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THE DARK LAKE

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For my sons, Oxford and Linus, who have somehow
managed to make the world feel both bigger and smaller,
at exactly the same time.

These violent delights have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
Which as they kiss consume.

William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II: Scene VI

now

When I think back to that summer something comes loose in my head. It's like a marble is bouncing around in there, like my brain is a pinball machine. I try not to let it roll around for too long. If I do, I end up going funny behind the eyes and in my throat and I can't do normal things like order coffee or tie Ben's shoelaces. I know I should try to forget. Move on. It's what I would tell someone else in my situation to do. Probably I should move away, leave Smithson, but starting over has never been a strength of mine. I have trouble letting go.

During the day it's not so bad. I'll be in the middle of doing something and then my mind wanders to her and the little ball ricochets through my head and I stop talking in the middle of a sentence, or I forget to press the accelerator when the lights go green. Still, I can usually shake it away and keep going with whatever I was doing without anyone noticing.

It's amazing what you can keep buried when you want to.

But sometimes, late at night, I let myself think about what happened. Really think. I remember the throbbing heat. I remember the madness in my head and the fear that pulsed in my chest. And I remember Rosalind, of course. Always Rosalind. I lie flat on my back and she appears on my bedroom ceiling, playing across it

like a lightless slide show. I click through the images: her in grade one with her socks pulled up high; her walking down Ayres Road towards the bus stop, backpack bobbing; her smoking a cigarette on the edges of the school oval; her drunk at Cathy Roper's party, eyes heavy with dark liner.

Her at our debutante ball, dressed in white.

Her kissing him.

Her lying on the autopsy table with her body splayed open.

I can't even tell anymore whether the pictures are from my memories or ones I came across during the case. After a while, everything starts to blur together. A few times I've got it all mixed up and Ben ends up on my bedroom ceiling, sliced open on the autopsy table. When that happens, I get up, turn on the hallway lights and go into his room to check on him.

Once it was all over I promised to make a fresh start. To stop letting the past weigh me down. But it's been hard. Harder than I thought it would be. So much happened that summer. It lives on inside me somehow, writhing around like a living beast.

It's weird, but in a way it's sort of like I miss her.

I miss a lot of people.

One memory I do have that I know is real is from our final year of high school English. It was warm and the windows were open on both sides of the classroom. I can still feel the breeze that ruffled across us as Mrs Frisk roamed around the room firing questions at us. We were studying Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*. This class was different from the English classes in earlier years. If you made it this far, you were serious. Even the boys would generally pay attention. No one sniggered at the love scenes like they had a few years earlier.

Rose always sat up the front, her back ruler-straight from years of ballet, her thick caramel hair spilling down it like a wave. I always

sat near the door on the other side of the room. I could look at her from there. Watch her perfect movements.

‘What do you think Shakespeare is getting at when he declares that “these violent delights have violent ends”?’ Mrs Frisk’s forehead beaded with sweat as she stalked around the edges of the room, stepping in and out of sun puddles.

‘Well, it’s foreboding, isn’t it?’ offered Kevin Whitby. ‘You know they’re doomed from the start. Shakespeare wants you to know that. He loved a good warning to set the scene. These days he’d be writing shit-hot anti-drug ads.’

Soft laughter bubbled up from the class.

‘It’s a warning, sure, but I don’t think he’s saying they should stop.’

Everyone paused, caught in the honey of Rose’s voice. Even Mrs Frisk stopped pacing.

Rose leaned forward over her notebook. ‘I mean, Shakespeare goes on to say, “And in their triumph die, like fire and powder. Which as they kiss consume.” So he’s basically saying everything has consequences. He’s not necessarily saying it’s not worth it. I think he’s suggesting that sometimes things are worth doing anyway.’

Mrs Frisk nodded enthusiastically. ‘Rose makes an important point. Shakespeare was big on consequences. All of his plays circle around characters who weigh up the odds and choose to behave in a certain way based on their assessments.’

‘They didn’t make great choices for the most part,’ said Kevin. ‘They all had pretty bad judgment.’

‘I disagree.’ Rose looked at Kevin in a way that was hard to categorise as either friendly or annoyed. ‘Romeo and Juliet were all-in right from the start, even though they knew it probably wasn’t going to end well.’ She smiled at Mrs Frisk. ‘I think that kind of conviction is admirable. Plus, it’s possible that the happiness they felt in their

short time together outweighed any other happiness they'd have felt if they lived their whole lives apart.' She shrugged delicately. 'But who knows. Those are just my thoughts.'

I think about that day often. The fresh fragrant air pouring through the windows as we debated the story of the two young lovers. Rose lit by the sun, her beautiful face giving nothing away. Her elegant hands diligently making notes, her writing perfect compared to my own crude scrawl. Even back then, she was a mystery that I wanted to solve.

There were a few minutes when I was alone with her in the autopsy room. I felt wild. Absent. Before I could stop myself I was leaning close to her, telling her everything. The words draining out of me as she lay there. Her long damp hair hanging off the back of the steel table. Glassy eyes fixed blindly on the ceiling. She was still so beautiful, even in death.

Our secrets circled madly around the bright white room that morning. Rocking back and forth on my heels as I stood next to her, I knew how far in I was again, how comprehensively her death could undo me. I looked at Rosalind Ryan properly for the last time before breathing deeply, readying myself, letting her pull me back into her world, and I sank down, further and further, until I was completely, utterly under.

Chapter One

Saturday, 12 December, 7.18 am

Connor Marsh jogs steadily around the east side of Sonny Lake. He throws a quick glance at his watch. He is making great time and it feels good being out of the house and running in the fresh air. The kids were crazy this morning; they'd woken at six and were still bouncing off the walls when he left the house an hour later. The place is way too small for two little kids, especially boys, he thinks. And Mia was in such a foul mood. He can't believe that she had a go at him about the fishing trip next weekend. He hasn't been away in ages and has been taking the boys to footy or soccer every Saturday morning for over two years now. Connor grimaces, frustrated at how unreasonable she can be.

His feet pound along the dusty track, making an even beat. *One, two, one, two.* Connor often finds himself counting when he is trying not to think too much about running. His legs burn more than they used to and his ankle hasn't been the same since he fell off the ladder at work a few years back. Still, he is fitter than most guys his age. And he has a full head of hair. Lots to be grateful for.

The day starts to wake in earnest. Connor catches glimpses of the sun through the messy tips of the gums. Another scorcher is

on the way. Birds trill from their lookouts and the wispy haze of sleep across the lake is starting to clear. Connor sighs. He's taking the kids to a fifth birthday party at ten, followed by a seven-year-old's birthday party this afternoon. Weekends sure are different these days. He would give almost anything to crack open a beer and watch the cricket in peace.

Connor steps heavily on a stick. It flicks up and scratches along his shin.

'Shit.' He stumbles before regaining his balance. The cut stings as it breaks into a thin red line. He slows his jogging, panting. He won't bother doing another lap now; he needs to head back home anyway to help get the kids ready for their party marathon. Walking, he places his hands on his hips as his heartbeat calms, breathing jaggedly from his mouth.

A duck flies low across the water, wings outstretched. Rubbish dots the edges of the lake. Chip packets and Coke bottles are held hostage by the rocks and submerged branches. The heat has caused the lake to creep away from its banks. Tree roots are exposed like electric wires. Connor's eyes scan the water. He really should come running here more often; get back into a routine. He can remember training here for athletics years ago, doing laps around the track before school, the burn in his thighs. He notices the gaping eye of the stormwater drain, pitch black against the glare as it disappears into the clay wall of the lake. A little further along, Connor notices something caught at the water's edge; it appears to be made from some kind of fabric. He squints and realises he is looking at hair swirling out past a line of reeds. His feet lock to the ground. It looks like human hair, a woman's blonde hair. His heartbeat picks up again. His limbs feel hollow. Two steps forward confirm it is indeed a woman face down in the lake. Bare white arms are visible every time the water ripples and long-stemmed red roses bob across the top of her watery grave.

THE DARK LAKE

A cluster of swans watches Connor from under the old wooden bridge. One of the birds lets out a low, haunting cry.

He drops to his knees and worries for a moment that he will be sick. His breathing slows and then quickens again. He looks back at the body and then jerks his gaze away. Barely thinking, he dials triple zero and thrusts his phone against his ear.

Chapter Two

Saturday, 12 December, 7.51 am

I stand in the shower with my head against the wall as blood oozes out of me. I had guessed I was about six weeks along but hadn't been sure exactly. I wonder if my denial has made this happen; my complete lack of acceptance. My sheer desperation for it not to be real. The blood mixes with the water before it disappears down the drain and I squeeze my eyes shut and wish I was a little girl again, tucked up in bed, my mother's soft pout of a kiss pressing against my forehead.

God, I miss her.

Scott left early this morning to beat the traffic. He's secured a couple of weeks' concreting work on a large housing development just north of Paxton, a town about thirty k's east of Smithson. Ben is at my dad's; he slept there last night because of our early starts. Dad will be getting jumped on about now. Ben is always so cuddly in the mornings.

I can hear my phone ringing but I don't move. The cool tiles feel firm and reassuring against my skin as I spread my palms out on either side of my face. Trying to focus. Trying to feel normal. After a few minutes I lift my head. My vision takes a while to adjust. My guts ache, the pain settling in low and deep.

I'm exhausted. I feel separate to my body. To my mind.

I know I should probably go to the hospital but I also know that I probably won't.

The bathroom is misty with steam. The bleeding seems to have slowed. I wash myself carefully and turn off the tap. The pipes shudder through the walls. I step out of the shower and pull a dark grey towel around me. I look at the mirror but I am just a blur in the fog. In the bedroom, I throw the covers across the bed and kick a slipper underneath it, stopping for a moment and leaning forward to catch my breath as sharp pain runs through me again. I dress quickly, lining my pants with a pad before pulling on black jeans, a plain grey t-shirt, low black boots. The temperature is climbing steadily and the leftover heat from yesterday still lingers unpleasantly in the house. I pour a glass of water and throw back a couple of Nurofen. Then, staring at the wall, I think about the day of loose ends in front of me: paperwork, a few reports to follow up, a cold case Jonesy has asked me to review. I picture my small desk in the middle of the station's main room and wish that I had an office. My mobile rings again as I am towel-drying my hair: it's Felix, and I look at his name on my phone and think a million things.

'Yep, hi.' I keep my voice light. 'I'm on my way. I'm just about to walk out the door.'

'Go straight to the lake, Gem,' he says, and I love the way his accent curls around my name.

I try to understand what he's saying. 'Why? What's happened?'

'A body's been found. It's a teacher from Smithson. A Rosalind Ryan.'

The room turns upside down. I sit heavily on the bed as I clutch at my throat, forcing myself to breathe. Felix keeps talking, oblivious. 'She used to be a student there too, apparently. Your age. You probably knew her.'



Set in between a burst of mountain ranges, Smithson is a little oasis of greenery in the middle of endless fawn-coloured acres of Aussie farmland. Smithson is known for ‘catching the rain’ that runs from the mountains, which is ironic as it’s the surrounding farms that actually need it. It’s changed a lot over the past decade. Carling Enterprises, a major cannery business, built a manufacturing plant on the outskirts of the town in the late nineties, just as I was finishing school. The large silver structure already looks grossly out of date but is nevertheless a hive of activity. It milks the surrounding area dry, sucking the fruit from the trees and yanking the vegetables from the ground, and in return spits out over ten million cans of tinned fruit and vegetables every year. This productivity has slowly but steadily grown Smithson from a modest population of just under fifteen thousand to one of almost thirty thousand. Factory workers, truck drivers, engineers, food scientists, marketing people: new faces are everywhere. Suddenly, Smithson, the Noah’s Ark town that had always proudly boasted two of everything, multiplied. There are five bakeries now, and that’s just in the town centre. Someone told me that Carling does this all over the world: bases itself in regional areas where the land is cheap and permits are easy to come by, and implants its business into a community, completely changing the landscape and the culture. In fairness, Smithson probably needed a bit of a kick in the arse, but it can be unsettling watching the giant trucks descend on our little world, the roads groaning under their weight, the smoke streaming out behind them.

To the east of the town centre is a large lake surrounded by dense bushland and a popular community park. Sonny Lake is really Smithson Lake but no one ever calls it that. I don’t know why, but

it's been Sonny Lake as long as I can remember. Even the road signs read *This Way to Sonny Lake*. My parents were married there in a very bohemian ceremony back in the seventies. I've got a photo of Mum from that day on my bedside table. It was taken just after she and Dad said their vows. There are daisies in her hair and a glass of punch in her hand. She looks about twelve.

The lake backs onto the main high school. When I was in primary school I used to come down here with Mum to feed the ducks and to hunt for four-leaf clovers in the grass. In my high school days, the lake was where we came to smoke cigarettes, drink stolen alcohol and kiss boys. The old gazebo on the little bridge across the water provided the perfect place for a ghostly séance, and the ancient wooden tower in a nearby clearing was a great vantage point from which to see if someone was coming. Once you climbed its creaky, winding staircase, you reached a lookout where you could see the entire lake, the main highway and all the way to the high school. It was also a great place to hide. Before he died, Jacob and I had spent hours up there talking and kissing and more. I close my eyes briefly, picturing his young face. He feels so far away now.

I try to avoid coming here.



Sonny Lake is already swarming with cops who are fencing off nosy passers-by. The lake is a popular hangout in the summer and, around two years ago, the council built one of those modern, soft-edged playgrounds at the north of the park to complement the rickety old one that remains to the west, but I've never thought to bring Ben; there are way too many memories lurking around for a Sunday afternoon play date.

Several people in jogging gear huddle nearby, talking quietly to each other as I walk past. Then I spot him. Detective Sergeant Felix McKinnon, my partner. My insides bubble gently and as always I marvel at the effect he has on me. His brow is furrowed as he bends down to talk to one of the forensic guys who is brushing at the ground just off the path. I see a white tarp a little further down in the reeds. Casey, our photographer, is snapping away to the left of it.

I allow myself to process the fact that Rosalind Ryan is dead. I suddenly feel startled to find myself a fully grown adult. I remember how her summer school dress moulded to her womanly figure. I remember the way my own uniform brushed below my knees, how I tried to pin it at the waist and the hem to look more like hers. I breathe deeply and exhale slowly. Walking down towards the lake, I set my face to blank. I try to block out the well-worn images of Rosalind that are fighting to settle in my vision. I try to block out everything. The sun is cracking through the last of the clouds and beats down like fire. The air is sharp. Dry. We are going to have to move quickly. We need to get her out of here.

‘Hey,’ I say.

‘Hi.’ Felix smiles up at me, squinting into the sun. ‘You okay?’

My vision blurs with patches of white. ‘Yep.’ I shrug his question away. I gesture to the white tarp. ‘What are you thinking?’

‘Hard to say. We ID’d her from a coin purse in her jacket that had a school library card in it. There’s nothing else on her except for her keys, which were also in her jacket. No phone or bag that we’ve been able to find yet.’ He wipes at his forehead, already beaded with sweat. ‘Fuck it’s hot.’ Felix is still trying to get used to the relentless heat that invades Smithson every Christmas. ‘She was in the water when the guy found her but Anna doesn’t think she drowned. She thinks she was strangled. But there’s also a nasty injury on her

head. No visible stab or gunshot wounds. We'll know more when we move her, obviously.' He staggers to his feet. A few grey hairs glint above his ears. The skin around his eyes wrinkles as his gaze meets mine. I look away before I can't.

'So did you know her? Remember her from school?' he asks.

I nod and look out across the lake. Two ducks bob along side by side, the beautiful markings on their faces like stage masks.

'She's not the kind of person you forget.'

'Yeah, I figured. Were you friends though?'

'It was high school! We were all friends until we weren't. You know what it's like when you're that age.'

He raises his eyebrows and looks as if he's about to say something else, so I cut him off before he can. 'Felix, is this our case?'

He's still looking at me curiously but says, 'I think so. I was in when the call came through and Jonesy asked me to call you. Matthews might kick up a stink but yeah, I reckon it's ours.'

A familiar current pulls through me. A new case. My head clicks into gear as I try to start firming up the possibilities. But it's Rosalind Ryan lying dead over there in the water, I think. It's *her*. My usually reliable brain is stuck on an image of her face and it glitches over and over like a buggy computer screen. The click of Casey's camera forms a steady beat behind us and the sound bores into my ears. I deliberately take a few deep breaths before I say, 'Good. I really want to work this one. Look—' I finally turn to meet Felix's eye '—I knew her a bit from school but it's not an issue. Honestly.' I try to ignore the throbbing in my abdomen. 'So who found her?'

'That guy over there with Jimmy. He went to Smithson High too, but I think he's older than you. He's pretty shaken up. His wife is coming to get him soon. Name's Marsh.'

I look at the well-built man clad in running garb sitting on a

park bench with Jimmy, one of our constables. I think the man is Phillip Marsh's older brother. I don't think we've ever spoken.

'I'll go and talk to him.'

'Okay. Don't be too long—we need to take a look at her before we get out of here.'

I make my way over to our witness, trying to remember his name. Spencer? Cooper? Something like that. 'Hello.'

Jimmy and the man look up at me.

'I'm Detective Sergeant Gemma Woodstock.'

Jimmy smiles at me briefly. 'This is Connor Marsh. He found the body of the young lady this morning. He was running laps.'

'Hi, Connor,' I say.

'To be honest I was only going to do one. One lap. I'm not as fit as I used to be.' Connor doesn't look at me as he speaks. His eyes are fixed on a stick near his feet. He is nudging it back and forth between them.

'Tell me about when you first saw the body,' I say.

He kicks at the stick again. 'God, it was so weird. You know?' He looks up at me again and there's a flash of recognition in his eyes. I'm pretty sure that after I finished school and started going to the gym behind the library I'd see him there lifting weights. He squints and turns his gaze to the lake. 'I was running. Just down there, along the bend.' He points down to a curve in the path about twenty metres from Rosalind's body. 'I wasn't thinking. Well, you know what I mean: I wasn't thinking about anything in particular. I was just running. I decided not to do another lap and started to slow down and then I saw her in the water.' He breathes out heavily. 'I didn't know what she was at first. Thought it was probably rubbish or something. And then I sort of realised what I was looking at in a weird moment. I totally freaked out.' Connor pushes his hair back from his eyes and says, 'I heard one of the cops say she's a teacher at the school.'

I hold his gaze but I say nothing and keep my expression neutral.

‘I know the one. She went there too, like us. She was really pretty.’ Connor looks at me. ‘Probably in your year, I reckon.’

Jimmy’s head snaps towards me. I ignore him.

‘Connor, did you notice anyone else this morning? Anyone hanging around? Anything at all that you can remember might be helpful.’

He is looking at the ground again. I notice the top of a tattoo snaking out of his ankle sock. It looks like the Smithson Saints Football Club emblem. ‘I don’t think I saw anyone. Maybe there was a girl in her car when I first pulled up in the car park. Talking on her phone. I think I remember that.’

‘Anything else?’ I press.

‘I don’t think so. Well, not really. I think I ran past someone walking their dog at some point. A guy, I think. An older guy maybe. Sorry, it was pretty early and I wasn’t paying attention.’

‘That’s okay. If you recall anything else just let us know.’

‘Do the flowers mean anything?’

‘The flowers?’

Connor nods. ‘Yeah, there were flowers around her in the water. Looked like roses.’

I exchange a look with Jimmy. He shrugs subtly. ‘We can’t speculate at this stage. We’ll obviously be investigating everything.’ I speak smoothly but my blood has turned white-hot.

‘Can I go soon? My wife is coming to get me but she’ll have the kids with her, so I think I should wait near the car park.’ He glances down towards the crime scene and shivers despite the heat. ‘Not here.’

‘That’s fine, mate, I’ll come with you.’

Jimmy’s calmness is always reassuring. He’d make a great voice-over artist selling life insurance or something.

‘Hey, Connor, one more thing,’ I say as they get up. ‘You didn’t touch the body, did you?’

‘No way. I didn’t even go very close. To be honest, I’m not good with stuff like that.’

‘A good way to be, mate, a good way to be,’ Jimmy says, leading Connor away.

Rocking onto the balls of my feet, I survey the scene again. A couple of young girls wearing neon running shoes and black lycra are clutching at each other, their faces ashen. They’re probably Smithson students, I think, grimacing. There are a few mothers cautiously pushing their children on the swings and half-heartedly helping them to navigate the slide as they fix their eyes squarely on the activity near the edge of the lake. I can hear the low hum of a chopper approaching. Bloody reporters. We need to keep moving.

Felix sees me coming and breaks away from the techs, raising his eyebrows in a question.

‘The guy’s clear,’ I tell Felix. ‘Saw nothing, knows nothing. We’ll pull him in later today or tomorrow to get it all logged and double-check with his wife for an alibi, but I doubt he can help us.’

‘I didn’t think so,’ says Felix. ‘Well, c’mon, let’s talk to Anna and get this done so we can get moving.’

‘I was going to suggest that exact thing.’

We smile briefly at each other as we walk along the rocks to where the reeds start. I see the dark entrance to the stormwater drain and can’t help feeling that someone could be watching us from in there.

‘Hey,’ I say to Felix, shaking the paranoia away, ‘what’s with the flowers? Connor Marsh said her body was covered in them.’

‘Yeah,’ he says, turning his head so I can hear him. ‘Long-stemmed red roses were floating all around her in the water. Fucking creepy.’

I picture it, thinking for a brief moment how perfect she would have looked covered in roses under different circumstances, and keep following Felix. Suddenly I experience a jolt of emotion so strong, I think I will fall into the water. This can't be real. I focus on remaining upright, my eyes fixed on the back of Felix's head, and breathe deeply.

Grey water laps gently at the brown dirt under my boots and then I see it: a foot, pale and ethereal, floating out from beneath the tarp. I remember watching Rose on the podium at the end of the local pool on a swimming sports day, her dainty feet squared together as she bent down low, snapping her goggles on, ready to jump into the water.

'Hey, Gem!' Anna's head appears from the other side of the tarp.

'Hi, Anna,' I say, shielding my face from the sun and stepping over a dirty plastic bag, crab-walking along the edge towards her.

Anna is standing knee-deep in the lake in her waterproof scrubs. She looks like an astronaut. I can tell she is hot; her face is red and her fringe sticks to her forehead in messy little lines.

'Right,' she says, when we are close enough. 'Well, guys, you know the drill. We have a deceased female, twenty-eight years of age. Her birthday would've been on Christmas Day, actually, according to her ID, which is a Smithson Secondary College teacher's library card. She's been dead for at least five hours, but it could be up to eight; the water makes it hard to tell. I'll be able to be more accurate later. Like I said to McKinnon earlier, I think she was dead before she hit the water. There's a large wound on the side of her head. I'd guess she was struck with a rock or something with rough edges but this should be clear when we do the autopsy. There might be dirt or gravel that confirms the weapon. I'd say she was strangled too, based on the marks on her neck, and obviously I'll want to run tox as well. I'm thinking lovers' tiff. Or a random attack,

especially if her wallet is missing.' Anna pushes damp hair away from her eyes. 'Either way, this isn't pretty. It looks like she's been assaulted too: her underwear is missing and there is some bruising around her thighs and upper arms. Again, I'll know more when we get her back to base. But I can rule out suicide and accidental death for you. This is a homicide.'

I look at Felix. He is staring down at Rosalind, seemingly deep in thought.

Anna gestures for the forensic team to come and get Rose's body. The reporters have arrived and are roaming up and down the police line like hungry lions. I see the black puff of a microphone bobbing along above the small crowd. The glint of a camera lens. The flick of sleek, TV-ready hair.

Great, the last thing I need today is a run-in with pocket-rocket reporter Candy Fyfe.

Anna puts her hands on her hips. 'Okay, guys, I'm done here. We've taken all the shots and bagged everything. Nothing that I think will be helpful. Mind you, there's bloody rubbish everywhere. Water never helps.'

'Yep, much better if everyone was killed in the middle of a wide open sports field on a still day,' says Roger cheerily. Roger is one of our longest-serving forensics. He's been with the Smithson police force for almost forty years and has a perpetually sunny attitude regardless of the situation. I often picture him at home, happily telling his wife about his cases: 'Yes, the dead girl was strangled, it seems, murdered in cold blood. Pass the salt, please, darling.'

Roger and Fred, our other forensic guy, pull up the tarp and place the stretcher carefully underneath Rose's left side. Above us is the belly of a low-flying helicopter, and I come around the right side to block the view of her body. Rose is pulled onto the white surface. Her face is exactly as I remember it. A Disney princess beauty: her

even features waiting patiently for a prince's kiss. When I heard a few years ago that she'd returned to Smithson and was a teacher at the school, I was disappointed. I wanted better for her than that. Her hair hangs to the side, and Fred picks it up and pulls it along her face so that it rests across her shoulder and down the side of her arm. He looks at her as if she is a sleeping child. I remember that Fred's wife had their first baby a few months ago and I wonder what is going through his mind.

Rosalind's toenails are painted a vivid blue and there are silver rings on her fingers. Her brows and lashes are dark against her pale skin. I remember trying to re-create those eyebrows in my bedroom. Even though my colouring was much darker than hers, it had never looked right.

Fred and Roger close the body bag around her. The marks on her neck are almost black. Her dark chocolate eyes stare unflinching into the burning sun. The harsh buzz of the zip and then she is gone.

'Right, well, I'll see you all soon, I'm sure.' Anna's already checking her phone as she walks off towards the car park.

We instruct the field team to begin the search.

'Start with the area around the lake,' I tell Charlie, our field lead. 'Then move into the playground and the bushland. And get rid of all these people. It's a bloody nightmare.'

Several uniforms start instructing people on the outskirts of the police tape to leave. I watch as a teenage boy casually holds out his phone and takes a photo of Rosalind's body being bundled into an ambulance before sprinting off towards the town centre.

We're already running out of time to get in front of this thing.

I turn back to the lake. The water gives nothing away.

Once everything is set in motion, we get into my car and head back to the station. Felix is listening to voicemails. He reaches over and gives my hand a slow squeeze. A deep shiver plays through me.

I pull my hand away and flick on the radio to drown out the buzz in my ears. The ache has settled deep in my groin where my belt is pressing and I shift my weight, trying to placate it. I can't tell how much I'm still bleeding and want desperately to get to the bathroom at work. I want to be alone.

I brake suddenly, seeing a red light just in time. Felix throws me a look but I keep my gaze on the road. *Rosalind Ryan is dead. Rosalind Ryan is dead*, I think, over and over. And then I think that somehow I always knew that something like this would happen.

Chapter Three

Saturday, 12 December, 11.36 am

‘Are you sure you’re fine to work this one, Woodstock?’ says Jonesy. There is coffee spittle in his moustache. His belly protrudes past his pants and he rubs at it distractedly. ‘McKinnon tells me you knew the dead girl.’

We are standing in one of the little offices off the main room of the police station. Ken Jones, our chief superintendent, has obviously decided that Rosalind’s murder warrants his presence. I can’t remember the last time I saw him down here on a weekend.

I recall flashes of Rosalind’s face in the schoolyard. Glimpses of her creamy skin in the school change room, her large eyes glowing back at me knowingly. Years later, I slowed my car to watch her walking in front of me, arms heavy with shopping, her long skirt swishing above her feet. Her grainy face in my high school yearbook faded from the rub of my fingers.

Her staring back at me in class, daring me to look away.

I know every inch of her face.

I clear my throat. ‘Yes, sir. I knew her a bit but it’s not a problem. Honestly. We weren’t friends and I haven’t really seen her since we were in school. Ages ago.’

My heart is flying; I hate lying to Jonesy but how else can I put it? It is impossible to explain Rosalind to him in any other way.

‘Well, good. ’Cause I want you to throw everything at this. Both you and McKinnon. Get tight on this one. It’s going to be big.’ He takes a noisy slurp of his takeaway coffee. ‘Do what you need to do today, sort out her family, and then get some sleep so you can hit the ground running tomorrow.’

‘Yes, sir, of course.’

‘You’re up to it after last week?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good. Terrible, all that was.’

I adjust my bag; the strap is digging sharply into my shoulder. I think back to last Sunday night, to opening the peeling bathroom door and finding the desperate, beaten-down young woman who had decided it would be better to drown her baby son in the bath and then slit her wrists as she held his dead body, rather than spend another night in fear of her violent ex-boyfriend. ‘Isn’t it all pretty terrible these days?’

‘Certainly feels like it sometimes. Well, anyway, let’s get this show on the road.’ Jonesy pats me hard on the back as his phone starts to ring. ‘Ah, here’s the bloody maintenance man. The air-con in the main room has carked it again,’ he says and walks away, scrambling to get his ringing phone out of his pocket. The *Pink Panther* riff is abruptly cut off as he starts barking orders.

I stare at the large painting hanging on the wall next to the water cooler: a blurry blue-grey sky set atop green mountains. I think about Rosalind, dead inside the body bag. My insides are wound tight like a spring, my organs suddenly too large for my body. I tap my foot and wish Felix would hurry. I don’t want to be alone with my thoughts right now.

He appears around the corner holding two coffees. He sees me and smiles. ‘Here. You probably need this.’

‘Thanks.’ I take the coffee from him even though the thought of drinking it is making my stomach churn.

‘I just spoke to Charlie. They’ve found her car in the top car park. The one in between the school and the lake.’

‘Charlie called you?’ I say.

‘Yeah. Just now.’

‘I thought you were talking to your wife.’

Felix shoots me a withering look. ‘I was, Gem. And then Charlie called me. Want to see my call log?’ His accent wraps sweetly around the word ‘log’ and I want to kiss him.

‘Don’t be silly.’

‘Her car’s not a primary crime scene, apparently. Anna’s gone back to do a once-over but it’s locked and seems fine. We can go have a look before they move it, if we want.’

‘Okay. Good.’

‘So, since her car was in the lake’s top car park, maybe she knew she was going to end up at the lake last night?’ he says.

I think about this. ‘From memory, the car park at the school is tiny. The teachers would use that lake car park all the time because it’s only a five-minute walk away. So she might have just always parked there.’

‘Maybe it’s changed since you went there,’ says Felix.

‘I don’t think so. I drive past there sometimes and it looks pretty much the same.’ I know I’m talking quickly. I stop to breathe.

Felix cuffs me amicably on the shoulder but then lets his eyes linger on mine. A flutter runs through me. ‘Are you really okay, Gem? It must be weird going to school with her and then seeing her like this.’

‘Seriously, I’m fine. It’s just a bit of a shock, I guess.’

‘Okay, right, you two.’ Jonesy is off the phone. ‘C’mon, let’s get this thing moving. Get Matthews and Kingston as well. I want them across this, just in case.’

I roll my eyes but Felix walks off to grab the others. Gerry Matthews and Mac Kingston, both in their late forties, are detective sergeants too but wear their superiority like a badge. They have no time for me and the feeling is mutual.

Once the five of us are crammed into Jonesy's messy office, we work through what we know.

'Deceased twenty-eight-year-old female. Rosalind Elizabeth Ryan. English teacher at Smithson Secondary College. It appears she lived alone in a small place on the highway. The body was discovered this morning at Sonny Lake, just before seven-thirty am. She was bashed and strangled, and there's suspected sexual assault.' Felix reels off this information as if it is a classified ad and I can almost pretend I don't know her. That I can't see her lifeless limbs floating in the water.

'And who found her?' asks Jonesy. 'Some jogger you said, Woodstock? Have we cleared him?'

'Yes, sir, I think he's clear. He knew her very vaguely but we'll obviously get a lot of that with her growing up here and being a teacher at Smithson.' My voice sounds odd, like I'm talking from the next room.

'Okay, get his statement sorted and put that to bed. What else? Time of death?'

'Anna thinks late last night or early this morning,' I tell them.

'Any ideas on what she was doing down at the lake?'

Matthews clears his throat. 'There was a big production on at the school last night. A stage play, I guess. My wife went. I just spoke to her. She said that at the end our dead girl was up on stage getting flowers and doing a thankyou speech. Apparently the play was very good.'

I remember Rose on stage in our final year of school, absolutely captivating as Medea. Her wild eyes like daggers as she looked out over the audience, bemoaning her plight.

‘She was always really into acting,’ I say.

‘Woodstock knew her back in school,’ Jonesy explains to the others.

I avoid making eye contact.

‘Right,’ Jonesy continues, ‘well, the school needs to be a secondary crime scene, pronto. Seems like she never made it home. Seal it off and start working over it. And check out her place too.’

‘I’ve already had a team seal it off,’ I say, ignoring the look that Kingston gives Matthews.

‘Good,’ says Jonesy. ‘You and McKinnon check it out once the forensics have gone through it. Interview whoever you need to. Who’s going to do the family?’

‘I’m happy to . . .’

‘No.’ Jonesy waves Matthews’ offer away. ‘I want McKinnon and Woodstock to do the family.’ He looks me in the eye. ‘The father is a bigwig in business, so tread carefully. Apparently he’s very friendly with Mayor Cordon. I want the formal ID done asap. People are talking so we need to confirm the identity today. Autopsy tomorrow; Anna knows already. Once all that’s sorted, I want you to get a grip on what happened at the school last night. Who, what, where, the usual. Reporters are already clogging up the phones. I can’t believe your mate Candy Cane hasn’t called me yet, Woodstock, but it’s only a matter of time.’

‘She’s not my mate, sir.’

‘She’s a pain in the arse, that’s what she is, but nonetheless she and the rest of the rat pack will be all over this. It’s a great story and just in time for Christmas. Bloody fucking nightmare.’ He pushes at his sparse hair and rubs his eyes. He seems surprised to find us all still there when he looks up. A few beats go by until he roars, ‘Well, go on then—move it!’

We scatter.



I found my feet when I became a cop. After years of teetering on the brink, wildly close to the edge, the force pulled me back to safety; I walked tall again. Dad said my uniform made me look strong. I think that I simply stopped looking at the ground when I wore it. In the beginning my days were reactive: traffic accidents, petty theft, lost property, broken windows. Over time they became more proactive: tracking known offenders, looking for patterns, getting inside their heads, attempting to predict and prevent their next move. We had a lot of grads from the city come and do stints with us. Typically, young cops need to do their time in the regional areas but it's not reciprocal; I haven't done more than a few weeks in the city, not since my training. Smithson and its surrounds are all I've ever really known.

A good four-hour drive from Sydney, it's hot here in the summer and freezing in the winter, but I soon discovered that crime isn't seasonal. Along with the wholesome country air comes a lot of booze, a lot of boredom and a whole lot of violence. Felix, fresh from the streets of London, assured me that the police skills we apply here are the same, it's just the scale that is different. I'm sure that's not true—I think he just didn't want me to feel like I was missing out—but either way, I know that everyone would agree that I'm good at this. It suits me.

From the beginning I liked the hunt. The endless puzzles to figure out. The permission to focus on one thing and shut out everything else. It's a profession sympathetic to selfishness. I found it relaxing after years of blaring noise to legitimately claim tunnel vision, to dive wholeheartedly into something, to have an excuse not to talk to people, to justify my mysteriousness.

Being a female cop in Smithson did come with its challenges,

but in a way I revelled in those too. They gave me something hard and real to buck up against. A living, breathing obstacle that I could conquer; a stark contrast to the murky nothingness that was the deep well of my grief. The soundtrack of leers and put-downs that followed me around only made me more determined, more focused.

Jonesy had a soft spot for me from the start. His initial fascination at a woman being able to navigate the testosterone-soaked locker room extended to him being impressed every time I fronted up, calm and capable, to a nasty road accident, a messy suicide or a violent conflict. To his credit, he seemed determined to avoid typecasting me, often deliberately sending the others to break bad news to family members rather than assuming they needed my soft touch. I'd heard him talking on the phone a few months into my appointment, declaring to someone that I was 'as tough as old tin'. It wasn't a father figure I lacked, and he never overstepped the fence I had carefully built around myself, but I did get a bonus uncle in Jonesy, and I can't say I minded. The guys in the station *were* brutal and his backing was not so overt as to make things worse for me; rather, he became a subtle and powerful—albeit bumbling—ally, and I yearned to make him proud of me.

It had been a long time since pride had seemed important; the grief that swarmed around Dad and me did not allow a normal parent-child relationship. Our focus was almost solely on survival. Dad never relaxed enough to enjoy parenting me most of the time; there were moments of nervous joy but generally he was too busy looking over our shoulders for looming danger. Having lived only with Dad since I was thirteen, I initially found the proximity of so many other people, particularly so many men, overwhelming. Their scent hung over the station; their constant hunger unsettled me. Their jokes were crude and cruel. I set my jaw and swallowed

my frustration and, occasionally, my fear. I had very little on my side. Not only was I female but I was also young, keen and sharp: a dangerous combination.

About a month into my first year, I attended a robbery at one of the local garages with Keith Blight, a worn-out old boy who saw no place in the police force for women. He thought I'd be better off taking my feelings and my handbag straight to the nearest beauty parlour. The mechanic had managed to detain the thief, a scrawny, acne-scarred backpacker who spat on the ground approximately every sixty seconds. We arrived and I pulled out my handcuffs only to have the ferrety criminal smirk at me and then exchange a knowing look with Blight, who seemed equally amused. They both thought I was a joke. A kid cop and a girl to boot. I said nothing, knowing that any protest, any reaction at all, would simply be deemed emotional, giving them exactly what they expected from me. My face burned as I pushed the backpacker's oily head down and shoved him into the police car. Anger raged through me, threatening to erupt into a scream.

And then, a few months later, the Robbie case came along and changed everything.

Chapter Four

Saturday, 12 December, 1.46 pm

Smithson in general is fairly leafy and George Ryan's house is undoubtedly in the leafiest part of town. Smithson has always had a wealthy area to keep the rest of us in our place; it's just that before the Carling plant was built, it used to be the retail franchise owners, a handful of bank managers and the former owners of successful family farms who lived at the base of the rolling hills on the edge of town, on the opposite side from Sonny Lake. Now it's more likely that Carling's top-tier executives are neighbours both at home and at the office.

'Nice place.' Felix ducks down to look up through the windshield at the full length of Rosalind's old house.

'Yeah.'

'I imagine this house was party central back in the day?'

'Unfortunately not. Rosalind kept to herself. Well, sort of.' I try to explain. 'She was popular but she was very private. I don't know if anyone really went to her house.'

'Why not?'

'I'm not sure. She was unusual.'

'Well, hopefully she's got easier to work out since then.'

‘Yeah,’ I say again, though I doubt it.

I look up at the house too. I know her bedroom used to be on the second level to the left: I would occasionally catch her silhouette in the window as I watched from the other side of the street.

I shake myself back into the present and push my phone onto silent.

‘Okey-dokey,’ says Felix. ‘Let’s do this, then, shall we?’

We get out of the car and slam the doors heavily behind us. I don’t mind if George Ryan knows someone is coming, though of course nothing will ease him into the shock he is about to get. Unless he already knows, I think darkly.

Telling family and friends about a murdered loved one is never easy. Parents are usually the worst, their grief so pure and unchecked. They tend to immediately recast the dead adult offspring back to their childhood version. Distraught mothers often relive the moment they first held their infants, and shape their arms into an empty cradle, even if the birth was sixty years earlier. On the other hand, children of the newly dead are often bravely stoic, realising their new responsibility and position at the top of the food chain. Plus, they are busy with a myriad of distracting, grown-up jobs: legal tasks, funerals to arrange, relatives to inform. Siblings are distraught, of course, but there is often a strange ingrained competitiveness that has them imagining the roles reversed. They picture themselves as the dead child and compare hypothetical grief and reactions. Even in death, the ability to pull rank can be strong.

Informing the family of a murder is particularly difficult because our best chance at a solve is maintaining a completely open mind. We must have the ability to see past a broken stare. To look beyond pale-faced agony and the wringing of hands. Murderers are people too, and in many instances the grief they show for a victim is real, despite having caused it.

George Ryan is listed as Rosalind's next of kin. I'm pretty sure she also has three older brothers.

'I can only remember one of them,' I tell Felix, as we walk to the door. The driveway is lined with a cloud of wattle and the sun bounces off it, making a ferocious yellow blaze. 'He seemed kind of cocky. I think the others were a bit older than us.'

'No mother?' asks Felix.

'I don't know,' I say. 'Not that I can remember.'

The front door flies open just as I am about to press the doorbell.

'Hello?' A short, clean-shaven man with neatly combed hair and a complexion starved of sunshine stands in front of us. A rush of air-con swirls out from behind him. His small eyes dart back and forth between us.

'Hello. Sorry to arrive unannounced but we need to speak to George Ryan.'

The man bobs his head up and down. 'Oh. He's only just out of bed. He's not feeling one hundred percent.'

'Well, I'm afraid we'll still need to speak with him. I'm Detective Sergeant Woodstock. This is Detective Sergeant McKinnon.'

A haze of understanding falls over the man's stare. 'You'd better come in then. I'm Marcus. George's son.' He steps aside, gesturing for us to enter. On our left is a polished wooden stairway. To the right, a high-ceilinged hallway displays a heavy-looking oil painting.

'Is Mr Ryan unwell?' Felix asks, as we follow Marcus towards the back of the house.

'He had surgery yesterday,' Marcus informs us. 'But he's recovering well.'

Felix and I exchange looks. We are probably about to bring his recovery to a grinding halt.

'This way, please,' says Marcus. 'Everyone is in here. My brothers are here too.'

He leads us into a large open room at the rear of the house.

Three men sit on a giant cream couch along the right wall of the room. Their eyes are glued to the cricket, which is playing soundlessly in high definition on one of the biggest televisions I have ever seen. The ceiling peaks directly above them and windows are cut into its sides, casting blades of light onto the floor near their feet. Photographs crowd the mantelpiece. On one end there is a large frame featuring a striking raven-haired woman with glittering blue eyes. From the kitchen I hear a radio tuned in to the cricket match on the TV.

Outside, a sparkling lap pool glitters in the bright sunlight.

'Hello,' I say. 'I'm Detective Sergeant Woodstock and this is Detective Sergeant McKinnon.'

Six eyes look at me blankly.

'Please sit,' insists Marcus, coming up behind me and ushering us into chairs. 'This is my father, George Ryan. And my brothers, Bryce and Timothy.'

If Bryce and Timothy recognise me, they don't show it. Steam curls from the mug that George Ryan is holding. He is the largest of them all: broad across the shoulders and overweight, but in a way that suits his frame. He is very pale. His hands shake as he steadies the tea on his knee. His younger sons flank him. While Marcus looks like he has stepped straight out of the early twentieth century, Timothy and Bryce are quintessential modern Aussies. They are both deeply tanned with loose-necked t-shirts, surf-brand shorts and wiry hair like ivy woven up their muscled legs. Straight white teeth underneath denim blue eyes complete the look.

I look at each of them in turn before speaking to George Ryan. 'Unfortunately, we have some very bad news.' I take a huge breath and close my eyes briefly before saying, 'Your daughter Rosalind was found dead this morning. We believe she was murdered.'

A ball connects with a bat on the radio and it sounds like a gunshot. The crowd oohs and aahs, and I watch carefully as the shock hits the Ryans square in the face.

Marcus looks desperately at his father and brothers and then back to me. 'What?'

George Ryan shifts into an upright position, clearly in pain. 'Rosalind is dead?'

Timothy and Bryce are gobsmacked bookends staring dumbly into their laps.

'Yes. I'm so sorry.'

Marcus scurries to the kitchen and snaps the radio off. The silence rushes through the house and I find myself desperate to say something. 'We believe Rosalind died late last night or very early this morning. After the play at the school.'

'What happened?' George Ryan's booming voice is glorious. Syrupy and thick, it catches in his throat.

Felix leans forward. 'We don't know yet, Mr Ryan, but it is a homicide investigation. Your daughter was attacked. We're terribly sorry, but can we please ask you all a few questions? We really need to know as much as we can. It will help us to find out who did this.'

George Ryan lets out a deep sigh, straight from his soul. He grimaces as he pulls himself up to place his mug on the coffee table. I imagine going from the ordeal of surgery to being told that your only daughter has been murdered.

'My little girl is dead?' His face wobbles wildly and his eyes seem unable to focus. He looks to me for confirmation. To check that the awful thing I just said is true.

I nod quickly, considering his reaction.

He pushes his fingers against his eyes and holds them there for a moment. 'Ask us anything,' he says to the floor.

‘I’ll get some water,’ says Marcus, jumping up from his chair again. His eyes are bright with tears and his lip quivers.

‘We’re fine, honestly.’

‘No, no, come on, please,’ he insists. ‘It’s so hot.’

I sense Marcus needs to have a task. ‘Thank you,’ I say.

‘Get me a water too, please, Mark,’ says George softly, as Marcus walks out of the room. ‘And bring me my pills.’

Felix is firm. ‘We know this is a huge shock. Maybe let’s start with when you all last saw Rosalind. Timothy, what about you?’

Timothy’s eyes are huge. He stares at the mute cricket game on TV, his jaw shaking. ‘Well, I went to the school play last night. It was a really big deal for Rose.’ His eyes jump from me, to Felix, to the floor. ‘I didn’t get the chance to speak with her though.’

Bryce’s head snaps up. ‘I didn’t know you went.’

George, too, looks at Timothy in surprise.

Timothy shrugs. ‘I hadn’t seen her since Dad’s birthday.’ He turns to me and wipes some tears from his eyes. ‘Um, Dad’s birthday night got a bit intense. I acted like a dick and Rose was upset. I knew the play was important to her so I wanted to go.’

‘All she talked about was that play,’ says a bewildered-looking Marcus, returning with a silver tray on which are several glasses of water. ‘She was very excited about it when I last spoke to her.’ He hands me a glass. He speaks so softly I have to strain forward to hear him. ‘I live in Sydney. I’m home early for Christmas because of Dad’s operation yesterday. Rose and I usually speak once a fortnight but I’ve only seen her once since Dad’s birthday in October.’

I glance at Timothy in time to see an almost imperceptible twitch of his eyes.

I turn back to Marcus. ‘Did you go to the play too? Seeing as you were here.’

‘I only just arrived this morning.’ His voice breaks and he looks away. He wipes his face with his hand. ‘I was planning to go next weekend.’

I shift my gaze along the couch. ‘What about you, Bryce? When did you last see Rosalind?’

‘At Dad’s birthday dinner, like the others. So October the seventeenth.’ His eyes bore into mine. ‘I haven’t even spoken to her since. We don’t really talk much. That sounds awful now.’ He gulps some water. ‘But it’s true. To be honest, I’m not quite sure this has sunk in yet. What did she do?’

‘What do you mean?’ I say.

‘Why did someone attack her? Was she fighting with someone?’

‘What makes you say that?’ I ask.

Bryce is sheepish, clearly regretting his comment. ‘I don’t know. I guess I just figured she did something that made someone lose it.’

‘Did she do that a lot? Get people offside?’ Felix probes.

Timothy stares at the floor. Bryce opens his mouth and then closes it. Felix arches his eyebrow at him.

‘Well, she can be difficult,’ says Bryce feebly.

‘Difficult?’ I say, ignoring his use of the present tense.

Bryce looks to Timothy for support. ‘Yeah. Well, she always speaks her mind, which I guess some people find challenging.’

‘Had she mentioned any specific run-ins with anyone lately? Arguments?’

Now Bryce is the one to fix his eyes on the floor. Timothy shakes his head slowly.

George Ryan clears his throat, cutting off our conversation. ‘I just can’t imagine how this could have happened. It doesn’t make any sense. No one would want to hurt Rose.’

‘It’s very hard to understand something like this, Mr Ryan,’ I tell him. ‘It may never really make sense, but we need you all to help us

try to piece things together.' I place my glass down and ask, 'When did you last see her?'

'At my birthday as well. I've been away a lot since then, you see, trying to get everything ready before . . . well.' He trails off and then seems to remember he was talking. 'She did call me on Thursday to wish me well for my operation. We talked about the play. She was very proud of it, you know.' He drops his head and shudders through a hopeless, silent sob.

'It was based on *Romeo and Juliet*, is that right?' I'd looked it up on the school website before we came here.

He lifts his head and focuses watery eyes on me. 'Yes, yes, she loved all that stuff. She really battled to get it happening. The school didn't want to put on a play this year. There were issues with funding or something, so it got delayed several times. I think she was quite frustrated about that. She was very passionate about it and kept pushing the principal to endorse it. That's just Rosalind all over: determined.'

Bryce, Marcus and Timothy don't move. George Ryan pops some pills out of the packet that Marcus gave him, dropping them on his lap before washing them down with the cold water.

He continues, 'And all those kids in year twelve got behind her, agreeing to be in the play even though school had finished. They must have really liked her.'

I nod, reminded that we need to talk to all of these students as soon as possible. I wonder what will happen with the play now.

The sun has moved across the floor onto my foot. I pull it away into shadow. 'So, Marcus, you were in Sydney last night. Timothy, you went to the play. Bryce, what about you?' I ask.

'I was here. I flew into Gowran yesterday afternoon. I saw Dad briefly at the hospital, but he was pretty groggy so I didn't stay long.' He seems out of breath.

‘What about after dinner?’ I press.

‘I had a work call and then had some dinner here. I spoke to my girlfriend at some point. She lives between Smithson and Sydney and was already here at a place she rents out, but she wasn’t feeling well, so she cancelled our plans just after I landed.’

Felix turns to Timothy. ‘Do anything after the play?’

‘Just came straight here. Bryce was here. In his room.’

Bryce nods in confirmation.

Something is nagging at me. Timothy and Bryce’s ‘Dear Diary’ recall is all a bit too neat. But as I study them I see real sorrow in their eyes. I change gears. ‘Did Rose have a boyfriend?’

‘A boyfriend? No, no. No boyfriend,’ says George.

‘Okay, well, what about earlier this year? Was she seeing anyone?’

‘No. Nothing like that. She had a few boyfriends in school and uni but nothing serious. She was very into her teaching. Very dedicated. Not running around like half the silly girls are these days.’

Timothy and Bryce exchange loaded looks from opposite ends of the couch. Marcus gets to his feet and hovers near my elbow for a few moments. His anxiety is palpable. He clutches at his hands and then clears his throat twice. ‘Do you want food? I think we have biscuits or maybe some cake.’

‘How often are you here?’ Felix asks him abruptly.

He stammers, ‘It—it depends. Probably three times a year.’

‘And you?’ Felix says to Bryce.

‘Same. Maybe a bit more. My girlfriend is here almost every second week at the moment so I come with her sometimes.’

‘And you live in Paxton?’ Felix says to Timothy.

‘I did. I own a place there. Well, half a place, according to the lawyers. I’m in the middle of a divorce so I’m staying here at the moment. I’ll get a new place in the new year.’

I catch Timothy’s gaze and feel the hairs prickling up my legs.

Felix turns to George. 'Mr Ryan, I have to ask, does Rose have other family? Her mother?'

'My wife Olivia is dead. She died a few days after giving birth to Rose. From a haemorrhage.'

'I'm sorry to hear that. That must have been incredibly difficult.'

'Yes. It was a shock, just like this. And I had small children to worry about then. Truth be told, Olivia was not a well woman before she died. Marcus was always a great help. Especially once Olivia was gone.'

Outside a bird swoops suddenly towards the pool and flits across the surface. Inside, the only sound I can hear is the soft whir of the air-conditioner.

'Is there anything you can think of that might be worth telling us about?' I ask. 'Something she said? Even something that seems like a little thing?'

Bryce and Timothy exchange looks again but shake their heads. Marcus swallows noisily. George Ryan just stares at his hands.

'Well, thank you. We'll leave you alone.' I stand up and gesture at Felix to do the same. 'We truly are so sorry. Look after yourselves. You've had a terrible shock. We'll do everything we can to work out what happened to Rosalind.'

They all stand except for George. His eyes fix on me, years and sorrow etched into his face. 'Yes. Please find out who did this to my daughter.'

Marcus walks us to the front door.

'We'll be working through her phone records, her house, what happened on the night she died—everything.' Felix shakes Marcus's hand. 'We're doing everything we can.'

Marcus holds his hand for a few beats.

Felix adds, 'One of you will need to come down to the station today to complete the identification. Your father may not be up to it?'

‘Oh. Yes, of course. Well, I’ll speak to Dad and see whether he wants to . . . or perhaps I’ll just go myself. He’s probably not really well enough. He’s supposed to have strict rest until Monday.’

‘How about I call you in an hour? You can let me know then,’ says Felix.

‘Yes. Alright.’ His face crumples before he pulls it back into line. ‘God,’ he says, almost to himself.

‘Marcus, make sure you tell any other family and friends sooner rather than later,’ I say gently. ‘This will be all over the news tonight.’

He nods, looking lost.

We step outside into the heat.

Felix pauses and turns to face Marcus again. ‘Did Rosalind keep living here after she finished school?’

Marcus stands in the doorway. I can see glimmers of his father starting to creep onto his face. ‘Ah, no, she wanted to do the student thing. Plus, I think being the only girl . . . perhaps it was a bit hard for her. I think she felt a bit lost living here. She never really found her place. Anyway, she moved to Sydney, did arts at uni and travelled a bit—you know, normal stuff.’ He pauses and we wait, both thinking he’s going to say something else, but he just stands there blinking at us.

After a few moments Felix smiles sadly. ‘Well, take care, okay? Like I said, I’ll give you a call in a little while. But you call us anytime you need. Or if you think of anything.’

Marcus moves his mouth into a tight smile and closes the door gently, his footsteps echoing as he walks down the hall.

‘Wow,’ Felix whistles, as we make our way down the driveway.

‘Wow what?’

‘I don’t know, but they’re something.’

We get back into the car. ‘Can you be more specific?’

‘Well, I don’t know where to start.’ Felix fastens his seatbelt.

‘I mean, we’ve obviously dropped a bombshell on them, but they seem so *weird*. No wonder she got out of there.’

‘Define “weird”.’

‘*That*.’ Felix makes his eyes bug out and I laugh.

‘Timothy looked at me funny,’ I say. ‘Like defensive or something.’

‘He had a weird vibe. They all did. Especially the younger two.’

‘Well, they were in shock.’

Felix dismisses the Ryans’ shock with a wave of his hand. ‘They were strange. Like cardboard cut-outs. And Marcus would have to be the most awkward person on the planet. I want to run background on all of them and get alibis confirmed asap.’

‘Of course,’ I agree. ‘I just don’t want to jump to conclusions. Getting news like that throws you. You’re allowed to act a bit weird.’ I start the car and pull away from the kerb.

‘When can I see you?’ Felix says.

‘Huh?’

‘When can I see you? You know, *properly*?’ His voice has a desperate edge and my body stirs in response.

I keep my eyes on the road. I think about this morning in the shower. It feels like it happened a long time ago. I blink the scene away. I wonder if I’m still bleeding. I can hear his breathing next to me. I guide us back towards the station. Felix grabs my thigh hard, digging his fingers in around its curve.

‘Monday night,’ I say, staring straight ahead, my heart beating so loudly I think he can probably hear it.