorry about Skye.' He squeezed her shoulder, as if that was supposed to make her feel better. 'Maybe they can tell you more about what happened with her when you call. It would be good for you to have some closure.'

Closure. Psycho-babble for 'The End'. Everything all neatly packed up in a box, stored away and forgotten, exactly how Josh liked it. The bedside clock clicked over. Seven-thirty. Time was slipping away. Josh needed to get moving, and she needed space. 'You'd better go.'

He pressed a kiss to her cheek and was gone, no further urging required. In an instant the room, the whole apartment, was quiet, the kind of quiet she imagined that followed the felling of an ancient tree in a forest or the deafening seconds of silence that come after a raging, calamitous storm.

Or perhaps before.

She made her way to the bathroom. Only ten hours ago, she'd stepped into the same shower and scrubbed away the exhaustion of the flight. Now it was something much deeper she needed to remove, something no amount of body wash or exfoliant could

cleanse. How was it possible that someone was here on the earth one moment and gone the next? *Skye*. The letter didn't even give the cause of death. A razor-sharp pain pierced her chest, swelling into a lump stuck deep in the base of her throat. She opened her mouth, tried to sluice it away, but it refused to budge. She'd always meant to get in touch, meant to check in on her friend and see if she was doing okay. Plan an actual visit. Now it was too late.

Hunched over, naked and dripping, she watched the water swirl around the drain and disappear. A sob broke from her mouth, echoing against the tiles. There was only one thing she could do: rip off the Band-Aid, the faster the better. The FACS office from where the letter was sent was in Redfern, which wasn't far away. She would call in before her scheduled meeting and see the caseworker. Explain the situation.

And find out what happened to *Skye*.



JABBING AWAY at the traffic button wouldn't make the lights change any quicker, but it was vaguely satisfying. Cleveland Street, as usual, was a virtual car park. A bus lurched past, spewing out a stream of black vapour, making Tess's stomach roll. Most days she could handle the noise and fumes—it was part of the fabric of the suburb. Chaotic. Loud. Colourful. One big noisy carnival. Surry Hills was so far removed from her childhood in southern Sydney, it was like another planet. As far away from suburbia as you could get. That word, 'suburbia', was as bland as the notion, and thankfully she and Josh had been on the same page about where they'd wanted to live. Granted, the craziness wasn't for everyone. Certainly not *Skye*. Her idea of heaven was the total opposite: sustainable living on an isolated country property, homeschooling

her daughter, sculpting and painting, making just enough money from her artwork to survive.

Two completely different worlds. Was it any wonder she and Skye had drifted apart?

Tess pressed a hand against the ache in her chest. ‘Drifted apart’ was such a handy euphemism. Made it all sound so gentle, so inevitable. So okay.

The beep of the walk signal jolted her forward and across the intersection through the throng of pedestrians. On the corner, a wolfish-looking dog lay sprawled on the footpath beside his owner, who was scraping a squeegee across the windscreen of a car. People rushed past, heads down, absorbed in whatever was flashing on the screens of their phones. Worker bees, all part of the Sydney hive.

She stopped outside a nondescript building, number 219. It was already after nine am, so the FACS office should be open. She pulled the letter from her bag, ignoring the contents as she searched for the name of the person she needed to see. Regina Martin. A woman—a stranger—who had been appointed by a government department to supervise custody arrangements for Skye’s only child, who was now an orphan. Like her mother. History repeating itself in some sick, cruel joke. Skye’s grandmother had loved her like she was her own, but it couldn’t possibly be the same. Tess’s thumb throbbed. She pulled it away from her mouth, wincing at the blistered skin, and wriggled it to get the blood circulating. Where would Grace be right now? Probably stuck in some awful orphanage, or had she already been placed in foster care? All those stories you heard on the news about kids being shoved from one home to the next, at the mercy of people who only wanted to collect a payout ... or worse.

Under the cool silk of her long-sleeved shirt, the fine hairs on

her forearms stood on end. Surely there were good, honest people out there who did want to do the right thing? People who genuinely wanted to provide a stable, loving family; care for a homeless child. People who were better equipped for parenting than she and Josh were. Of course those people existed. Procrastinating wouldn't help anyone, certainly not Grace.

Slipping through the automatic doors, Tess checked the directory and made her way up in the elevator, the folded document pulsing like a heartbeat against her palm.

The woman at the reception desk gave a tight-lipped smile. 'Can I help you?'

'I need to speak to Regina Martin.'

'Do you have an appointment?'

'No ... no, I don't.'

'I can make one for you if you like.' Her fingers skipped over the keys as she scanned the screen. 'I can get you in to see her next Tuesday at three forty-five pm.'

Tuesday was four days away. Far too much time to consider her options. Reconsider.

'I need to see her urgently. It's in regard to a guardianship case.' She handed the document across to the receptionist.

A few flyaway hairs sprang from the woman's centre part as she bowed her head to read, frowning behind her thick-lensed glasses. 'And you are the guardian named here? Tessa De Santis?'

'Yes.'

'Take a seat.' She rose from her chair and disappeared, the letter still in her hand.

Tess settled back against the hard plastic seat. The waiting room was too warm and reeked of disinfectant. Photos of children of various ages lined the walls, some holding hands with an adult, all of them looking happy and contented. Were they real kids who

had been placed in homes, or idealised versions the department wanted the public to see? A door opened and closed along the hall and the receptionist returned, resuming her seat without a word.

‘Ms De Santis?’ A second woman appeared in the waiting room. ‘I’m Regina Martin. Please come in.’ She had a faint accent, maybe Spanish, a lusciously thick set of dark brows, and an air of absolute authority. A bright-orange scarf was wound around her neck and her ripped jeans, definitely not traditional work wear, were a sharp contrast to the tailored charcoal of Tess’s business suit.

The caseworker led the way to her office and waved Tess into a chair. ‘I thought we might have heard from you sooner.’

Snippy, but probably best not to fight fire with fire. Tess put her bag on the floor, took a breath and pasted on her best conciliatory smile. ‘I’m so sorry, but I’ve been overseas for work.’ Considering the gravity of the situation, it was hardly surprising the woman would be questioning her tardiness. ‘I only got back late last night.’

‘We did try to contact you on the phone number found at Ms Whittaker’s house, multiple times.’

Those few missed calls while she’d been in LA, the voicemail she hadn’t bothered listening to. Tess cringed inwardly. No wonder the woman was snaky. Regina Martin leaned forward and shuffled through a pile of manila folders, slid one out and flicked it open. A computer and a wooden carving of an elephant were the only decorations on the desk. Tess plucked away a piece of white fluff caught in the weave of her skirt while the woman read through paperwork, probably re-familiarising herself with the case. She looked drawn, slightly harried. It couldn’t be easy dealing with such fraught situations day after day. Eventually she looked up, rested her elbows on the desk and balanced her chin on the arch

of her clasped hands. 'So, you are Grace Whittaker's legal guardian.'

Was she asking a question or stating a fact? Either way the answer was yes. 'That's right.'

'There's no father involved?'

'No. Skye fell pregnant when she was travelling. It was an accident, but she wanted to have the baby.'

'And when is the last time you saw Grace?'

Tess shrank back into the chair, shifting again as it creaked. The heat in her cheeks was a dead giveaway. She'd read somewhere that if you acknowledged the blush it would subside. And yet her face remained on fire.

'Ms De Santis?'

'About five years ago, I think.'

'You think?'

The incredulity was well warranted. 'No, it was. I mean ... I know it was. In Sydney.'

Regina Martin sat back in her chair. 'And you haven't seen her since? Haven't visited? They didn't visit you?'

'No.'

The caseworker tipped her head to the side and frowned. 'So, I'm curious as to why Grace's mother would leave her in your care.'

'We were friends, close friends.' Tess sucked in a breath. The explanation sounded totally lame, considering the length of time since they'd actually seen each other. 'Skye had an aversion to the city and I've ... well ... I have a very busy job.'

'I see.' Regina Martin pursed her lips as she considered the documents in front of her. 'It's my job to make sure that the child is placed with the right people.' She glanced at Tess's hand. 'You're married?'

‘Yes.’

‘Do you have any children?’

‘No.’

She was noting down every word. ‘And what is it you do for a living?’

‘I’m a human resources manager. I have my own consultancy.’

‘So you would be financially able to care for Grace?’

‘Yes. Absolutely.’

Another scribble in the file. Surely financial stability had to count for something? ‘Have you discussed this with your husband?’

‘We’ve ... talked about it.’ Finally, they’d come to the point of the meeting. She’d started off on the wrong foot, given the wrong impression about why she was here. ‘To be perfectly honest ...’

‘Let *me* be totally honest with *you*, Mrs De Santis.’

The sudden, incorrect change in title niggled, but there were more important issues at stake. If the woman wanted the floor, she could go for her life. In the end, the outcome would be the same. Tess crossed her legs and gave a slight nod.

‘If there was any extended family in this case, we would prefer Grace be placed with them. Are you aware of any relatives who might be able to take her in?’

‘No.’ The short, single syllable came out far too loud and Regina Martin widened her brown eyes. Tess’s stomach hollowed. She made a conscious effort to lower her volume, soften her tone. ‘I was the closest thing to family after the death of Skye’s grandmother.’ It was the absolute truth. Family wasn’t just about blood. She was right there in the room when Grace was born, watching on as the midwife laid the tiny bundle on her friend’s chest, those smoky eyes looking up into her mother’s. Days later, as they had

sat together on the lounge of Skye's rented flat watching the baby sleep, Skye had taken her hand.

Promise me you'll take care of her if anything happens to me.

Those had been her exact words.

'And you are one hundred percent sure you can provide a safe, loving, long-term home for the child, as her mother wished?'

'Yes.' The word sprang from Tess's lips, the same answer she'd given her friend. Wherever it had come from, there was no taking it back. Not then. Not now.

'In that case, I'm going to need to set up an interview with you and your husband.'

'But he isn't listed as a legal guardian.'

'No, but since I assume Grace will be living with both of you ... there are protocols we need to follow.' Regina Martin gave a soft smile. She seemed to be thawing. 'I'm sure you understand.'

'Of course.' This conversation was not what she'd intended when she'd walked inside the building. Or was it?

'I suggest you talk this through very carefully. Taking on someone else's child is no picnic.'

How the hell was she going to break the news to Josh?

So, babe, I'm sure you won't mind, but ...

I know this wasn't what you were expecting ...

Can we talk about this calmly ...?

'And there's something you should know about Grace.' The serious tone in the woman's voice drowned out the practice questions. 'She's extremely withdrawn. Hasn't spoken a word since she's been taken into care.'

'Isn't that normal, though, considering she's just lost her mother?'

'Yes. And no.' She folded her arms and tapped the pen against her bottom lip. 'You just need to be aware, there could

potentially be some deep-seated emotional or behavioural issues.'

With all the focus on guardianship, there'd been no discussion of how this whole situation had come about in the first place. A part of Tess didn't want to know, wanted to just sign on the dotted line and get as far away as possible. But if she was going to be Grace's foster-mother she needed to know the details, for better or worse. And wasn't there a tiny part of her that wanted to know the truth? She ran her tongue over her lips and forced herself to look straight at Regina Martin. 'Do you know what happened to Skye? How she died?'

'Didn't the police inform you? You were named in the legal documents they found in the house.'

'I haven't been contacted by anyone except this department.' Tess scrunched her toes inside her shoes. Josh always harangued her about not listening to her phone messages. Maybe he was right.

'Grace was the one who reported her mother's death.' Regina Martin sighed, the air leaving her body like a deflating balloon. 'She found her, in bed. The coroner requested a post-mortem, but I'm not sure what the outcome was in the end ... There was some evidence to suggest it might have been suicide.'

The room began to spin. Tess gripped the edge of the desk, tried to anchor herself by staring at the small wooden elephant, but it blurred into a trio. She closed her eyes to focus on her breathing, and when she opened them again a tumbler of water appeared in front of her. Regina Martin was looking down with motherly concern.

Tess held the glass with two hands and took a sip. 'Thank you.'

'I take it the news has come as a shock. I'm so sorry.'

She should ask for more information, find out the details, but

an image of her friend's lifeless body was already forming. She stood and placed the half-empty glass on the desk. 'How quickly can the approval interview be arranged?'

Regina Martin took up her seat and peered at the screen of her computer as she typed. 'I can definitely organise something for Tuesday next week.'

'Nothing sooner?'

'Today is Friday. Tuesday at eleven am would be the earliest.'

Naturally, the wheels of officialdom did not spin on weekends. 'Alright. We'll see you then.' *We*. Tess and Josh. The new parents. 'What's the procedure after that?'

'Assuming you're given approval, you should be able to take Grace home by the end of the week.'

'Next Friday?'

'Correct. Paperwork takes time, I'm afraid.' She shook her head apologetically. 'Nothing moves quickly in community services.'

'So what happens to her in the meantime?'

'Grace is being looked after by a qualified carer in a transitional facility.'

'An orphanage?'

'We no longer have orphanages. The children are placed in temporary care in strictly supervised homes.'

So Grace was grieving and alone. Friday was another week away. 'Is there any chance I could visit her over the weekend?'

Regina Martin drummed her short, neat nails against the desktop, a soft light growing in her eyes. 'Look, it's not something I'd usually approve.' She spoke conspiratorially, as if she was afraid the room might be bugged. 'But since this case is quite unusual, I suppose I can allow a short visit in the morning.' She pulled a Post-It Note from a holder on her desk, jotted something down from the file and handed it across to Tess. 'Here's the

address. I'll let the carer know you and your husband will be there at ten am.'

Tomorrow morning. Josh had a bike trip this weekend. 'Ah ...'

Regina Martin was already moving out from behind her desk. 'Keep in mind that Grace is in a very fragile state. Don't make any promises and don't mention anything about what happened to her mother.'

Right. No promises. No mention of Skye.

'I'll see you and your husband back here on Tuesday.' The door opened and they stepped out into the overly heated hallway. 'And, Tess ...'

The sudden use of her first name pulled Tess up short. 'I'm very sorry about your friend.'

There had been a few difficult moments during the interview, but this woman had a heart. Summoning a smile was simply too hard. 'Thank you.' She made her way downstairs and out onto the street, leaning against the rough brick of the building as she tried to process what had happened. Had she really just agreed to be a foster-parent? How would Grace react to meeting her? And what was she going to say to Josh?

And then there was the question she needed to ask above all the rest but didn't want to know the answer to at all.

Why did Skye kill herself?

CHAPTER 3

The bus scraped against the kerb and Tess shuffled forward on autopilot along with the crowd of late-afternoon travellers. Most of her day since arriving at the office had been the same: people talking at her and her mouth moving in response, her face forming the appropriate expressions, but behind the mask was the feeling of having just been dumped by an errant wave. And not quite surfacing. Processing the meeting about Grace was one thing, the news about Skye's death was something else completely. Work had provided the necessary distraction, but now that she was wedged against the window, staring out at the evening bottleneck of traffic through finger-smudged glass, the horrible finality of it all was unavoidable.

Suicide.

Skye had killed herself. Or at least that's what the police suspected. There would be a coroner's report, based on the post-mortem and whatever evidence was found at the time, but it wouldn't include the cause, the truth concealed deep inside such a desperate act.

A bell chimed on Tess's phone and a calendar notification appeared on the screen. *Dad's Birthday dinner seven pm. Shit.* Sitting through a cheery family gathering was the last thing she needed tonight, especially when she had far more urgent matters to discuss at home. All day she'd resisted the urge to throw up, had swallowed it down through meeting after meeting, but now she was being dragged back onto this morning's rollercoaster of emotion and there was a good chance she would actually heave. Closing her eyes and trying to breathe only made it worse: the sour tang of body odour from the man beside her sent her stomach into a spin. Jumping to her feet, she climbed over the top of her fellow passenger and hit the buzzer, weaving her way down the aisle until she reached the front of the bus. Thank God the driver had the good sense to pull up at the next stop. Right outside a pub, where she no doubt looked like she'd had one too many, but the rough brick façade was as good a wall as any to lean against. Keeping down the meagre morsels of food she'd consumed today was far more important than keeping up appearances.

The buzz of a phone.

A text from Josh. *Going to be late. I'll Uber and meet you at your parents'.*

He'd remembered the dinner. She texted back, *Okay. See you soon.* Surely he would know better than to mention anything about what had happened in front of her family. Best to make sure, so she added a second message: *Don't mention anything about Skye at dinner. Might spoil the party.*

Time was getting on. She needed to get back to the apartment, pick up the car and get to her parents' place on time, or her head could very well be served up on a platter along with the tiramisu. She cringed at the mental image: far too

frivolous in light of today's news. A taxi appeared in the stream of cars and she hailed it down, climbing in and resting her head against the back of the seat, finding refuge in the chatter of drive-time radio. All she wanted to do was go home and crawl into bed, wake up in some new existence where the last twenty-four hours had never happened. Pray for a sliding-doors moment so she could hop in the car this weekend and do the four-hour drive to Weerilla to see her old friend again.

Alive.

The cabbie jammed his foot on the brake, jerking her forward, and she braced herself against the front headrest.

'Sorry, love.' He had the grace to look mildly apologetic as he shrugged in the rear-view mirror.

Tess slumped back against the seat, sighing aloud as they started moving again. There would be no road trip to the countryside, no warm and fuzzy reunion. No more chances to make amends. And there was no avoiding the truth about Skye. Or Grace. For the next few hours at least, she could hide behind her father's birthday celebrations, delay the inevitable, awkward conversation she would be having soon with Josh and continue doing what she'd become so skilled at over the last twenty years.

Pretend.



'IS THAT YOU, TESS?' Her mother's voice cut through the babble coming from the kitchen.

Tess paused by the hall stand, checking her face in the mirror. Dark shadows circled her eyes, standing out against the ghostly pallor of her skin. She gave her cheeks a good, hard pinch. Maybe

the rush of blood would make her look a little less like an extra from *The Walking Dead*.

‘Tessa?’

There it was, the frantic tone, the soundtrack to every family function. Her reflection frowned back at her. The pinching hadn’t exactly worked—in fact, it had given her two angry patches rather than a healthy glow, but that would have to do.

‘Yeah, it’s me, Mum.’ Judging by the voices making up the kitchen chorus, she was the last—almost—to arrive. The closer she got, the louder the volume and the more she wished she’d called to say she was feeling sick. It wouldn’t have been a lie.

‘Hello, darling. I was getting worried. Where’s Josh?’ Her mother’s face was as flushed as her own was pale.

‘Sorry, I meant to call.’

Her mother scowled, then recovered with a welcoming smile.

‘Josh should be here soon. Don’t wait to serve, though.’

‘Hey.’ Rob appeared from behind, poking Tess in the ribs before dragging her into a suffocating hug. ‘How’s my little sister?’

‘Your *only* sister is fine.’ She rubbed at her face as he let her go. ‘You might want to think about shaving sometime soon.’

‘Nah, Ally likes me rugged.’ He gave her a goofy grin. It was hard to take him seriously when he looked like Bear Grylls. ‘You look like crap by the way.’

‘Yeah, long-distance flights followed by a day of meetings will do that to you. Where is your better half anyway?’ Usually, the family banter bored her senseless, but tonight the dependable monotony of it was a soothing balm.

Rob nodded his head towards the living room. ‘Just changing Ethan. Giving Dad a few pointers.’

‘I could never get him to change his own children’s nappies, so I wish her luck with that!’ Her mother’s indignation was the

perfect accompaniment to the lavish arrangement of food on the bench.

‘Now, now, Beth, don’t go defaming a man when he’s not around to defend himself.’ The birthday boy appeared, carrying his grandson, who had a fist in his mouth and drool coating his chin.

‘Happy birthday, Dad.’ Tess hugged her father while the baby flashed a gummy smile.

‘Thanks, princess.’

‘Tess might want a cuddle with Ethan.’

‘No, not at the moment.’ Her mother never missed an opportunity to drag her into the baby thing, but she’d perfected the art of ducking and weaving. ‘Might just grab a drink.’

‘Fine. Dinner’s ready.’ Her mother rushed past, a huge dish of steaming lasagne in her oven-mitted hands.

There was a frenzy of movement and plate passing as they all took their seats. Ally popped through the doorway, blew Tess a kiss and slipped in beside Rob. She was a tiny woman, her long blonde hair pulled up into a ponytail so tight her head must be seriously aching. She leaned across to Ethan, now strapped into a high chair, and wiped his face with the Spiderman bib slung across his chest. Everyone was in their allotted place, Tess in the seat she’d sat in all her life, opposite her brother and to the left of her father, with her mother at the other end of the table. The seat beside her was conspicuously empty.

‘So, where’s Superboy?’ Rob asked.

Tess really was too tired for Rob’s teasing tonight. After a lifetime of being the youngest in the family, she’d learned how to let it go. She made sure her voice was light when she answered. ‘He’s been caught up at work, but he shouldn’t be long.’ Thankfully, Adrian was off somewhere in the wilds of South America climbing

mountains, so there was only one of her brothers here to do the tormenting.

‘How was your trip, Tessie?’

Good old Dad, breezing through life with his rose-coloured specs firmly in place.

‘Busy but good.’

Her mother’s eye roll was standard. She always carried on about how Tess needed to slow down, take things easier, even though she had no idea about life in the corporate world. One day she *might* get over the fact that Tess had refused to become a teacher, or carry on the family tradition and become a teacher-librarian. Probably not. You’d think she’d be satisfied with having a daughter-in-law who taught kindergarten, but it only seemed to make her more irritated with her own daughter’s choice of career. Tonight was not, however, the night to tackle that particular issue. Tonight was all about survival.

The table was crammed with the usual menu: pasta, garlic bread, gnocchi, polenta. It was all too much, especially when the Italian blood was on her father’s side and he was as Anglo as a shrimp on the barbie. Tess picked at her food, staying firmly under the radar as the conversation bounced from stories about her absent brother’s mountaineering adventures to Ethan’s latest growth spurt, Rob’s new building project and her father’s current exploits on the golf course.

When the doorbell chimed, her mother was out of her seat and practically running down the hall in a matter of seconds. She had a huge crush on Josh, despite having two sons of her own. Was it sweet or sickening? If Tess had turned up this late for a special dinner, her mum would have given her the silent treatment for hours.

‘Not a problem at all, love, I’ll just pop your dinner in the

microwave. You sit yourself down. Would you like a beer?' So much fawning. Definitely sickening.

'Thanks. That'd be great.' Josh appeared, brushing a kiss against Tess's cheek. 'Hey, sorry I'm late.' He continued on to the end of the table, clapped her father's shoulder and shook his hand. 'Happy birthday, Tony. Had a good day?'

'Thanks, mate. Not bad. Got in a round of golf, beat the pants off the other blokes, and knocked back a few brews at the club.'

'Excellent. Better than a day at work.' Josh hovered, pushing his tortoise-shell-framed glasses up the bridge of his nose. He'd loosened his tie and rolled up the sleeves of his business shirt, trying to bridge the gap between work wear and family dinner. If Rob made the tired joke about him being Clarke Kent's doppelgänger again, there was a pretty good chance Tess would lose her shit.

'You're not wrong.' Her father was still rambling. 'Retirement's the best thing that's happened to me.'

'Is it, now?' Her mother plonked a plate on the table beside Tess and an opened beer on the coaster. She turned to Josh with a saccharine smile. 'Watch the plate, love, it's hot.'

Tess bit into a forkful of gnocchi, the metal grinding against her teeth. Her mother's eternal fussing was almost sycophantic. Why was she the only one it seemed to bother? The conversation rolled on, with a backing track from Andrea Bocelli until Ethan pitched his rattle across the table and it landed right in the middle of Tess's plate, sending a splash of tomato sauce down the front of her white shirt.

Great. The evening was getting better by the minute.

Muffled laughter erupted around the table. Tess grabbed a serviette and dabbed at the stain. Nothing better than being the butt of everybody else's joke.

‘That’s a first-grade bowler’s arm, right there.’ Rob beamed.

‘Sorry, Tess.’ Ally, at least, looked vaguely embarrassed.

Tess wiped the rattle and, resisting the temptation to aim it at her brother’s head, passed it back to the baby. Ethan squealed and a bubble of warmth expanded inside her chest. He really was the cutest little thing and she never bothered paying him much attention.

‘He must keep you on your toes.’ Awe, and maybe a hint of fear, permeated Josh’s contribution to the conversation.

‘That’s an understatement. But parenthood is the best thing that’s happened to *me*.’ Rob winked at his father. ‘Apart from marrying my beautiful wife, of course.’ He put an arm around Ally and gave her a hug.

Ally elbowed him in the side, but the corners of her mouth lifted in a coy smile. Despite their ten-year age difference, they were a very well-suited couple.

Rob chugged on his Corona and banged it on the table. He’d clearly been here well before dinner and downed a few birthday bevies. ‘Speaking of which, are you two all set for your starring roles?’

‘Starring roles?’ Josh looked at her, equally puzzled.

‘Sunday fortnight.’ Her mother piped up, positively bursting. ‘I’m sure they’re both looking forward to it. Make sure you’re not late, though, Tessa. Father Rafferty likes everyone to be on time.’

Oh shit! The christening. Grace would have been home with them for just over a week by then. Would it be a good idea to take her to such a huge family gathering so soon? Probably not, but she could hardly announce that now, even if they had been railroaded into being godparents. *There was your first mistake*, Josh had said this morning in reference to her saying yes to the same request from Skye. In this case he was actually right. The whole thing was

a farce. 'I don't really get why you're having him christened, to be honest. It's not like either of you is religious.'

'I really don't know why you'd say that, Tessa. You were all christened and it's never hurt any of you.' Her mother had her scolding voice well primed. No doubt she'd had a hand in organising the whole shebang.

'No, but, well ... we are both Catholic, and it's just something we want to do.' Ally looked as if she was about to start crying.

Oh Lord, please let it end. 'I never said it hurt anyone.'

'Anyway ... Since we are having him dunked, thanks again for agreeing.' Rob de-escalated things before they could get any worse. 'I know kids aren't really your thing, so it means a lot.'

'Our pleasure, mate.' Josh raised his hand and the two of them clinked bottles across the table. 'It's an honour to be asked.'

'And I'm sure kids *are* their thing.' Her mother lifted her fingers into air quotes. 'They just haven't gotten around to it yet. Being godparents will be good practice for when you have your own.'

Josh was a straight-out liar, and as for her mother, if only she knew it was *him* providing the roadblock to her additions to Nonna's Brag Book, she might not treat him like God's gift to the De Santis family. Josh dropped his gaze to his meal and began eating with gusto. No help there. Tess let her knife and fork clatter onto the centre of her plate.

'You can't put it off forever, darling.'

'And you can't help yourself, can you, Mum? Maybe you should just mind your own business for once.' Even as the words fell from her mouth, she wanted to suck them right back in, rewind the conversation to the usual inane topics, but it was already too late.

Her mother lifted a hand to her chest, her eyes wide as the room held its breath.

‘Now, Tessie ...’ Her father jumped in.

‘You must be exhausted, Tess.’ Ally rushed in, playing peace-keeper. Confrontation had never been her forte. ‘I don’t know how you stay on your feet half the time with the hours you do.’

‘Probably a little jet-lagged, aren’t you, love?’ Her father smiled softly, the warning tone now gone from his voice.

‘Yeah, I am actually.’ Under the table, Josh put a hand on her knee and squeezed. A reminder to count to ten. Or twenty. More likely a thousand the way things were going. Her dad had provided the perfect excuse for her appalling behaviour. She raised what she could of a thankful smile in both their directions and shot a more apologetic one at her mother. ‘Sorry, Mum.’

Knives and forks scraped again as life returned almost to normal. Josh sipped quietly at his drink. Ally wiped Ethan’s cheek with her napkin and tickled him under the chin, releasing a burst of giggles. The small amount of food Tess had managed to keep down sat like a boulder in the pit of her stomach.

‘You do look pale, though, darling. Are you sure it’s just from the flight?’

‘It’s been a tough day.’ Finally Josh was speaking up, saving her from wreaking any more havoc. ‘Coming home to the bad news about Skye.’

A wave of heat rolled beneath Tess’s skin. She locked her hands in her lap. Physical violence in front of her whole family would not go down well.

‘Skye Sullivan who you went to school with?’ Her mother, not surprisingly, was first to respond.

Josh turned, waiting for her answer, and realisation rippled across his face. ‘Oh, sorry.’

‘Yes, Mum.’ Tess looked up. ‘That Skye.’ Her mother had never

known about Skye's decision to change her name after her grandmother's death. 'She died.'

'Oh. What happened?'

'I'm not sure.'

'That's awful, love.' Her dad sounded genuinely concerned.

Rob narrowed his eyes. 'Didn't she have a kid?'

'Grace. She's ten.' If she spoke in short syllables, kept it factual, she might just manage to keep it together.

'Yes, she was a single mother.' Never one to miss an opportunity for moral judgement, her mother shook her head. 'Poor little mite. What's going to happen to her now?'

Josh was busy finishing off his lasagne. It would serve him right if Tess dumped him in it, announced his new status as a father here and now, made him deal with it in front of her whole family. But then she'd be dealing with it, too.

'She's, um, been made a ward of the state. They'll find a foster home for her.' *Please let Ethan start projectile vomiting, let his head spin and his screams be ear-splitting, anything to make this conversation end.*

'Wasn't there another relative?' Her mother squinted. 'Surely they could take her.'

A shrill ringing started up in Tess's ears. She shook her head, simultaneously willing it away and answering the question.

'She was a bit weird, wasn't she?' Rob picked at the crack between his two front teeth, removing a piece of parsley and wiping it on his napkin. 'Into all that new-age crap.'

'For fuck's sake, Rob, just because someone doesn't fit your idea of normal does not mean they're weird.' Tess shoved back her chair, picked up her plate and made a beeline for the kitchen. Scraping her leftovers into the bin, she turned on the tap too hard and sent a shower of water spraying across the parquet floor.

‘Why don’t we have the cake in the lounge room?’ Her mother’s voice was an octave higher than usual as she circled the table collecting the dishes. ‘You all head in and we’ll be there in a tick.’

Tess leaned against the sink, eyes closed, waiting for the knot in her chest to loosen. Even with the jet-lag excuse, her reaction had been uncalled for, bordering on hysterical. She was usually better at keeping things under control.

‘I’m sorry to hear about Skye.’ Her mother mopped at the floor with a tea towel, sounding mildly sympathetic.

‘You never liked her, anyway.’

‘That’s not true, Tessa. I had no problem with her when she was younger, but she did go a little off the rails when she left school.’

‘I think *wayward* was the adjective you most frequently used to describe her.’ She took the soaking cloth from her mum, wringing it out in the sink until her fingers hurt.

‘Well she was, Tessa. Even you have to admit that. Out at all hours of the night, worrying her poor grandmother out of her wits. Is it any wonder I didn’t want you hanging around with her?’

They were both upright now, her mother shuffling dirty plates into the dishwasher, Tess stationary against the bench. She should muster the energy to help, but her legs refused to move. Skye had been the scapegoat for her ‘going off the rails’ as a teenager, for her ‘wild’ behaviour, the tattoo, and the Goth phase her mother had so detested. It was a mutually convenient rationale that Tess had never bothered to challenge. ‘It was all a long time ago.’

‘Yes, it was. And I am sorry to hear she’s died. She didn’t have an easy life. And that poor child of hers.’

Children were her mother’s Achilles’ heel; her concern for Grace was genuine. Maybe confessing her decision to her mum would be good practice for telling Josh. She peered back over her

shoulder into the lounge room. Josh seemed to be occupied, deep in conversation with Rob. Now was as good a time as any. She took a deep breath. 'I never told you this, Mum, but I'm Grace's guardian.'

Her mother, retrieving dessert bowls from the cupboard, literally froze mid-movement. 'Do you mean guardian as in *legal* guardian?'

Tess nodded.

'No, you didn't ever tell me that.' She placed the bowls down without looking up.

'We were going through one of our no-speaking stages at the time. I never really thought it would matter that much, but now ...'

Her mother took the cake from the fridge and placed it on the island in the centre of the kitchen. You could almost hear the wheels clanking inside her skull. 'So, what does that mean exactly?'

'A letter came from Family and Community Services. It's up to me—well us,' she motioned towards the lounge room to include Josh, 'to decide whether or not we want to foster her.'

'And what does Josh think?'

'He pretty much dismissed it without a discussion.' This morning's conversation, the letter, all of it was still surprisingly raw. She folded her arms across her chest.

Her mother placed the birthday cake on an engraved silver tray and positioned gold candles around the circumference, her frown lines deepening by the second. This could go either way, but it was better to give her mum time to think it through before jumping back in.

'Taking on someone else's child is a huge decision, Tessa, especially a child of her age. And it's not like you and Skye were that close anymore.'

‘This is a little girl we’re talking about, a little girl I agreed to look after if anything happened to Skye.’ She shook her head. Why had she expected her mother to understand? How could she? ‘Anyway, you’re always saying you want me to have kids.’

Her mother walked across the kitchen and picked up a box of tissues. She sat down on a stool, patted the one beside it and waited.

Snatches of conversation filtered through from the lounge room punctuated with an occasional baby squeal. This was her father’s birthday celebration and she shouldn’t be making it about her own problem. She was being selfish. Petulant. Acting like the spoilt child she’d been once. Her mother seemed to be waving a white flag. It would be foolish not to offer one of her own.

‘I went to see Grace’s caseworker today.’ She sucked in a short breath as she sat on the proffered stool. ‘There’s a possibility that Skye killed herself.’

‘Oh no.’ Her mother’s hand came to rest on top of her own.

The touch bolstered her courage. ‘I told them I’m willing to go ahead and foster Grace.’

‘But I thought you said Josh was against the idea?’

Tess met her mother’s gaze. ‘He is.’

A look towards the other room, an unexpected gleam in her mother’s watery eyes. ‘Well, sometimes things happen for a reason. It’s not the ideal way to start a family, but I’m sure Josh will come around. And who knows? It might be the push you both need to start a family of your own.’

A raucous squeal rang out with almost perfect timing.

Grabbing the cake in one hand, her mother stood and handed across a stack of dessert plates. ‘Come on, let’s get the birthday boy to blow out his candles.’

And that was that. Her mother breezed out of the kitchen,

leaving Tess alone and floundering. Had she really just suggested that fostering Grace could be a good idea? And then used it as ammunition for her baby campaign?

Tess made her way to the lounge room, moulding her expression into party mode and mouthing the words of 'Happy Birthday'. As her father blew out the candles, a starry-eyed Ethan nestled on his lap, she looked around for Josh. He was huddled in the corner at the far end of the room, a hand over one ear, an intense expression of concentration on his face as he spoke into his phone. Work, no doubt. It was always work. There was barely room in his life for her, let alone a child. Would he really agree to take on someone else's daughter? Someone else's possibly disturbed ten-year-old daughter?

Hip hip hooray.

Hip hip hooray.

Hip.

Hip.

Hooray.

There was only one way to find out.