

Chapter 1

‘And what is your differential diagnosis?’
A Christina Price stood against the wall in the stark hospital hallway. She tried to take a deep breath, but her ribs were panic-stiff, the clack of the nearby nurse’s keyboard too loud. Her phone vibrated in her pocket yet again. Shit. She had to *think*. ‘Uh, cirrhosis. And liver cancer,’ she said.

The examining consultant peered over the top of his glasses. ‘You need to expand on that.’

She squared her shoulders, fingering the knot of raised skin on her right palm for motivation. She’d had fifteen minutes with her patient. Surely she could think of something else.

‘Um, there could be a primary liver tumour. Or a metastasis from another site.’ She tried to picture the anatomy in her mind, but her attention kept sliding back to her phone. It had been ringing for the past half-hour, and only one caller would be that persistent. Something bad must have happened.

The consultant tapped a pen on his clipboard, bringing her back to the room. ‘Where else could a tumour be?’ he asked.

Her thoughts moved like sticky mud. ‘The pancreas?’

The consultant made a note. ‘All right. Go back to your second idea. Which neoplasias could have metastasised to the liver, in this patient?’

A nurse rattled past with a phlebotomy trolley, so often the focus of Christina's humiliation this term. She averted her eyes, trying to remember the page from her textbook. 'Ah, stomach, breast, ovarian, ah . . . lung and kidney.'

'In *this* patient.'

The blood drained from Christina's face. Oh god, had she just suggested breast and ovarian cancer for a male patient? 'Umm . . . lung and kidney.'

'And what about your examination? Did you find evidence to support your diagnoses?'

'Um.' She looked at her notes, her handwriting blurring. She knew this stuff. Why couldn't she remember? Her phone buzzed again.

'Like in the abdomen?' prompted the consultant. 'Ascites?'

She shook her head. She hadn't remembered to check.

'All right.' He looked at his watch. 'Please summarise your findings.'

Christina's face was burning now, her stethoscope pulling the fine hairs on the back of her neck. She knew she'd done terribly, as she had all term. Really, as she had for the past two years, especially on the ward. At the beginning, she'd thought getting into med school was the hard part; it had certainly taken her long enough. But it turned out that she was hopeless at practical skills. *See one, do one, teach one* was the motto, but Christina could never pick things up that fast. All the other students seemed so much more confident. Maybe it was because they were younger. But the thought of failing tore something in her soul. She forced a deep breath; maybe she could still recover.

'Grant Reading is a fifty-five-year-old man who initially presented with jaundice and, um, right-upper-quadrant discomfort . . .'

But when she finished, she realised she'd failed to ask Grant about any family history.

The consultant grunted, rocking on his heels, his hands clasped behind his back. 'That will do. You may go.'

That was when reality crashed in. She hadn't recovered. Not even close.

Christina turned away, limbs sluggish with despair. She pushed through the ward's big double doors and trudged down the stairwell, then paced along the corridor towards the student common room, checking her phone as she went. Something froze inside her when she saw five missed calls from the care house number. How bad was this going to be?

Skirting the other surgical students collapsed on the old couches, Christina sank into a hard chair by the window, plucking at her shirt, which had stuck to her cold-fear sweat. She braced herself for the coming conversation.

Lena, one of the carers, answered on the second ring. 'Christina, I'm sorry, I know you have exams, but there's been a problem today.'

'What kind of problem?'

A pause, as if Lena was considering where to start. 'Your mother . . . she went missing.'

'What? How could that even happen? She's partly paralysed, for god's sake.'

'She came back a few hours later. But she's been drinking again. I'm so sorry. One of the carers was sick and we were short-handed.'

Christina's breath left her like an explosion. 'Jesus,' she said.

Across the common room, she could hear a group of students from her year – Toby, Sean, Sarah and Katie – commiserating, giddy with post-exam relief. Katie was talking over everyone else, going over details no one wanted to discuss, until Toby threw his notes at her. Soon they would go out to drink beer

and celebrate. Christina had never been part of that circle. Her life was taken up with other things, responsibilities and obligations.

‘Look, I’ll come now,’ she told Lena. ‘But I have to be at work in an hour.’ She ended the call and grabbed her bag, doing the maths in her head. Thirty minutes to drive to the care house, time talking to her mother, another thirty to get to work. To revive herself, she splashed water on her face from the kitchen tap.

‘How’d you go?’ called Katie. ‘Hey, Christina, I said how’d you go?’

Christina glanced warily at Katie Prior, who was dressed impeccably in a crisp pale-blue shirt and black pants, her artfully streaked blonde hair pulled into a perfect bun. Katie was the only student who knew where Christina had come from. Her older brother, Sebastian, had been in Christina’s high-school class. And the less said about both those things, the better.

‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ Christina said, heading for the door.

‘Bye!’ called Katie with a laugh.

Toby followed her into the hall, panting as he tried to catch up. ‘Hey, you okay? The exam really that bad?’

‘That bad,’ said Christina, not slowing even as she felt rude. Toby had tried to help her study, his efforts always interrupted by work or her mother. He was quiet and soft-spoken, the kind of study partner she’d have liked if she could. ‘Sorry, but I have to go.’

She didn’t look around. All she could think about was what might be waiting for her at the care house.



She pulled her ancient Corolla into the driveway twenty-five minutes later. Lena met her at the door, her dark eyes

apologetic, her uniform blouse rucked from the day. She went to speak, but Christina cut her off. 'Don't apologise again. Tell me the whole story.'

When Lena was finished, Christina was aghast. She turned towards the lounge, the weight of what had happened sinking in. Four months ago, when the residential care package had come through, she had thought that from then on she would be solely her mother's guardian – ensuring her finances were sorted, making medical decisions if needed. Nothing like this.

She paused before she went in, carefully putting up her mental barrier.

Rachael sat in one of the electric-lift chairs, a *New Idea* crooked against her weaker arm, her blonde hair shot with grey and tucked behind her ears as she stared at the pages. No matter how hard Christina pulled her emotions back, she always felt the gut strike when she saw the sunken cheeks, dotted with spider naevi, the red flush across her mother's palms – the medical signs of the affliction that had taken over her mother's life and nearly destroyed Christina's. She could smell the sour fumes in the air as she sat down in the opposite seat.

'What were you thinking, Rachael?'

'What, no *Mum* today?' Rachael said with a slight slur, not looking up from the pages.

Christina ignored this. 'Where did you go?'

'Oh, nowhere.'

'This nowhere have pokies?'

'So what if it did?'

Christina rubbed her forehead, wondering how much of this month's disability payment was gone. 'How did you get there?' she asked quietly.

'I walked.'

'No, you didn't.'

‘I took the bus.’

‘No, you took the house car. You took the keys and you drove.’

‘Why are you asking, if you know?’ said her mother, folding her good arm across the other one, and keeping her attention on a spread showing Kate and Wills.

‘Jesus, Mum. You have fits. Your arm is paralysed. You’re not allowed to drive. And you were drinking. What would have happened if you’d hit someone?’

‘I wasn’t going to hit anyone. I’m a good driver.’

‘You know you can’t drink with your medication.’

‘I had one beer. That never hurt anyone.’

Christina’s heart sank. Her mother’s denial was powerful. Intractable. One beer had never been in her vocabulary.

‘I just wanted to get out, spread my wings,’ Rachael said now. ‘Eating up the miles, free as a bird. You understand that, don’t you, Chrissy? You always loved road trips. You’re my one baby, the only one who understands me. We were always so alike.’

Christina abruptly stood. *So alike*. The words struck her emotional barriers like heavy fire, reviving her worst nightmares – of failing, of ending up where everyone had said she would, poor and dependent. She paced to the window and looked out into the backyard. The grass needed mowing and a paling had come loose from the fence. She had to remind herself that there had never been any road trips. That was her mother’s fantasy. But it was harder to dispute the claim that they were alike.

‘Aren’t you going to sit down and talk?’ Rachael demanded.

Christina didn’t look around. ‘I have to be at work soon.’

She found Lena in the kitchen, counting out the residents’ medication into weekly pill boxes.

‘This can’t happen again,’ Christina said. ‘The keys have to be secure, all the time.’

‘Of course. The director is reviewing the procedures tomorrow. We’ll call you.’

Christina sighed. Lena did her best, but the house was always short on staff, and the agency that ran it had three other houses on their books.

‘Lena, if this happens again – call the police. I mean it. She’ll hurt someone.’

Christina hurried out the front door, cursing as she checked her watch. She was twenty minutes late to work, where she shuffled around the hospital emergency room with her survey question sheets until nine thirty, doing the research legwork that a doctoral student hadn’t wanted to do themselves. The department was quiet for a Friday evening, the rush of cases not due for at least an hour when the end-of-week partying turned serious. She scanned down the cases on the computer system, looking for suitable candidates, and managed four in three hours. Not her best effort.

By the time she reached home, her feet were throbbing and her back ached all the way down into her tailbone. She rented a room upstairs in a share house behind the freeway, which emitted a constant low roar. Even outside she could hear music coming from downstairs, and when she pushed open the sliding door at the back, she found her housemates in the kitchen amid sizzling pans and loud music. The air smelled of tacos, and the cooking onions stung her eyes.

She avoided them, climbed the stairs and pulled her door closed, which at least muted the music. She sat on the bed and tugged off her shoes, stretching out her toes on the threadbare carpet. Breathing in . . . and out. This wasn’t forever. Things would get better. She just had to get through the next eighteen months, finish her degree, and her life would change.

But her mother was tangled in her thoughts, and they would take a lot of unpicking. Maybe it had been Katie Prior

reminding her of home. Or maybe it was Rachael's reference to road trips, evoking so many other broken promises. Or just that when her mother had gone into care she'd thought things would be better . . . No, focus, she told herself. Breathe.

Her lecture notes were stacked in piles across her desk, her ancient laptop on screensaver. The muscles pinched between her shoulders as she pulled out her phone, deleting Lena's missed calls and messages.

Oh, wait. What was this? Another missed call earlier in the day, from a number she didn't recognise. Frowning, she dialled voicemail and deleted each of Lena's messages until she found it.

'Oh, Christina,' began a vaguely familiar voice. 'I'm so sorry but Dr Winterbourne's had some unfortunate news. I'm leaving you my home number. Please call me when you can. It's . . .'

Christina's insides twisted. It was the receptionist at the GP surgery, her next rotation. The one she'd organised weeks ago. She dialled the woman's home number, not caring about the time.

'Is he all right?' she asked as soon as the receptionist answered.

'No, it's terrible.' The woman's voice shook. 'Looks like he has cancer. Quite out of the blue, and they're still running tests. He's about to have surgery. I'm really sorry, but there's no chance you can start on Monday week. We have a locum coming in, but he'll be flat out in a new place. I'm sure you'll find something else.'

When she'd hung up, Christina let the phone fall into her lap. How awful for Dr Winterbourne. She'd only met him twice, a kind elderly man with a shock of white hair and half-frames on a chain. She couldn't imagine him facing surgery, or chemotherapy. Then there was the fact that she'd lost the placement. Don't panic, she thought. But she knew that by

now all the practices would be full. Space was at a premium. Music pulsed under her feet, starting up a corresponding throb behind her eye. The whole day cascaded back.

‘Shit!’ she screamed, thumping the bed with her fist. She allowed herself five minutes of cursing, then curled into a ball on the covers, thinking madly. There had to be a way through this. She just had to find it.



Late the next morning, dark circles under her eyes from a sleepless night, Christina slumped at her desk amid the crossed-out and discarded sheets of the medical school’s approved practice list. She’d called every number; they were all full. The medical school’s receptionist refused to take any more of her calls. They were seeing what they could do, she said.

So Christina stewed in miserable suspense. She did her laundry while listening out for the phone, carefully hand-washing her thin work shirts to coax another week out of them. She went to a meeting with the agency who ran her mother’s residential care, cutting off their reassurances that it wouldn’t happen again. She’d heard that before.

And still no one called. As the clock crept towards five, Christina began to imagine what the school would say. Her grades were poor. Classes missed. Maybe they would make her repeat the year. Or maybe it would be worse, they would tell her there was no longer a place for her in the school.

At one minute to five, when she had given up hope, her phone finally rang.

‘I have a solution,’ the school’s placement coordinator began, without preamble, and with a distinct tone of relief. ‘There’s a place available right near your home address.’

‘How is that even possible?’ asked Christina, the reprieve running warm in her veins.

‘Another student dropped out. You’ll need to do the tutorials by remote, of course, but there’ll be another student doing the same thing, so you can buddy.’

Christina frowned. ‘But home’s only a few minutes from the campus. Can’t I do the tutes there?’

A pause. ‘I mustn’t have been clear. This place is in Townsville. On the base.’

‘What?’

‘The home address we have for you is in Townsville.’

Christina froze. She’d listed the Townsville address when she first applied to the medical school, after someone had told her a regional address would give her a better chance of acceptance. Never had she imagined it was still on file.

‘Christina?’

‘I haven’t lived there for more than ten years,’ she croaked.

The coordinator cleared her throat. ‘Look, I’ve spent all day on this and exhausted all other avenues. You’re welcome to keep trying to find a place yourself, but this is the best I can do for you. The school expects you’ll have to travel for rotations now and then. If you can make it happen, I’d advise you to take it.’

‘Where in Townsville?’ Christina asked reluctantly.

‘A clinic on the army base. It works just like a regular practice. They often take students. I understand you’d have some things to organise. The school can help with the transport. But don’t think about it too long. Let me know tomorrow morning.’

Christina felt as though the stuffing had been knocked out of her body. She’d promised herself she was never going back. Could never go back. Not to the place she’d escaped from so many things . . . where her aunt Harriet still lived.

But after an hour, then two, distractedly stacking her notes and books into neat piles, straightening her bed and

listening to the rumble of her housemates downstairs, she had to face facts. What else could she do – tell the school she wouldn't go?

Christina rubbed a hand across her mouth, considering. She didn't even know yet if she'd passed the current rotation. If she didn't, some kind of remediation might follow, throwing out the rest of the year.

But what if she passed?

She twitched aside the curtain and looked down on her Corolla under the streetlight, its sun-damaged bonnet covered in the leaf-drop from the spreading poinciana. No way would the car make it to Townsville; she wouldn't reach Brisbane's city limits before it overheated.

Grimly, she pulled out a notepad, wrote down her tiny bank balance, and began a list, just to convince herself this couldn't work. *Take leave from job*, she scribbled. *Pay for flight*. That would use up most of the balance. But at least the school had said they could help. The bigger issue was: *Find somewhere to stay*.

Christina chewed her pen.

This should be where it ended. There was only one option. Which she couldn't contemplate, could she?

Exhausted after staying up late studying the night before, her mind still swirling with thoughts and calculations, she went to bed, hugging the blanket close around her.



When the first lorikeets shrieked past her window Christina gave up on sleep and woke her computer. Results would be posted by now. She dragged the blanket over her lap as the school portal loaded.

The practical mark was first: forty-nine per cent, a conceded pass. Christina groaned; that would earn her another caution

on her record. Any more and she would repeat. She heard her mother's voice in her mind: *We're so alike*. With a surge of panic Christina cut the thought off. It wasn't true. Wasn't. Then she saw the written exam result.

Ninety-two per cent.

'Oh my god,' she whispered, reloading the page just to make sure, double-checking her name. She'd actually done it. Despite everything – her mother, her housemates, her job – she'd managed to do one thing right. The first time she'd ever earned more than a scraping pass.

In disbelief, she ran her hands over her crowded bookshelf, where two and a half years of notes were carefully arranged in folders alongside her textbooks. She'd done all of that in the past two months, converting her disorganised scribble into meaningful summaries, desperate to turn around her performance. Hard work. All her own. It couldn't be for nothing.

That thought decided her; she had to call Harriet.

She waited until eight. The number was still in her memory, but her fingers trembled as the phone rang, and rang. Perhaps her aunt had moved, changed her number? Eventually a machine picked up. *'You've reached Harriet Reed. I can't take your call . . .'*

When the beep sounded, Christina had to force out the words around fifteen years of anger and regret. 'It's Christina,' she said. 'I, um, have to come to Townsville. And, um —'

Click. 'Christina?' Harriet's voice was suddenly alive on the line.

Blood rushed to Christina's face. She could still picture her aunt as clearly as on that last day in Townsville: an imposing woman, broad in the hip and shoulder, with a stern stare that could soften into the kindest smile. Her

mother's face, but unmarred by years of drink. But it had soured all the same.

'Yes,' she managed.

'Long time,' said Harriet. 'How are you?'

Christina tried to speak and found that tears had gathered in her throat.

'Well, I didn't expect to hear from you,' Harriet said, her own voice cautious. 'What's this about you coming up?'

Christina gripped her blanket. 'My rotation fell through. The only one I can get is on the base up there . . .' She very nearly hung up. She couldn't ask.

'How long is your rotation?'

'Two months.'

A tiny pause. 'Well, you're lucky you called today,' said Harriet briskly. 'I was about to leave on a trip. I asked the neighbours to look out for the place, but if you want the job instead . . .'

The shaking in Christina's limbs subsided. 'You're going away?'

'Thought it was about time. Thomas died last year.'

'Oh. I . . . didn't know,' said Christina. Thomas was Harriet's husband, a man Christina hadn't known and yet who had so changed the relationship between them.

Harriet, never keen on sympathy, made a dismissive noise. 'We had a long time to prepare. But the house is there if you want it.'

'Where are you going?'

'Oh, Kokoda, if it works out. Then who knows? I've always wanted to see Italy. Be gone a couple of months. So, are you taking the house?'

'Yes,' said Christina, not believing her luck.

'I'll leave the key in the usual spot.'

Christina put down the phone, her aunt's words still ringing in her mind. *In the usual spot.* As though she were thirteen again, and coming home from school, to Harriet and a new life, one that would end too soon.

And now, after all that had happened, she was going back.