

Chapter 1

Brisbane, November

‘Beth Harding, what the hell is going on?’
In the midst of her youngest sister’s birthday party, Beth pressed her phone to her ear and crept inside, her pulse racing.

‘Hi, Tom.’ She heard waves in the background. She imagined her former fellow resident, Tom Black, the headland of Manly beach rising up behind him. They’d known each other since medical school, and for the past week she’d been sleeping on his couch.

‘How’s the beach?’ she asked.

‘Nice try,’ he said, clearly ropable. ‘I called the hospital to swap a shift and instead I find out you resigned yesterday. I thought you were just flying home to Brisbane for Vicky’s party. So, what the hell?’

Beth glanced around to see who could hear. Thirty guests crowded her mother’s covered patio. Her uncle Jim was mustering the meat, brandishing the long tongs and a tasteless apron covered in a French-maid print, the air thick with barbecue smoke. Across the tiles Victoria, the birthday girl, radiated charm. Her white sundress, Christmas-bell earrings

and blonde chignon were flight-attendant perfect, despite her coming off-shift early that morning. Vicky was in a huddle with Anne, her middle sister, and their mother, while Vicky's boyfriend, Ryan, hovered at the edge of the conversation. But no one was looking her way.

Tom went on, 'I know you've been frustrated with work, and getting over Richard is going to take a while . . .'

A strangled sound escaped Beth's throat.

'Beth? Beth?' He tried his best reasonable tone. 'Look, I'm worried. Why don't we have a coffee when you're back tomorrow and talk about it?'

'I can't, Tom.' Beth couldn't help glancing at her case resting in the hallway, its belly stuffed full of *Murtagh's General Practice*, the *Oxford Handbook of Clinical Medicine*, her album and enough clothes for a long trip. She pushed a wayward length of hair behind her ear and cupped her hand around the phone, the truth spilling out. 'I'm going away for a while.'

A pause. 'Where?'

'I'm taking a locum post. I'm just waiting for the call to confirm.'

Tom suddenly laughed. 'Thank god. Finally!'

'What do you mean, finally?'

Tom only laughed harder. 'Beth, you've been miserably stale for three years. I'd given up thinking you were going to climb out of the rut.'

'I wasn't in a rut,' hissed Beth indignantly. But he had a point. She was five years out of med school and still without any direction. No specialty had called her, and the world had contracted around the monotony of her inner-city hospital. And then there had been Richard.

'Are you really sure, though?' Tom continued. 'You're a beach girl. What if you end up in the desert?'

‘It’s only a few months,’ she said, wondering if that would be true.

Tom sighed. ‘I wish you’d told me, but I’ll hold your boxes. I want to hear all about it.’

Beth ended the call and eased back outside, her fingers stroking the vintage camera around her neck, a bead of sweat on her lip. The barbecue sizzled unattended, the crowd clustered at the patio’s far edge; from the shouts, one of her younger cousins was doing tricks on the backyard trampoline. Beth hovered by the patio doors, smoothing her blue sundress, impatience turning in her gut.

The next moment, her uncle Jim appeared, tongs in hand, his apron stretched across his belly, a net of broken capillaries over his nose.

‘Beth!’ he exclaimed. ‘Good to see you, love. Everything all right? Your mum said she was a bit worried about you. Where’s that fine fiancé?’

Beth evaded neatly. ‘I’m fine, Uncle Jim. And he’s working.’ Just a little white lie.

‘Good, good. Well, listen, now the old cooker’s under control, can you take a look at something for me?’ He cast a glance over his shoulder.

Beth steered him inside. ‘What have you got?’

Jim pulled up his shirt, displaying angry red skin across his stomach. ‘Came up all by itself and itches like crazy,’ he said.

Beth peered at the rash. ‘Could be an allergy. Have you changed washing powder, or something like that?’

‘No, but I was in Thailand last week. Got some new shirts.’

Beth raised her eyebrows. ‘You should see your GP,’ she said firmly. ‘Promise me you will, Uncle Jim?’

‘Okay, okay. But there’s also this other thing, too,’ he began, turning and gripping the seat of his pants.

‘For goodness sake, Jim, leave Beth alone,’ scolded a familiar voice. ‘No one wants to look at your behind, least of all your niece.’

Gratefully, Beth found her aunt Judy striding in from the patio. Judy had the same curly, pale ginger hair as Margaret Harding, Beth’s mother, but that was where the similarity ended. Judy’s mouth was bracketed with deep smile lines, and energy and wit sparkled in her eyes. Jim retreated, red-faced, to the barbecue.

‘That man has no sense of shame,’ said Judy. ‘How are you, dear? Getting on well in Sydney, still?’

‘Fine,’ said Beth brightly.

Judy’s eyes fell on Beth’s camera. ‘Oh, you’ve still got that old thing!’ She ran a finger across the lens cap. ‘I remember when your father bought it. Are you staying long?’

Beth shook her head. ‘I just came for the party. I promised Victoria I would.’

‘You’re a good sister,’ said Judy. ‘But you’ll be glad to get home. I know it’s tricky for you here.’

Beth swallowed a mix of guilt and secrets. *Where was home now?*

Soon, the meat was served and a long line formed around the salad table, hands batting away the flies. Beth waited until the queue was shorter. With spare seats in short supply, she pulled a dining table chair up to the French doors and tucked her camera underneath. She’d just sat with the flimsy paper plate on her knees when a shadow fell across her chair.

‘Beth, here.’ Beth stood reflexively, nearly losing her food plate as her mother handed her a tray of spent glasses. ‘These are for the dishwasher. It should have finished the last load. Oh, and Ryan needs a fresh beer. They’re in the sink.’



Beth carried the tray into the kitchen with its familiar worn wooden cupboards and seventies brown tiles. She stacked and reloaded the dishwasher, and then as she made a move back to her dinner plate her mother reappeared, cross lines circling her mouth. Her sundress was a jovial yellow, a light colour for her slender frame. But her eyes were pinched.

‘I nearly tripped over this,’ Margaret said, thrusting Beth’s camera case into her hands. ‘I don’t know why you insist on carrying the mouldy old thing around. And Ryan’s been looking for that beer.’ With a tut, she extracted a bottle from the ice and left.

Beth scanned the camera for damage, all its old-fashioned dials and hand-painted numbers. When she’d tucked it away, Margaret reappeared with Beth’s dinner plate. ‘Someone might have sat on it,’ she said, moving to tip the lot into the bin.

Beth leapt for it. ‘I haven’t eaten any yet!’

‘It’s cold.’

‘I’ll still eat it,’ said Beth, rescuing the plate.

‘You’re lucky to have such an appetite,’ her mother went on. ‘I’ve barely been able to eat anything. Had horrible stomach pains all week, and my back before that. Must be the stress of the party. I had to go to the doctor yesterday.’

Beth glanced up. Her mother leaned against the sink, her ginger curls limp. Beth’s heart tightened. ‘What did he say?’

‘Kept me waiting too long, so I left. But doctors are quacks anyway. I’m going to see Anne’s acupuncturist on Thursday. He’ll sort it out.’

‘But what if it’s serious?’

Margaret’s hand flew to her chest. ‘Did you have to say that? I was stressed enough already. Christmas is only six

weeks away. Everyone's here. I've been packing boxes for the business orders all week and I had to make all the desserts myself. Vicky's only twenty-one once. You should have come up earlier to help.'

Beth reached her hand to her mother's arm, desperate to make amends. 'I didn't mean it like that.' But her mother moved to adjust her bracelet, out of reach. Beth retracted her fingers.

'I didn't expect you to come without Richard,' her mother went on. 'You might have told me for the numbers.'

Beth knew the adult thing to do was to tell the truth, but all bravery left her. 'Sorry. I didn't think.'

Her mother brightened. 'Have you looked at your guest list yet?'

'No. Sorry.'

'You're not wearing your ring either. Richard's a good man, Beth.' Her mother's gaze flickered, her mouth setting like toffee. Beth detected the familiar topic. 'Not like your father. No-good deserting bastard.'

'*Mum*,' Beth said. Even though her father had been gone nearly fifteen years, her mother's invective cut like shards of glass.

'Well, he was,' Margaret insisted, but her voice wavered. 'Left us for that mine job, but I stayed. I did the work bringing you all up. I worked hard so you could have things I didn't.' Tears gathered in her eyes, and the facade cracked. She fanned a hand over her chest. 'I'm sorry,' she mumbled. 'I don't know why you put up with me.'

Beth reached out and her mother pulled her into a hug wrapped in familiar floral perfume. Beth had always been tall for her age, and now her mother seemed fragile, her shoulders all bones under Beth's hand. 'It's okay, Mum,' she said soothingly. 'I know it still hurts. I'm sorry, too.'

Her mother pulled away, dabbing under her eyes. 'There, I'm fine,' she said. 'Now, just . . . I'll just be outside.'

Beth leaned against the bench, trying to assemble the pieces of the conversation into some kind of meaningful order, but all that came was shame. How on earth could she think of herself now?

Then like a beacon, her phone rang.

'Doctor Harding? This is Greg at the MedFirst agency.'

Beth hung on the words. 'Yes?'

'I've confirmed an immediate start position in Iron Junction. It's a Pilbara mining-town med centre and one of their FIFO doctors is sick.'

'FIFO?'

'Fly-in, fly-out. You'd do ten days on and four off back in Perth, which they call a swing. Does that sound okay? I know you were keen and we can have you travelling today. It's two flights and a drive, I'm afraid.'

Beth's soul surged with joy and uncertainty, hope and doubt. She turned the name of the town over in her mind. *Iron Junction*. A mining town. It sounded remote. She'd been waiting impatiently for this call, and now she wasn't sure why. What did she hope to achieve? Beth bit her lip. The crowd was forming a knot on the patio, now. Maybe it was time for cake. They hushed, and she dropped her own voice. 'Yes, but I'm in Brisbane,' she said, feeling herself waver.

'That's all right. I'll see what we can book and call you back.'

Beth ended the call with lingering apprehension but also the first sensation of lightness in the long, difficult week. She stepped into the hall with its soft pink walls and ornate plaster cornices. Such a familiar place. Even Victoria's and Anne's rooms were exactly as they'd been while they were at school. Beth's had become the office after she'd been the

first to leave home for Sydney and the room now smelled of Australian pepper and smoky salt which were her mother's best culinary mail-order sellers. But heading off to remote Western Australia was something else. Maybe she should phone Greg back and call this off.

She slipped out the patio doors, where Victoria's birthday speeches were underway. She might be at a crossroad, but this was a happy day for her family. Ryan was speaking now, telling everyone how amazing Victoria was, and wishing her a happy birthday. Claps and cheers.

Then Ryan hushed the crowd. 'That's also why,' he continued, 'I have something else for Victoria.'

Beth took in Ryan's satisfied smile, Victoria's perplexed expression, the murmur of expectation. Ryan was down on his knee now, offering up a ring box. Victoria's eyes were wide and spilling tears.

Beth's stomach turned in a protective, leaden ball. Just a few short months ago, that had been Richard on his knee, and her happiness. Things she no longer had.

Stiffly, she found the bathroom and splashed water on her face, then stared at herself in the mirror. Her long dark hair was caught behind her ears, but her eyes now had that same pinched look her mother always carried.

'Go,' she told herself sternly.

Beth in the mirror refused to budge. Her thoughts turned back to Sydney. She closed her eyes. 'Please, go,' she whispered.

A droplet of water tracked down her face, a tiny sensation that cut a clean path in her thoughts. She must leave now or she would never have the chance. It was time to cast off, and go looking for the self she'd lost. So, silently, she picked up her heart and her case, and left the party behind.