

Chapter 2

‘Sky! Welcome!’ David opens my car door.

I saw him at the hospital and funeral but it’s all a blur. The last time David and I really spent time together was Christmas, nine months ago. We chatted before the Christmas pudding while Paula and Mum fought in the kitchen. The afternoon felt cold, despite the summer heat, and I was been happy to have David there.

‘So good to see you, mate,’ David says, hugging me tight.

‘Hi,’ I say, swallowing back the lump in my throat. I can’t help but be glad to see him now.

‘I’m so sorry, Sky,’ his voice is soft, ‘Your mum, Eleanor, was just a beautiful person, inside and out.’

‘Thanks David,’ the words barely coming out. I should say something profound, meaningful, but nothing comes to mind.

‘Please, call me Dave,’ he says, ‘That’s what my family and mates call me.’

He kisses Paula and they hug for a minute before lugging my bags inside. The house is small but light and airy. The furniture is traditional but quaint; a real country house.

‘You really love plants,’ I say to David taking in the variety of pot plants that sit on every surface and even hang from the bathroom ceiling.

'Paula's the real plant Meister,' Dave smiles. 'She may have been the city girl, but she's got talent; I just busy myself with the big boring landscaping jobs.'

I follow him and Paula to the back room.

'Hope you like it,' Paula says, as we stand in the doorway.

I take in the single bed with lavender quilt, small white laminate writing desk and chair placed under a window and large cupboard. A vase of fresh cut red and golden native flowers stand on the bedside table next to a slightly rusty metal lamp.

'It's great, thank you,' I say. I'm intruding in Paula and David's life, and for a moment, my anger and sadness make way for a wave of gratitude. 'I really appreciate it.'

'Don't be silly, sweetie. No need for 'thank yous', we're family. This is your home.'

I turn away so Paula can't see my face and pretend to look around. I want my real family, Mum, and this is not my home. I imagine her walking in now, hugging me from behind, her plait tickling my neck. I squeeze my eyes tight for a second, can't time reverse, the galaxy rewind and everything to go back to how it was?

Paula and David leave me to shower and settle in.

I unpack my clothes and fold them into the wardrobe. I notice a couple of boxes stuffed at the back of the top shelf and pull them down to take a peek. Weird, they're filled with all sorts of baby clothes and breastfeeding stuff.

I open my suitcase filled with books, so heavy David had groaned lifting it from the car. I'm a bookworm and refused to give a single one to the charity that took all our furniture, the stuff Melody didn't want. Mum called her style 'vintage-retro', now I realise that spells 'zero-worth'.

Carefully, I hide my wooden box full of treasures under the bed, after taking out a white pebble. I lie down, and like a little girl, stroke its smooth sea-washed surface, perfectly heart-shaped. Mum found it last year on our beach holiday. It was our best holiday ever; maybe even the best week of my life. It was

perfect. We borrowed a caravan and drove into the sunset, walking for hours on white sand beaches, our pastel sarongs billowing in the humid breeze, hair curled with salt, Mum's multi-coloured Indian bangles tinkling like wind chimes as she searched for the prettiest shells.

I must have fallen asleep for a while because next thing I know there's whispering outside my door.

'I know,' David says, 'give her time ... must be in shock.'

'She has to eat,' Paula insists in a louder voice. 'She'll get sick,' I hear her say before I fall back asleep.

A knock on the door wakes me again. I look at my watch, 11.30 a.m. I've slept through dinner and breakfast and my stomach is rumbling.

'Sky,' Paula calls, 'come and have lunch.' She knocks again softly, 'Sweetie?'

'Coming,' I say, giving in to my hunger. I wish I could stay in my room forever. Then my new life would never begin and I can pretend this never happened. But I have to leave the room some time, don't I?

I switch into my favourite jeans and Mum's old long sleeve Sea Shepherd T-shirt. Mum and Melody went to one of their protests against whaling in the southern oceans. They marched from their ship docked at Sydney Harbour to the Prime Minister's house. I give it a quick sniff; a mix of flour, cinnamon and rose perfume. Her smell. It's like I've been kicked in the gut, I gasp. And then there's a flash of thought: what if Mum comes back, miraculously, and finds all her stuff gone? She'd be devastated. Betrayed. I should never have allowed everyone to throw it away. Now that I think of it I should have been a much better daughter. Why didn't I stay with Mum all day, every day for those last weeks? The thought upsets me so much I have to sit down on my bed again to get myself together.

Paula has set the kitchen table with three plates and a vase of flowers from the garden.

‘Here we are, hope you like lasagna,’ she scoops some onto my plate; the smell of beef hits my nostrils like a truck. ‘Corn, beans, mash?’ Paula asks.

Aagh. Guess she really forgot I’m veggie. I’m not telling her. If she doesn’t care enough about me to remember I haven’t touched the stuff for two years, she doesn’t deserve to know. I’ll just throw her food in the bin.

‘Check out the colour,’ David holds up a green bean, ‘rich and dark. Paula’s veggie patch is unbelievable, Sky, you have to take a look.’

I smile and nod as I pick at the sides of the dish. Luckily I’m not hungry.

‘Now I’m off work for a while I can do some weeding,’ Paula says to David and turns to me. ‘Eleanor loved the Asian eggplants, I remember the last time she came we picked ...’ her voice cracks.

‘Mum hates gardening,’ I want to say, ‘probably just pretended to be polite.’

‘Are there lots of farms around here?’ I change the subject instead. I can’t stand her talking about Mum all the time like they were so close when they weren’t.

‘Yep, this is an agricultural area, plenty of sheep and cows - Angus, Hereford ...’

‘There’s a chicken farm not too far from here,’ Paula interjects.

‘The one we smelled?’ I ask, and Paula nods before continuing,

‘Dave’s doing a big landscaping job at a lovely horse ranch, but that’s a while away, where is it again?’ she turns to him, ‘along the north-west road ...’

My phone beeps and I take it out of my pocket.

A comment from *WildRider*, ‘Hate it when you can’t find decent veggie food on the road,’ he adds a sad face. ‘Why are you in West Creek? Thought you were from Sydney?’

I stare at the screen for a while smiling, not ready to tell the truth about Mum but happy to hear from him. It’s the very first

time he's asked me a personal question, and I have to admit I'm more than a little excited.

My fingers fly over my phone screen: 'I'm moving house,' I write. 'Leaving the big city and—'

'Sky,' Paula frowns. 'No phones at the table, this is family time.'

'Hold on,' I say, continuing to write. Who's she to tell me what I can do anyway? It's not like I'm on the phone all the time; hardly anyone keeps in touch with me these days, save for Melody.

'Sweetie,' Paula says, looking to David for back-up, 'I'm sure Eleanor wouldn't have allowed ...'

I grit my teeth, I'm so annoyed. How would she know what Mum does or doesn't do? Paula hasn't been a part of our lives for ages.

'You really have no idea, do you?' I bark, pushing the chair back so roughly it falls with a crash. I've never done anything like that before. Paula looks at me like I'm a lunatic.

'Hold on there, mate, no need to ...' David says, his voice gentle as he picks up the chair.

But it's too late. I've already slammed my bedroom door.

I stand by the wardrobe mirror and study my face. It's crazy. How can something gut you from the core, scoop out your insides like ice cream, and you still look the same?

I pull up my shirt. Guess I'll make the change myself. A tattoo of Mum's name or maybe a portrait of her, right here; I feel the spot on my tummy. Melody has a tonne up her arm and down her back. She would tell me stories of each one; memories engraved on her skin. Of course, Mum said no tattoos, no way. But now I can. I am still thinking of the perfect design so she will always be with me.

Sitting on my bed, I read a text from Melody. 'Sorry love, can't see you yet, off to a silent meditation retreat, need to gather my thoughts. Love you.' Melody's known me my whole life and almost feels like a big sister, since she, Mum and I lived together the last few years. I miss her and she'd promised to visit next

week. I know Paula and Melody barely talk. I haven't told Paula about our plans yet.

I finish my reply to *WildRider*. 'Haven't started my new school yet, but I already hate this place.'

Could life get any worse?