

Chapter 1

The day after the funeral, Rachael, by force of long habit, woke near dawn and made two cups of tea. She dumped the teabags in the sink, then, remembering it would annoy Tess, squeezed them out and tossed them in the bin. It took her longer to register that the second cup wasn't needed.

She poured her mother's tea away and braced her hands on the sink, looking out the window. Their harvest had finished two weeks ago and the wide rolling fields of stubble were grey before the sunrise. A beautiful grey, like a dove's feather, joining the pale soft light at the horizon. As the sun appeared, it gilded the cut stalks, and the single majestic gum on the rise seemed to float on a sea of burnished gold.

Seven, Rachael thought. Seven sunrises without my mother.

She pressed her hand to her mouth. The tears kept boiling up unbidden, the wound still raw and open. Mercifully, Tess, Joel and the children were still asleep. She had time to pull herself together.

'You're up early.'

Rachael jumped and sucked back the tears. Tess had padded into the kitchen in thick, silent socks. Her checked robe was tightly knotted at her waist, her blonde hair stowed in a neat plait. Rachael involuntarily touched the unbrushed, ragged

clump behind her head, the result of sleeping on her ponytail. Amidst the frizz were bits of broken elastic sticking up from the overstretched band.

‘So, we’re getting started on Mum’s things?’ Tess asked, flicking on the kettle.

‘What?’

‘Mum’s things. I asked you about it last night. You said we’d do it today.’

‘When?’ Rachael said. She couldn’t remember a single thing that had happened yesterday, apart from those two women talking outside her window. The day had been a blur of tears and hymns and the scent of white lilies.

‘This morning.’

‘No, I mean when did you ask me?’

‘After dinner. When Joel was doing the dishes.’

‘I don’t remember.’

She didn’t even remember eating dinner. She took her tea from the windowsill, but didn’t drink it. She wouldn’t have been able to swallow around the lump in her throat.

‘Look, have some breakfast,’ she said, dodging around Tess.

‘I’ll eat later. Where to first – lounge or bedroom?’

‘We don’t need to start right now,’ Rachael said, trying and failing to keep the wobble out of her voice.

‘But it’ll be a huge job. Her wardrobe is overflowing. What a woman on a farm wanted with all those fancy clothes, I don’t know.’

‘She made a lot of them for other people – for formals and weddings and things like that.’

‘What are they doing in her cupboard then?’

‘Because people brought them back and she’d modify them for someone else. She didn’t—’

‘I bet you don’t even know what’s in there,’ Tess said. ‘I bet

that ottoman's still stuffed with winter woollies nobody wears. Don't worry, Joel will feed the kids and keep them away.'

Rachael had a vision of her sister striding around her mother's room and stuffing garbage bags with dresses and quilts and other precious things, mixing up what was going where. 'No,' she said.

'I don't understand. We have to get back to the farm in a few days, so I won't be around to help later. You said you wanted to get started.'

Rachael threw her hands up. 'I don't remember what I said! It was her funeral, Tess. Besides, I was here with her the last ten years. I know what she wanted. If you have to go home, that's fine. I can manage.'

'Oh, I see. This is about me choosing to go with Dad when we were kids.' Tess folded her arms, bringing out a well-worn bickering point like a favourite toy. 'Well, someone had to. It doesn't mean I didn't care about her. And I'm just trying to make things easier for you.'

Tess delivered her speech without a shred of sadness. Rachael was utterly unable to understand how her sister was navigating the grief so easily.

'It's not about that,' she said.

Though she couldn't help remembering standing beside her mother on the day Tess and her father drove away. Rachael had pressed herself against her mother, her eight-year-old eyes unbelieving. Marion had squeezed her fiercely, tears in her eyes, though she'd held her voice calm and level. 'She's still your sister,' she'd said. 'This will always be home. She'll be back one day. She'll be back.' Over and over the same words, as if they had the power to make it true.

Now, Tess pursed her lips. 'Well, can I at least make some lists for you? There's all the medical hire equipment that needs to be returned, and someone should throw out all the tablets.'

‘Why would I need a list?’

‘So you don’t forget.’

Rachael stared. Was it possible that Tess still thought of her as a dreamy girl with her sketchbook and pencils, often late and forgetful? Yes, that’s what she had been, once. But she’d worked very hard in her last years of school; and then had come ten years of looking after her mother’s appointments, medicines and meals, toilets and showers, and the farm. All that had changed Rachael forever. Tess simply hadn’t been here to see it.

‘I’m not going to forget,’ she said.

‘You forgot what you said yesterday.’

Rachael gritted her teeth. All she wanted today was to be left alone, to stare down the fields or wander round the house, to be as lost as she needed to be. Choosing retreat, she abandoned her tea and headed for her room.

Tess followed. ‘Well, what about cleaning out the fridge? There’s tonnes of food from the wake that needs organising.’

‘Then take it home for Christmas.’

‘Speaking of Christmas, I think you should come up to Dubbo. You shouldn’t be here all by yourself. Or, a better idea. I’ve got someone I want you to meet.’

Rachael spun back. ‘Why would I want to be fixed up with anyone?’

‘Who said anything about fixing up? It’s Joel’s cousin, nice man. He’s bought a farm near Orange and he doesn’t know anyone yet. Family’s all in WA, so he’s going to be alone too. You can talk shop and keep each other company.’

Rachael rubbed her face. She hadn’t slept much this week, her mother’s last days in the hospital replaying in her thoughts at night. Worries about the farm and the future were also accumulating like fallen leaves. Couldn’t Tess understand how

tired she was, how upset? How the smallest things seemed like mountains?

She started back down the hall. 'Will you please just leave it alone? We only just buried Mum.'

'I thought it would take your mind off everything, and besides it's time you found a man. There's been no one since Matthew.'

Rachael froze with that same sick feeling she'd had yesterday, as if his name had dropped a cage around her body, one that was so tight she could barely draw breath. She steadied herself on the wall. Retreat wasn't enough; she needed to escape. The door onto the rear verandah was right there. She suddenly found herself outside, boots on, striding through acres of field, mowing down a row of cut stalks in her haste.

'I'm just trying to help!' Tess yelled at her back.

Rachael didn't turn around. Out under the sky, she pulled out her hair band and sucked in the warming air, trying to shake off the shock. Finding that Matthew's name could still hurt was an unpleasant surprise. She thought she had packed him away so deep in her heart that he couldn't affect her any more.

She strode south, trying to lose herself in her steps, and avoiding the long field where a dip in the ground lay hidden in the wheat stalks. Sadly, avoidance didn't help. If she closed her eyes, she could still imagine lying in that hollow with Matthew, the earth cool against her arms, his body warm beside her. She had lost hours lying against his chest, twisting his curly brown hair in her fingers, staring into his eyes, and listening to his plans for them both. She'd been so excited by the prospects he'd effortlessly sown in her mind: of university, and then coming home to work and build a home together. Dreams that were still tied to the earth and the baked-straw scent of the fields, to everything Rachael was.

He'd broken off and given her his broad smile. 'I'm going on.'
'No,' she'd said. 'I want to hear more.'

So he'd brushed his thumbs across her cheeks, cradled her face, and said, 'I'll love you forever.' Fierce and certain, he'd sealed his promise with a kiss and her heart had lifted with joy.

Rachael wrenched her mind back with an exasperated curse. That same straw scent was in her nose, but everything else had changed. They'd both been seventeen when he'd made that promise, imagining a different life than the one that had happened. And yet she knew she would never love anyone like that again.

She walked until she hit the south fence and still the ache clamped around her like a too-tight belt. The sun was behind a cloud, shooting beams of filtered orange across the sky, and birds wheeled and skimmed low over the stalks. Across the highway in a neighbour's field, a combine turned a lazy circle at the end of a row, the distant grumble of its engines competing with sporadic traffic. Rachael lifted the hair off her sweating neck, but couldn't put it up again; she'd lost the band somewhere in the field. She leaned on a fence post to pick the prickles off her socks, then chewed the remaining nail on her left hand as a truck rumbled down the highway towards Parkes. Another passed a minute later. Rachael lingered, watching.

The next truck had cowboy western murals painted over its cab. Then came two caravans, and two sedans. A sheep truck was next; the driver waved. Then she spotted a green Corolla flying down the highway. Rachael straightened. Just as she made out the mismatched door panel, the car flicked its lights at her and ploughed onto the hard shoulder.

The driver's door flew open and Rachael almost cried again, this time in gratitude. Sammy was here.

'I thought that was you,' Sammy called, negotiating the slope to the fence, the breeze ruffling her choppy fringe. She

had a blonde pixie cut, dimpled cheeks and long eyelashes.
‘What are you doing out here?’

‘Avoiding the house.’

Sammy raised her eyebrows. ‘Tess?’

‘She wants to get into Mum’s stuff.’ Rachael’s voice caught.
‘She’s being really awful. I don’t understand how she can be so . . .’

‘Callous? Invasive?’

‘Yeah. She’s worse than normal.’

Sammy hugged Rachael awkwardly across the fence. She was wearing her black work pants and blue blouse with *Parkes Country Motor Inn* stitched over the breast pocket.

‘Are you on your way to work?’ Rachael asked, confused. It was far too early for a shift at the motel; Sammy was more likely to have been at her second job, at the bakery.

‘Later. I came to see how you are. I brought food.’

‘I’m not hungry.’

‘I know. But I bet your nieces and nephew will be. Come on, I’ll give you a ride back to the house.’

Rachael glanced over her shoulder, gauging how long it would take to walk, then bent to slide through the fence. ‘Probably a good thing. Tess might have decided to clean things out on her own.’

‘I’m sure she wouldn’t,’ Sammy said. ‘But leave Tess to me. You’ve got enough to deal with.’



They found Tess and Joel and their three children – Felix, Emily and little Georgia – in a whirlwind of Weet-Bix, half-empty milk bottles and rejected multigrain toast that had spread from the kitchen to past the dining table. Joel’s T-shirt was on inside out and his hair still bed-mussed as he supervised Georgia in the

highchair. Tess, who never seemed to eat anything, was sipping tea while simultaneously plunging a knife into the Vegemite jar.

Sammy breezed straight across the chaos, kissed Tess on the cheek, offered some words of condolence, then produced bakery bags. Rachael didn't know what Sammy had said, but as soon as the whole family had finished with breakfast, they dressed and took off down to the sheds, Joel leading the way and the children happily chasing each other.

Sammy stacked the dishes and ran the sink to wash up. Unable to be still any longer, Rachael took up a tea towel. One of her mother's, it was printed with the now-faded words of 'Advance Australia Fair'.

'I did it again this morning,' Rachael said. 'With the tea. Making two cups.'

'Oh, Rach. I'm sorry. I can't believe she's gone either.'

'It's just ...' Rachael wanted to say *it hurts so much*, but that didn't begin to cover it. Instead, she picked up a bowl and dried it with undue savagery. 'You know, yesterday at the funeral I hadn't seen a lot of those people since school.'

'Yeah, it was really the old crowd, wasn't it?'

Rachael shook her head. 'I realised how long ago that was. How much everyone had—' She broke off, taking a shuddery breath. 'They're all married, Sam. They've got kids, or they've been travelling, or working their businesses. They were all talking about the things they've been doing, and ... and ...'

'And you've just been here, looking after your mum?'

Rachael nodded. 'You know I was happy to do it. But then I ...' Her voice choked.

'What?' Sammy asked gently.

'I overheard someone saying how I used to be good at school and how I'd never make up for losing that time. And then I couldn't stop thinking about that, or about Matthew ...'

Sammy leaned her head onto Rachael's shoulder, a silent gesture of solidarity and comfort, and hugged her fiercely with one arm. 'Rach, whoever said that is a knob. Let me tell you as a married person, we haven't got something over you. It's not all perfect on this side. You didn't lose time, it was just different. You were utterly selfless in what you did for your mum, and now you've got qualities that other people can only dream about.'

'Like what?' Rachael asked, disengaging herself and hanging a Parkes Elvis Festival mug back on its hook, the same one she'd made her mother's tea in that morning.

'Compassion. Endurance. Patience, for starters. Plus you've been running the property all that time.'

'Mum was the real brains behind it. She might have left it to me, but it was her farm.'

Rachael glanced out the window to the gum tree on the rise where they'd scattered Marion's ashes. She didn't know if she belonged here any more, not without her mother. But where else would she go?

She heaved a huge breath, backing away from a dark pit. 'Talk to me about something else.'

'Well,' Sammy said, putting an encrusted Weet-Bix bowl aside to soak, 'would you like to hear about the suspected rat at the bakery? The disgusting thing I found in one of the motel rooms last week? Or the latest from the Feud Across the Fence?'

'What's happened this time?'

'Well, I saw a police car parked in Bev's drive last week,' Sammy said. 'Taking a statement apparently. I didn't tell you at the time but Bev thought one of her garden ornaments had been stolen, then it turned up later in the bin. Bernie didn't say much about it at work, but I limit him to five minutes boasting about his latest revenge plan, so I don't have all the details.'

Rachael shook her head. For as long as anyone could remember, postmistress Beverley Watkins and Bernie Collins, the town baker, had loathed each other. Their neighbourly dispute was famous in the district, though no one could remember how it had started. Rachael's mother had somehow managed to be good friends with both of them, though never, she was quick to add, when they were in the same room. Rachael knew her mother had been entertained by the ongoing hostilities, viewing them as a harmless farce, but she'd never shared Marion's enthusiasm.

'I always thought it'd burn itself out eventually. They were both so good to Mum, it's hard to believe they hate each other so much.'

'Try living in a shed on one of their properties,' Sammy said. 'Then it feels like it will never end.'

A rumble announced a car coming down the long drive. Sammy put her hand on Rachael's arm and went out to look.

'Speak of the devil,' she said as she came back. 'It's Bev.'



Rachael opened the door to find Beverley Watkins wearing a pair of Christmas-themed earrings that clashed horribly with her apricot suit. Even so, she managed to project the dignity and authority of a headmistress. Her grey curls had been backcombed into an impressive coif and her half-frames hung on a long chain around her neck. She was clutching a sturdy calico bag and a bucket full of rags and spray bottles.

'I've come to help you clean up,' she said, brandishing the bucket. 'You must have three inches of dirt on the floors after all those people here yesterday.'

'That's very kind,' Rachael said. 'But—'

'Not to mention the state of the toilets. I love a farmer, Rachael, you know I do, but half those men think the toilet

brush is some kind of ornament. Let me deal with it and spare you the horror.'

It wasn't the first time Beverley had turned up with rubber gloves and cleaning supplies. She'd taken to coming once a month for the last year or so, and during the worst parts of her mother's decline Rachael's pride had given way to appreciation. The woman was a stain-destroying crusader.

'But what about the post office?' she asked, pushing the door wide to let Beverley through.

'I'm opening late today. Just been in to do the sort. People can still access their mailboxes if they want, and no one much comes in before lunchtime. I brought your post with me. Here.' She dipped into the bag and came up with a thick wad of letters. She squeezed Rachael's hand. 'There'll be some lovely cards in there for your mum. Now, don't you worry about me. Just pretend I'm not here.'

'Bev's cleaning the toilets,' Rachael explained when she went back to the kitchen.

Sammy had finished the dishes and was wiping down the counters. 'I've still got an hour before I need to go,' she said. 'Is there anything else I can—'

She broke off, staring through to the family room window, which gave a glimpse of the drive. Another dust plume was coming, too far away yet to hear, but the vehicle was distinctive enough that Rachael knew instantly who it was.

Two minutes later, she opened the door to see Peter Grant climbing out of a pale-blue van emblazoned with AgriBest logos. Her heart gave a tiny lurch. Peter was Matthew's brother, and there was enough resemblance to remind her of Matthew every time she saw him.

Fortunately, his face was where the resemblance ended. Peter was what Rachael's mother had called 'rough round the edges', a man with a broad country accent, a slow way of

speaking and an intense pride in his successful agricultural supply business. Like so many men of the district, Peter was also generous and hard-working, if sometimes overbearing in his enthusiasm. Today he was wearing an AgriBest polo shirt, a snug pair of jeans and a cowboy hat.

‘Rach!’ He strode over and gripped her in a bear hug. He smelled of soap and cologne, and was all fit muscle under his shirt. ‘How’re you holding up?’

Rachael was too squeezed to answer, but there was something comforting in his gruff care of her and she patted his solid back. Despite his reputation as a shrewd businessman, Peter had often extended their farm credit long past what was reasonable, saying that the community had to look out for each other. In return, Rachael and her mother had been loyal customers.

‘Mum and Dad send their best wishes,’ he added. ‘They thought it was a lovely service yesterday.’

Rachael nodded and asked him to thank them. Things had been a bit awkward with Greg and Evelyn ever since Rachael had broken up with Matthew, and they maintained a cordial distance. She hadn’t been out to their sheep farm in years.

‘Just passing by on my way back to Parkes,’ Peter said. ‘Thought I’d come lend a hand in the shed – you must be still cleaning the harvest gear. Suzi’s got the shop under control,’ he added when Rachael tried to refuse. ‘Oh, hi there, Sam.’

Sammy stood in the kitchen doorway, a tea towel working in her hands. ‘Hi.’ She turned to Rachael. ‘Should I put out another cup?’

‘Nah, I’m off down the back,’ Peter said. ‘Won’t come in – dirty boots. Catch you later.’

‘Joel and Tess are down there with the kids,’ Rachael called after him.

Peter raised a hand in acknowledgement and kept striding. He appeared in the backyard a moment later, growing smaller as he headed for the far shed.

Sammy watched him from the window. 'What's he doing here?'

'Came to help with the harvest gear cleaning.'

Sammy grunted.

A few minutes later, Tess and the children came back from the shed in search of snacks, and Beverley popped in to sip a mug of tea and admire the children before heading back to what she whispered was the 'unspeakable condition' of the second toilet.

This, Rachael reflected, was what her mother had always loved about the country: that people knew and helped each other. But she couldn't help feeling restless. Beverley was cleaning; Peter and Joel were working; Tess had taken over the meals while she was here. Rachael had nothing to do, and into the void came the pressure of lost time, the comments she'd heard at the wake eating like poison into the soft centre of her grief.

She prowled around the kitchen. She picked up the pile of envelopes, then put it down again. Then picked it up again. She couldn't quiet the churning in her chest. Her mother's death had been a terrible shock, but a problem just as large loomed: the *what now?*

She checked the bins for the third time, but they'd already been taken out and replaced with fresh liners smelling of lemon. When she trailed out to the laundry, passing Beverley working on the second shower, she found the hamper empty, the back line nearly full, and a last load already going in the washer. Nothing to do there either.

The children were whining for more of Sammy's pastries while Tess firmly told them no and redirected them to sandwiches. When Joel and Peter came up from the shed for

coffee, the noise in the tiled kitchen and family room reached a crescendo.

Overwhelmed, Rachael was hovering in the hall when Sammy came to find her.

Her friend touched her lightly on the shoulder. 'How about we go outside? Sounds like a concert in here.'

Rachael nodded with relief.

'Do you want those with you?'

Rachael looked down. She was still holding the stack of mail. This, at least, was something she could do. She gripped them tighter, and pushed outside into the warm air.



Rachael flipped through the envelopes. Her mother had been a diligent and consistent correspondent. Her Christmas cards went out every year, and she'd kept a diary loaded with birthdates and significant events for just about everyone she'd ever met, which she had checked every week right up to the end, even though Rachael had to turn its pages for her and write her letters. All those years of dedication had been repaid in kind.

Rachael slid open the first card, which offered condolences from the Parkes theatre group, for whom Rachael and her mother made costumes most years. Then another, from the bowls club.

As Rachael was reading it, Sammy came out the door with fresh tea. 'They'll all be gone soon,' she said. 'Bev's nearly finished.'

'Mmm,' Rachael said, taking out another condolence card. The front was pretty, a grove of autumnal trees, but the handwriting was so bad she could hardly read it.

'I've been thinking,' Sammy said. 'Do you want to get away? Even for just a night. I could come and pick you up after work. Tess is here until tomorrow, isn't she?'

'Day after,' Rachael said.

She was about to put the letter pile aside when a particular envelope caught her eye. It was creamy and thick, with her name and address in swirling calligraphy letters on the front. She straightened the tiny fold in the top right corner, and rubbed her thumb over a smudge on the heavy paper.

‘Who sent that?’ Sammy asked.

Rachael peered at the black letters: *Miss Rachael West*. Each one carefully executed by hand, with little pools of ink at the bends. ‘Must be someone arty. Maybe one of Mum’s quilting friends.’

She used a finger to break the gold embossed sticker closing the back. Inside was not a card but a heavy tri-folded sheet of paper with a gilded swirl at the top, like expensive letter paper. Two more folded sheets peeped from the envelope.

Rachael read: *Mr Walter Quinn requests the pleasure of your company for the wedding of—* Her eyes skittered down to the names, which struck her in the face like a sledgehammer. ‘Oh,’ she said. The word came out breathless, as if her lungs had been suddenly punctured.

She read the lines over and over, not believing what they said: *Bonnie Marie Quinn and Matthew Reginald Grant*.

Matthew Reginald Grant.

Matthew.

Rachael’s chest twisted in a great knot. She had known Matthew was in Sydney pursuing his medical career while she was caring for her mother. She heard things about him from time to time, mostly from Peter. But she’d never given his life beyond medicine a thought, as if it, like hers, had been on pause. After all, Matthew was the one who’d said he was too busy for a relationship. Now here was immense evidence to the contrary. While she’d been helping her mother to the toilet, and driving to medical appointments, and getting antibiotics for the infections, and organising ring-ins to help plant and

harvest, and working at the sewing machine on someone else's wedding dress, or sewing gold braid on costumes for the theatre group, he'd been out meeting people. Falling in love. Getting engaged to a woman called Bonnie Quinn who moved in the kind of circle that sent calligraphied wedding invitations. The movie of Matthew's life had kept playing long after Rachael had been written out of the script.

Abruptly, she realised the gold swirl at the top of the invitation was an elegant monogram of B and M. Bonnie and Matthew. Rachael squeezed her eyes shut as an exquisite pain bloomed between her ribs. This was not what was supposed to happen. It should be her name next to Matthew's.

'What is it?' Sammy asked.

Weakly, Rachael held out the invitation. Sammy extracted her glasses from her pocket and read with her eyes jerking from line to line.

'So he's getting married,' she said finally, then frowned. 'Bonnie Quinn. Wow, really?'

'What? Who is she?' Rachael asked, her voice tiny and faint and frantic.

'Well, you know *the* Walter Quinn, right?'

Rachael thought, slowly extracting where she'd heard that name. On the news, connected with mining and TV stations and a dozen other things. 'The big business guy?'

'Yeah, that's him. I think it's his daughter Bonnie. I've seen her in *New Idea*. She's in some kind of fashion business, but does lots of charity work – raising money for the kids' hospitals and building wells in Africa, that sort of thing. I'm pretty sure she was in *Who's* sexiest people last year too.'

'How do you even know that?'

Sammy shrugged. 'Working reception at the motel. I can only watch movies if I keep the sound down, so I read the mags instead. It might not be her though.'

‘Because Walter Quinn is such a common name.’ Rachael sucked in a long, slow breath and forced herself to read the invitation again. Yes, it was all still real. Names. Dates. Location.

‘Oh my god,’ she whispered. ‘It’s in Paris.’

‘What?’

Rachael pointed, sure she had slipped into some kind of dream. ‘Paris.’

She pulled out the other papers in the envelope, which were instructions about contacting a travel agent to confirm flights and the hotel for herself and a partner, compliments of the bride.

Partner. Rachael almost laughed, but it came out as a hiss, like a pressure cooker about to vent.

She stuffed all the papers back into the envelope and squinted at the golden fields under the blue sky, her eyes resting on that dip where she and Matthew had lain together planning their future. She’d seen the whole world in his earnest green eyes. She wanted that moment back; wanted everything as it had been then.

But while the sky was still the same blue, Rachael’s hands were rough from work and sun, her face etched with the years of caring for her mother and running the farm. Those days with Matthew were gone and nothing could replace them.

She scrunched the thick envelope and its contents in her fist and lobbed it towards a vintage milk can decorating the verandah. It bounced once off the rim, then tumbled inside with a puff of dust.

Sammy’s eyebrows popped above the top of her glasses. ‘You okay?’

‘You know what you said about getting away for a day?’

‘Yeah?’

‘How about we do that.’