

THE GIRL IN THE MIRROR

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ROSE CARLYLE

THE
GIRL IN
THE
MIRROR



First published in Australia in 2020 by
Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Australia.

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Corvus, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

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2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is
available from the British Library.

Paperback ISBN: 978 1 83895 195 5

E-book ISBN: 978 1 83895 196 2

Printed in Great Britain

Corvus
An imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ

www.corvus-books.co.uk

In memory of my brother,
David Carlyle

PROLOGUE

For the first twelve days of our life, we were one person. Our father's brains and our mother's beauty swirled into one blessed embryo, the sole heir to the Carmichael fortune.

On the thirteenth day, we split. It was almost too late. One more day and the split would have been incomplete. Summer and I would have been conjoined twins, perhaps sharing major organs, facing a choice between a lifetime shackled together and a surgical separation that might have left us maimed.

As it was, our rupture was imperfect. We might look identical, more than most twins, but we're mirror twins, mirror images of each other. The minute asymmetries in my sister's face—her fuller right cheek, her higher right cheekbone—are reproduced in my face on the left side. Other people can't see the difference, but when I look in the mirror, I don't see myself. I see Summer.

When we were six years old, Dad took a sabbatical from Carmichael Brothers, and our family sailed up the east coast of Australia and into Southeast Asia. Our home town, Wakefield, is the last safe place to swim before you enter croc territory, so Summer and I and our younger brother, Ben, spent a lot of time on that cruise playing inside our yacht.

I loved everything about *Bathsheba*. She was a custom-built sloop, her sleek aluminium hull fitted out with the best timbers—teak decks, oak cabinetry—but what I loved most of all was the ingenious double mirror in the bathroom. The builder had set two mirrors into a corner at right angles, with such care that I could scarcely discern the line of intersection. When I looked squarely at either one of these mirrors, I saw Summer, as usual. But when I stared between them, past that line, into the corner, I saw a non-reversed image. I saw my true self.

‘When I grow up, I’m going to have one of these mirrors in my house,’ I told Summer, watching the solemn blonde girl in the mirror mouth the words in time with my voice.

Summer put her little hand on my chest. ‘But, Iris, I thought you liked pretending to be the right—the other—way round,’ she said.

‘Mirrors don’t change what’s on the inside.’ I pushed her hand away. ‘Besides, my heart *is* on the right side.’

We were the most extreme case of mirroring the doctors had ever seen. It wasn’t the facial differences, barely detectable without calipers. They had scanned my abdomen when

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I was a baby, and my liver, pancreas, spleen, all my organs, were on the wrong side of my body. This was how the doctors knew that we had split so late. When I lay still and watched my bare chest, it was the right-hand side that rose and fell in a rhythmic flutter, proof that my heart was misplaced.

Inside Summer, though, everything was as it should be. Summer was perfect.

PART I

IRIS

CHAPTER 1

THE MIRROR

I wake in my twin sister's bed. My face is squashed between plump pillows covered in white cotton. It makes me feel like a kid again, swapping places with Summer, and yet everything has changed. We're adults now, and this is Adam's bed too.

I roll over and survey the marital bedroom. Everything is oversize and lush; the colours are creamy and airy, but the carpet is the colour of a ripe peach. There's something illicit about lying here, even though Summer and Adam are thousands of miles away, not even in Australia anymore. Someone must have changed the sheets since they left, but I can smell Summer. She smells of innocent things: suntan lotion, apples, the beach.

This room breathes Summer, so it's jarring to remember that she didn't choose these furnishings. Adam owned this

house when Summer married him, not long after his first wife, Helen, died. The room looks much the same as it did on Summer's wedding day last year. It's just like my sister to mould herself into the life that another woman left behind. She's easy-going to a fault.

The super-king bed is nestled into a bay window with decadent views of Wakefield Beach. I struggle to sit up—this bed is too soft—and lean against the mahogany bedhead, bathing my face in the light of the rising sun. The Coral Sea's turquoise mingles with gold shards of reflected sunbeams. I wish I was in the water right now, swimming in those colours. There are a few things I need to wash off.

From here, perched on the cliff edge, in one direction I can see Wakefield River, north of the town, cutting through the land like a wound. Summer has always loved the river, although, as a breeding ground for saltwater crocs, it's not swimmable. She likes to look at it from the safety of the bridge that our father built across it—his first construction project.

In the other direction, a faultless beach sweeps north to south, wild and open to ocean waves. Halfway along the beachfront, one mansion, faux Victorian with a hint of Byzantium, dwarfs the other beachfront dwellings. It's the house we grew up in; at least, that was where we lived until Dad died.

My mother, Annabeth, must still be asleep in the spare room, so this is my chance to check out Summer's loot. If I were house-sitting, I wouldn't cram myself into the guest bedroom, but Annabeth revels in being unassuming. She tried

to stop me sleeping here when I turned up late last night, but I couldn't resist.

I claw my way out of the heaped bedding and rub my bare feet into the thick carpet. March is still high summer in Wakefield, and as I pad around the room, the warm air kisses my naked body. This time yesterday, I was in the mountains in New Zealand, where winter was already frosting the morning air.

One wall of the walk-in wardrobe is lined with Summer's dresses, a rainbow of silk and lace. I'm surprised that her drawers are still full of lingerie, even though she and Adam plan to be overseas for a year. The lingerie is typical Summer stuff, overrun with roses, demurely styled, more suited to a pre-teen girl than a married woman of twenty-three. There are loads of it; she surely wouldn't notice if half of it disappeared—not that I would dream of stealing. I suppose she couldn't fit all her clothes on the yacht.

The yacht. *Bathsheba*. This is the nub of the thing. This is why I feel as though Summer and I have swapped places. Because Summer's on *Bathsheba*. And *Bathsheba*'s not mine, she never was mine, she never will be mine, but I feel that she ought to be. It feels as though Summer is sleeping in my bed, on my yacht.

Summer never loved *Bathsheba*, but now *Bathsheba* is her home. She and Adam have bought the yacht, bought her fair and square from Dad's estate, and now Summer and Adam

own her as much as they own the house that I'm standing in right now.

What do I own? A shrinking bank account, a wedding ring I don't want anymore, a bunch of furniture I've left behind in New Zealand. A piano I'll probably never play again. It was a cheap instrument, anyway. Summer and Adam have a better one.

I pick up a bra and knicker set that's so innocent it's almost porno. Yellow gingham, it reeks of boarding school: hockey sticks and cold baths. The bra is a double D, and I wear a D, but it looks like it'll fit. I step into the panties. I want to see what Summer looks like in these.

As I'm fastening the bra, the phone rings in a distant part of the house. That'll wake Annabeth. I suppose I will have to face up to her and her questions about why I'm here. I pretended to be too tired last night.

I barely have time to think before Annabeth bursts in on me.

'Here she is,' my mother says into the handset as she minces across the bedroom in a frumpy nightie, her blonde hair looking frizzy and streaked with grey. My mother is at the age where she needs make-up and hair products to achieve the beauty she once woke up with; she's not looking her best right now. 'No, no, she was already awake. Love the gingham bra, Iris. Summer has one the same.' Her sleepy blue eyes peer at me myopically. She dangles the receiver in my face as though I won't be able to see it unless it's right under my nose.

I grab the phone and shoo Annabeth out of the room. 'Close the door behind you!' I call.

Who could be phoning me? Who even knows I'm back in Australia, let alone in my sister's house?

'Hello?' My voice is craven, as though I've been caught somewhere I shouldn't be.

'Iris! Thank goodness you're there.' It's Summer. Her voice breaks into jagged sobs. 'You have to help me. We're in trouble. You're the only one who can help.'

I can't quite focus, because I'm wondering whether Annabeth's comment about the bra gave the game away. Summer can be oddly territorial about her clothes. But my sister doesn't seem to have heard. She's saying something about Adam, something about how she needs me, Adam needs me. Adam wants her to say that it was his idea and he's praying I'll accept.

I gaze at a rack of Adam's white business shirts. Each one holds Adam's shape as though a row of invisible Adams is wearing them, here in the wardrobe with me. The shirts are so big in the chest, so long in the sleeve. I hold one to my face. It smells of cloves. I can see Adam in this pristine white, his skin glowing darkly.

'The poor little man, his pee-pee is swollen and red, and there's something seeping out. It's horrific. The foreskin is so stretched. He's crying all the time.'

What is she saying? I'm agog. We're twins, but we don't have *that* kind of relationship. I've never heard Summer describe

anyone's penis before, let alone her husband's. What the hell is wrong with him?

'The worst part is when he gets an erection. It's excruciating. Babies do get erections, you know. It's nothing sexual.'

Babies?

'Wait,' I say. 'Are you talking about *Tarquin*?'

'Who else could I be talking about?'

Silence.

Tarquin. The other thing that Summer took over when Helen died, along with Helen's house and Helen's husband. The baby.

Summer is Tarquin's mother now. Adam and Summer agreed that Tarquin deserved a normal family, so Tarquin calls Summer 'Mummy'. Or at least he will if the kid ever learns to speak.

'Summer, I know baby boys get erections,' I say. 'We have a younger brother, you know. I've seen these things.' Summer always assumes I know nothing about kids, explaining that they need a daily bath and a regular bedtime, or something equally fascinating, like I'm an idiot. The last thing I want to think about is Tarquin's pee-pee, especially if it's seeping.

'Trust me, you've never seen anything like this,' Summer says. 'It's becoming dangerous. The infection could spread. The doctors said he could lose his penis. He could *die*.' The word comes out with a sob. 'He needs surgery. An emergency circumcision. They can't fly him home. He's having the surgery today, here in Phuket. We're at the international hospital.'

Summer's voice is fast and fluttery. She's teetering on a tightrope between shouty hysteria and a flood of tears. Most of the time, Summer is the self-assured, gracious twin, while I'm nervous and gauche, but when the chips are down, I'm the one who keeps her head.

I step up to my role now. I hang Adam's shirt back on the rack and smooth it into place. No one could tell it's been touched. 'An international hospital sounds good,' I say.

'Yes,' she says. 'They've been so kind to us here.'

'That's good, and it's good that you've rung me,' I reply. I say 'good' like it's a mantra, calming Summer. 'Of course I can help. So you haven't told Annabeth yet?'

'I couldn't . . .' Summer's voice quavers again.

'I can tell her. She can fly up to Phuket today. I don't mind taking over the house-sitting for a few days.'

No response.

'For as long as you and Adam need it,' I add generously.

'No, no, Iris, we need you, not Mum.'

My head buzzes. Summer needs me. *Adam* needs me. But why? I'm no good with babies. Tarquin already has both his parents. The only parents he knows, anyway. What do they need me for?

I picture myself in Thailand, swanning around the Royal Phuket Marina with its flotilla of superyachts, drinking cocktails. Strong ones, not the virgin cocktails Dad bought us when we were kids. Surely not all those millionaire yachties want Thai girlfriends. Some of them must prefer blondes.

But what am I thinking? Tarquin is ill. It sounds like his penis is rotting off. There'll be no time for drinking and flirting. Surely.

'We're in a serious bind, Iris, and we can't tell just anybody about it. Only people we trust one hundred per cent.' Summer pauses.

'Well, obviously you can tell me,' I say.

'Of course,' says Summer. 'I'm just saying, you must keep this a secret. The thing is, our import permit for *Bathsbeba* has expired. We've already checked her out of Thailand. We were ready to go, but the beaches are so beautiful here. We thought we could spend another couple of weeks in a quiet anchorage and no one would know. We never imagined Tarquin would get sick. It's terrible timing. If customs find *Bathsbeba's* still in Thailand, they'll seize her. The people here are lovely, but there's so much corruption.'

Summer makes it sound as though corruption is some affliction, like malaria, that the poor Thais suffer through no fault of their own. But I'm too keen to hear more to quibble with her.

'So what do you want me to do?'

'Oh, Twinnie, I don't know how to ask you such a huge favour. Adam's a good sailor, but he's barely been out of sight of land. You know how hard it is on the open sea. It's a long passage to the Seychelles, at least a fortnight, and the end of the season is near. The typhoons start in April, but we

can't wait till April anyway. We need to get *Bathsheba* out of Thailand now. And you were always such a great sailor, Iris. We'll pay your plane fares, of course, and Adam says you can stand whichever watches you want.'

As Summer speaks, I step back into her bedroom and approach the bay window. The water glitters far below, swirling around sun-bleached rocks. I can't let myself believe Summer's words. They're too good to be true. I've melted through the glass, and I'm flying over the ocean, turning a joyous shade of aquamarine.

Adam's speaking in the background now. Has he been listening all along? 'Tell her I'll do all the night watches,' he says, in that deep voice flecked with the cadence of the Seychelles. His voice goes on more quietly. I hold the phone close to my ear and shut my eyes, straining to hear.

'Believe it or not, Iris *likes* sailing at night,' Summer says. When she speaks to Adam, her voice becomes playful, smooth, liquid. No wonder I can barely stand to be in the same room as my sister and her husband.

But it seems I wouldn't have to spend much time with the two of them. The plan seems to be that Summer will stay in Phuket with Tarquin and his festering genitalia, and I will leave behind my failed job, failed marriage and failed life, and sail across the Indian Ocean on the yacht I have loved since childhood. And who will go with me? My brother-in-law, the wealthy, handsome, charismatic Adam Romain.

I imagine sailing into the Seychelles, a dream-country of coconut palms and halcyon beaches, but I'm not a mere tourist, because my husband is a local, so in a way it's a homecoming.

Well, not husband in my case. Brother-in-law. But still.

'Of course I want to help,' I say, 'but I have a lot of job interviews lined up.' This isn't true; I haven't started looking yet. I've been trying to figure out how to explain to prospective employers why I walked out on my last job. 'And I have a lot of bills.'

Summer's voice when it comes back is quieter. 'We'll cover everything,' she says. 'Plane fares, debts you need paid, anything you need. I'm sorry, Iris. I know things have been hard for you with Noah leaving. I know it isn't fair to ask. If I wasn't desperate. If *we* weren't desperate . . .'

It's not often that Summer's in need. All our life, she's been content with what she has, happy with her lot. As anyone would be who had Summer's lot. But I can't bear to stretch it out. She sounds truly unhappy—and in a moment, she might think of someone else to ask.

'I'll do it,' I say. 'I'll do it for you, Twinnie.'

Summer squeals down the phone.

In a few minutes, everything is planned. Adam has found a direct flight on his smartphone. I'll leave Wakefield this

morning. I have an hour to pack and to tell our mother before I head to the airport. I'll be in Phuket by this evening. I'll be on *Bathsheba*.

Adam comes on the line. 'What's your date of birth? Oh, stupid me, of course I know that. What's your middle name? Same as Summer's?'

'No middle name.'

'Really, just Iris? OK, that's easy. Short and sweet. Hang on a second, hon—Iris—the website's confirming the booking.'

Did he almost call me honey? The thought has a deep effect on me. I feel it in my body. I flush with shame; I really should get out of Summer's underwear.

But now Adam's saying goodbye. In the background, Summer is asking about Tarquin's vaccinations, but Adam doesn't know the answers to her questions. He's always so vague, it makes me wonder how the hell he manages to run a travel agency. Summer has to handle all their life admin. He hands the phone back to her, and she asks me to email Tarquin's vaccination records to her. Then she hangs up.

Finding the records is easy. Summer has filed them all in the wardrobe. I'm struck by her extreme organisation. Her life is laid out here in writing; there's even a folder labelled 'Adam's favourite meals'. When I pull it off the shelf, a sex manual falls out. *The Millennial Kama Sutra*. It looks well worn.

I could browse all day, but I have to get moving. I have to dress, eat something, tell Annabeth the plan. My mother's

barely got her head around my sudden appearance, and now I'm disappearing again. She'll freak out about Tarquin too. She treats the kid like he's her blood grandson.

First, I dart into the ensuite bathroom for one glimpse of Summer in her good-girl gingham. And that's when I see it. The one thing that Summer has changed about this house.

The two panes of glass must have cost a bomb, and it must have been quite an operation to hoist them up here. They seem larger than the door. They've been installed with great care. The angle is exact, the seam almost invisible. Even better than the one on the yacht.

It wouldn't bother me, it wouldn't gnaw at my insides, if Summer had genuinely wanted a double mirror. We are twins; I can't blame her for wanting the same things as I do. But Summer has never minded who she sees in the mirror. She's never been interested in the 'mirror twins' thing. I can see she has installed this mirror because it looks good. It fits into the space beautifully, and with the door to the bedroom open, it reflects the bay window and the ocean beyond.

Even the things Summer doesn't care about she gets first.

I stare diagonally into the double mirror. The girl in the mirror stares back. She's wearing Summer's yellow underwear, but she isn't Summer. It's her left cheek that's fuller, her left cheekbone that's higher.

The girl in the mirror is me.

CHAPTER 2

THE WILL

There was a moment when Summer was an only child. Annabeth's got a bohemian streak, so she refused to have an ultrasound during her pregnancy, even though Dad was desperate to know the baby's sex. And her belly wasn't very big. There was no clue that there were two babies.

So it was a girl. My mother held the rosy blonde infant in her arms and gave her the name she'd been saving up all her life: Summer Rose.

Then they realised I was coming. Dad doubtless felt his dashed hopes rise again—a second chance for a son. Annabeth just hoped that we would not be identical twins.

They were both disappointed. My father, ever logical, suggested Summer and Rose as names, but Annabeth couldn't take away the name with which she'd already blessed my sister.

Later that day, someone brought my mother a bunch of irises, and something about the spiky, unscented flowers must have appealed, because that's what my parents named me. Annabeth always told this story as if it meant something special, but I couldn't get past the idea that she had looked around the hospital room and named me after the first thing she laid eyes on, because she still wanted Summer to be Summer Rose.

Suitcase in hand, I hurry out of Summer and Adam's bedroom and down the floating staircase. I've organised for my Uncle Colton to drive me to the airport since Annabeth's eyesight is too poor these days. I won't let her come with me. After Summer's phone call, I've managed to fudge the truth, so she now has the impression that the reason I turned up in Australia was to go and help with *Bathsheba*. All the same, she's already asked me too many questions about Noah.

Uncle Colton is easier company, although as he gets older, his resemblance to Dad is becoming almost spooky. When I reach the bottom of the stairs, Colton is standing close by my mother's side in the spacious white living room, where everything is drenched in sunshine from the skylights that Adam has installed. The two of them are gazing at the larger-than-life framed photo of the newborn Tarquin on the living room wall. In the photo, Tarquin is skinny and sickly, with breathing tubes in his nose, and is held not by his dying mother but by a young neonatal nurse.

Standing together, my uncle and my mother both look as blond and well preserved as each other, and the ugly thought hits me that Annabeth might be attracted to this uncanny reincarnation of her husband. Then again, she probably can't see well enough to appreciate the similarity. She has macular degeneration, so everything in her world is low-res.

'So this is all Helen's stuff, the furniture, and the piano, of course?' Uncle Colton asks. Helen was a concert pianist, and her Steinway grand still has pride of place in Summer and Adam's living room. It's out of keeping with the decor, black and heavy where everything else is light.

'I guess nobody plays it?' he adds.

'I think Summer and Adam hope Tarquin will learn.' Annabeth heaves a sigh. 'It's funny that Summer has such a beautiful piano, when Iris is the one who plays.' *Funny* isn't quite the word I'd have used. I itch to open the lid and run my fingers over those immaculate keys, let sweet, warm music fill that airy space, but I'm running late.

On the way to the airport, Uncle Colton is his usual boring self. He drones on about what lovely girls Francine is raising and how well Virginia is doing in high school, but I'm only half-listening. The way he talks, anyone would think Francine was his wife rather than his brother's widow. One of the three wives my father left behind.

Alone in the departure lounge, having farewelled my uncle, I indulge in a bit of twin-spotting and glimpse several pairs. Most people don't notice twins, even identical ones, once

they've grown out of the dress-alike phase. Few sets of twins are as alike as Summer and I, so a haircut and a change of clothes are all it takes to slip out of the public gaze.

But I never miss other twins. I can even spot fraternal twins, because it's not their looks that give them away.

A brother and sister, young teenagers, walk past, with the same deep, doleful eyes. They are out of sight in seconds, but I know. She's half a head taller, graceful and womanly, while he's still a skinny, sandy-haired boy. Most people will think she's a year or two older, but this doesn't bother the boy. They laugh about it together and look forward to the day when he'll tower over her. I can tell these things.

The way they're whispering as they walk—smiling, leaning their heads together—is the first clue, but the giveaway is that he's carrying her suitcase as well as his own. What teenage boy carries his sister's suitcase? A twin, that's who.

Next, a family settles into the seats opposite me. Mum, Dad and two girls who share a face. Mainland Chinese. I'm no good at guessing ethnicity, but you can always tell Chinese twins because their parents have that we-beat-the-one-child-policy smile. That smile seems to last the rest of their lives. If you ask me, they're barmy. I've been planning on a one-child policy since I was fourteen. I would be planning a no-child policy if it weren't for certain complications. If it weren't for my father's will.

The Chinese twins have started refusing to dress the same; their clothing is defiantly different. One is in a dress, the other

jeans. One has short hair, even though it doesn't suit her. She took one for the team.

However different they look, though, they don't know how to stop behaving like twins. Their mother ferrets out a lunchbox and hands them a couple of hard-boiled eggs—Summer is like this too, always feeding Tarquin, apparently terrified that he might one day experience a hunger pang. The twins reach for the eggs with one movement. One twin peels her egg while the other waits, then the same twin peels the second egg. She eviscerates them both and hands the yolks to her sister, retaining the whites. Only now do the twins eat, as if responding to an unseen cue. Each pops the contents of her left hand into her mouth, then the right. They chew in unison.

I've met twins like this before, of course. Chloë and Zoë, my friends at law school in Melbourne, were this kind of twin. They shared clothes, friends, secrets. They could hardly credit that I had left my twin in a different city—Summer stayed in Wakefield and went to nursing school. Committing to four years apart from my twin seemed both the best and the worst decision of my life. I escaped constant comparisons by others, but my own comparisons after I left Wakefield were with social-media Summer, who was even more glamorous than the real girl.

All I needed to know to understand Chloë and Zoë's relationship was that each texted the other whenever she got a period. I prefer not to know when Summer's on the rag.

There's something nauseating about the way she wears white or pastel underwear every single day of the month, like a girl in a tampon commercial. And the thought of Summer's period always reminds me of the beauty pageant.

Was there a time when Summer and I were like Chloë and Zoë, like these egg-scoffing twins? I honestly can't remember. Summer would have been the twin who peeled the eggs and then let her sister eat both yolks. Everyone always knew she was the sweetheart. She was kind to the lost and the lame. Identical as we were, Summer was somehow more beautiful. She had inner beauty.

If there ever was such a time, it was my father's last act to destroy it. Since he died, Summer and I have not been like other twins. Dad taught me that there's not enough for two. There's only one life that we have to share.

Ridgeford Carmichael, known as Ridge—although I never had the balls to call him by his first name as I do Annabeth—was your typical Aussie self-made man, proud of all the things that people in other countries are ashamed of: his convict ancestry, his lack of education, his three wives, each younger, blonder and more fecund than the last.

When I was growing up, I knew that Carmichael Brothers was a construction firm, but Dad seemed to have a few other ventures going on, so I never figured out exactly where all

his money came from. He was always embroiled in property investment, always wining and dining politicians, always travelling overseas. Dad was powerfully built, with rugged, sunburned features. Although he was more than a decade older than Annabeth, he didn't seem it; he was rowdy and vigorous till the day he died.

Dad grew up with no family of his own. His childhood was passed in foster care and a state home. All he seemed to know of his background was that some ancestor had been transported for stealing a beer glass from an English pub.

Perhaps that's why Dad was so dynastic. By the time he was twenty-two, he had found out that he had a younger brother and gained custody of Colton, who was twelve. Dad sent Colton to the best boarding school in Wakefield. Colton became his protégé, and then his business partner.

Dad put off having kids until he'd made his millions, and by that time his first wife, Margaret, was too old. After he divorced Margaret, Dad didn't repeat his mistake; Summer and I were conceived on our parents' honeymoon. When Annabeth called it quits after she produced our younger brother, Dad ran off with Francine, who was fresh out of Catholic school. But I still didn't realise the extent of his obsession with populating the world.

These are the facts of his life, but they don't capture what Dad was like. Perhaps all I need to say to describe my father is this: he didn't like nice people. I found this out the last time I saw him alive.

Our family was gathered at the dinner table in the big house on Beach Parade in early December, shortly after Summer and I had turned fourteen. Annabeth was telling a story about an encounter with a beggar. Earlier that day, she had taken Summer and me to Billabong to choose new beachwear for Christmas; numerous store-wrapped boxes were now sitting under our Christmas tree. On her way into the mall, Annabeth wished the beggar merry Christmas and held out a twenty. He, smelling like a rubbish bin, took the bill clean out of her hand and marched straight into a bottle shop.

‘Right in front of me!’ Annabeth exclaimed, smashing a generous portion of turkey cannelloni onto Dad’s plate. He tilted the china, inspecting it for damage from the big silver serving spoon.

‘So you were outside the bottle shop when you gave this bozo the cash?’ Dad asked.

‘I’m trying to raise our kids to be nice people, Ridge,’ Annabeth said.

‘Nice is dumb,’ said Dad, and he turned to me and winked.

I lapped it up. Summer was the beauty in our family—even then I knew it—and Ben was the only boy, the heir. But I was the one Dad included in his special joke.

I surveyed my mother, my brother, my sister. Annabeth gave cash to a beggar outside a bottle shop. Ben, ten years old and small for his age, was so gentle that Dad had given up ever

teaching him to hunt, even though he had great aim when firing at a tin can. And Summer, well, Summer was Summer.

But I was Iris, the unexpected twin, the surplus twin, and with that wink, Dad gave me a new place in our family. Not nice. Not dumb.

This is why I thought I would at least get my share of the family money—not that I expected Dad to die any time soon. Your average father might not have seen much in me, not compared with my angelic sister, but Dad always seemed to appreciate my cynical streak. Ridge hated the idea of his money being lost, and you have to have a fair amount of street smarts not to be bamboozled out of your fortune. It seemed that Dad thought I would be up to the task.

Annabeth and Dad were already divorced by then, which perhaps partly excuses his dinnertime pronouncements about her brainpower. Maybe it's weird that he still came for dinner sometimes, four years after leaving my mother, but he still owned the house on Beach Parade. Later, when I went to law school, I wondered how the hell Dad had managed to keep his property intact through two divorces. Maybe Annabeth was too nice for her own good. Or maybe the judges were afraid of Ridge Carmichael, the man who owned half of Wakefield. Whichever it was, when he died, Dad left his three wives and seven children not much more than comfortable. The bulk of his fortune, that's where it gets interesting.

For the first few years after the divorce, we stayed in the beach house. Dad moved in with his girlfriend, Francine, who

lived in a penthouse in inner-city Wakefield. Francine had a two-year-old named Virginia. We assumed she was Francine's daughter from a previous relationship.

When Dad married Francine, they changed Virginia's surname to Carmichael. I still didn't question who her father might be, although my mother must have had her suspicions. But Annabeth wouldn't say a word against her ex-husband. She acted as if she had been lucky to be married to him in the first place, even though she was a very pretty, sweet-tempered woman—utterly wifely, a perfect match for a man like Ridge. The only way you could tell when something upset our mother was that she would do the housework with even more vigour than usual, slamming the vacuum cleaner into furniture, thumping pillows into place.

By the time Summer and I were fourteen, Francine had popped out three more babies: Vicky, Valerie and Vera Carmichael. Like Francine, the girls were all too blonde to be called blonde; their hair was white. The birth of Francine's fourth daughter tipped the balance of power. Now there were more of them than there were of us, and Francine started making noises about a house swap. It turned out that Ridge owned both properties. Nobody wants to live in an apartment with four kids, even if it is a multi-level penthouse with a rooftop garden and swimming pool, but I don't know whether Francine would have succeeded if Dad hadn't died.

After dinner that night, when I kissed Dad goodbye, I begged him to take me with him on his upcoming sailing

holiday. Since the divorce, Dad had flown Summer and me and Ben up to Thailand every summer, but this year, he was taking Francine and their kids.

‘I can help with the sailing, Dad,’ I said. ‘I’ll even help with the babies.’

Dad laughed. ‘Stay here and help your mother,’ he said. ‘Stop her from giving all my money away.’

Two weeks later, Dad had a heart attack on the pier at a beach in southern Phuket and was pronounced dead at the scene. Francine said his body had to be taken back to shore in a tuk-tuk because the ageing pier wasn’t strong enough for an ambulance.

Francine and her children were back in Australia within two days. The live-aboard sailors of Phuket, a disparate bunch of hippies, old salts and dreamers from all over the world, had pulled together to help the young widow. They had organised the repatriation of Dad’s body, fed and comforted the kids, and sailed *Bathsheba* back to the marina, hauling her out onto the hardstand, where she stood high and dry for the next nine years, because nobody in the family knew what to do with her.

I had met these people, these ragtag seamen, on our sailing holidays with Dad. He’d have a drink with them, but sometimes it seemed as if he only talked to them to collect stories about their stupidity: their amateur sailing, their dull lives, how the Thai tradesmen ripped them off. They were nice people, he’d say, like it was the worst thing you could say about anybody.

And now I understood. Nice is dumb.

At Dad's funeral, Annabeth wore black silk and Francine wore black satin. Francine, awash with pearls, led a cortège of ghost-pale daughters in matching white dresses, their dead-straight hair pulled back by long black ribbons. Annabeth—taller, but a much less imposing figure—was flanked by Summer and me in tailored linen and Ben in his first proper suit. Annabeth only had three children, but she had the boy. Francine was the newest, youngest wife, but Annabeth was still prettier. Besides, Annabeth had the beach house. Or so we thought.

Margaret didn't come to the funeral. I think she was the only wife who knew what Dad was really like. I was about to find out, before the service even started.

The funeral home was one of those one-stop shops that aims not to offend anyone and ends up being a soulless train station. When we arrived, a soft-spoken man with startlingly pink skin took Annabeth aside. He explained that Dad's casket would be rolled into the service on wheels. Health and safety regulations.

I don't know whether Dad could have mustered six loyal mates to carry him, anyway. There were hundreds of people arriving for the service, but they weren't Dad's bosom buddies. Apart from family, I didn't know any of them. They were smiling and chatting easily to each other. No one was crying.

The pink man asked my mother whether any of us would like to 'view the deceased before we close the casket for the ceremony'. He gestured down a quiet corridor, away from the room into which the crowd of cheerful mourners was pouring. He

might not have figured out that Annabeth was an ex-wife. She looked forlorn enough to be the widow.

‘My children are far too young for that,’ Annabeth said. She steered us towards our relatives. Her parents were in a corner with my aunts and uncles and a few cousins. They looked hot, itchy and awkward in borrowed black clothes. January in Wakefield is a punishing time, and the air conditioning was showing its age.

I didn’t mean to spy, but I needed to know that Dad was really dead, and I kind of wanted to see the coffin on wheels. It was easy to evade my grandparents and head down that corridor. I pushed open a tomb-like door and found myself alone with my father’s dead body.

He had died in the tropics, and I guess he had been embalmed, but there was a faint odour in the room. I remembered a dog I had seen—and smelled—when I was a kid, lying dead in a gutter on a busy Thai street. I sure knew Dad was dead now.

Still, I crept forward until I saw him. The great Ridge Carmichael, reduced to a quiet, coffin-bound corpse. His body looked hollow, and his face was a horrible grey. Only his hair looked normal. He had recently turned sixty, but just a few strands of silver had pushed their way through the blond.

Sixty was old to be a father of small children, but it was young to die.

Tall vases bursting with white flowers stood sentinel around my father’s coffin, emblems of love. And not any old flowers. Someone had chosen the varieties: roses and irises.

My eyes filled with tears. Someone had done this to honour me and my twin, Dad's firstborn children. None of his other kids had flower names.

I buried my nose in the nearest bouquet of irises and breathed deep. I knew they wouldn't have a fragrance, but it's a lifelong habit of mine to sniff my namesake flower. I've always wished they smelled as pretty as roses, and I guess a part of me believes that persistence should be enough to get what you want in this world.

As I was sniffing the odourless irises, being rewarded only with the smell of death, the door swooshed open behind me. I looked around. A cloth was draped over the trolley beneath the coffin, and it reached the floor. It was the only place to hide. I ducked under.

Just in time. I stiffened at the clack of stilettos. Mum always wore flat shoes. Who was this?

The intruder approached the casket and stood silent. I couldn't breathe.

Now the door opened again, and I heard a soft tread. 'Francine,' came my mother's voice. 'I apologise. They told me Ridge was alone.'

Francine and Annabeth had always been polite to each other. Too polite.

'No, I'm the one who should apologise,' said Francine. 'I agreed to allow you this time, but when it came to it, I couldn't bear them to put that . . . that *lid* on without seeing him again.'

‘It was a small enough thing to ask,’ said Annabeth. ‘Ten minutes alone with the father of my children. You could have given me that. Soon you’ll have everything that was mine.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Do you think you could give me time to pack before you kick me out of my home?’

I was jammed against the wheels of the trolley. This space wasn’t big enough to hide my body, and the toe of one shoe was sticking out from under the cloth. I curled up tighter, tucking my feet in with infinite slowness. My fingernails dug into the skin of my arms.

Francine’s voice rose, her broad accent growing broader. ‘You can’t think I knew about the will. Of course I want the house, I’ve made no secret of that. Your children are nearly grown now, the girls anyway. You must see that you’re the winner here, Annabeth. Your twins will be married and pregnant at eighteen—one of them, at least—and then you’ll have everything. You’ve hit the jackpot. Virginia’s only six. What hope does she have of beating them to the money? You can afford to give me the house. It’s nothing compared with the millions coming your way. A hundred million, Annabeth.’

My body jerked, and I lost my balance and rocked back onto my heels with a thud. I froze, but the two women didn’t seem to have heard. My mother was speaking now, in a voice I had never heard before—a cold, flat voice.

‘How dare you,’ she said. ‘How dare you dream for one minute that I would prostitute my daughters for that money!’

My children deserve better than this. Francine, I promise you, Summer and Iris will never *bear* of this will. If you want to pimp your daughter out in her teens, you're welcome to Ridge's money, every cent of it. We'll live on the crumbs he's left us with our dignity intact. My girls will marry and have children when they are ready, when they make their own free choice unsullied by Ridge's sick fantasies. No grandchild of mine will enter this world to win some filthy prize. To live out a dead man's dreams.'

Francine's shrill laugh made me shiver. 'Nice speech, Annabeth,' she said. 'How virtuous you sound. If you can keep silent, all power to you, but secrets this big have a way of getting out. I think my daughters deserve to know the truth. I trust them to do their best for their family . . . if your girls can keep their legs crossed long enough to give mine a chance. And now I'll leave you alone with the *father of your children*.'

'No,' said my mother. 'I've been here too long already.' Something in her voice—I could *bear* her eyes sweeping around the room—made me hold my breath, willing my body into a tighter ball.

And then both women were gone, and I was alone again with my father's body.

The room whirled around me. My father was dead, and my mother had become a different person, hard-edged and sour.

We had to give up the beach house. That was my first thought. Marriage, pregnancy, babies—at fourteen I didn't

want to think about any of that. Annabeth had said she didn't want to tell us, so I would pretend not to know.

Summer didn't need to know.

I had always known Carmichael Brothers was a multi-million-dollar enterprise, and Uncle Colton was only the junior partner. Ridge owned the lion's share. Had owned.

Now I knew what his estate was worth. The beach house, the penthouse, what my mother described as 'crumbs', and a hundred million dollars.

As we chanted our way through the funeral service, Annabeth's and Francine's words spooled through my head, and I counted the years. Eighteen was the legal age for marriage, less than four years away for me and Summer, but Ben wouldn't be eighteen for eight years, and Virginia not for twelve. If Summer didn't know about the will, there was no way she would get married and have a baby in her teens. She wasn't that kind of girl. And Ben, well, Annabeth and Francine had treated Ben as out of the running. They hadn't mentioned him, hadn't questioned each other's silence. All the adults seemed to know that Ben wouldn't be fathering a child.

My father had known this, I realised. Dad's frustration, his suppressed rage at my little brother, was somehow connected with this mystery.

Introverted and scholarly even at the age of ten, Ben was not like the rest of us. Although he was usually more obedient than Summer and me. I sensed that he was waiting till

he was old enough to forge his own path. It was as though he rejected Dad's values so completely that he couldn't be bothered arguing. He was just waiting Dad out.

I had heard Dad muttering about 'the Carmichael name dying out'. I couldn't imagine how this was related to Ben's rare acts of quiet rebellion, but this was the only part of the conversation that I didn't understand. What I knew for sure was that Ridge Carmichael, the grand patriarch, had not left his fortune to his son. And he hadn't split it seven ways. Like a medieval lord, he wanted it to stay together for as many generations as possible.

Dad had bequeathed his empire to the first of his seven children to marry and produce an heir.



Francine had been right about one thing. Secrets this big get out. Somehow or other, by the end of the funeral, Summer knew.

In the car on the way home, she whispered in my ear, 'I'm not going to let Dad rule my life. I don't care about his money. I'm not going to get married until I'm in love.'

And I thought, good for you, sister. Take your sweet time. For me, the race was on.