

## Chapter One

**I**t was after midnight when the big van pulled into the driveway next door. Anna stood in her dark kitchen, getting a glass of water. The van's headlights blazed up the driveway, and two men stepped into the light: one was slim, jangling a set of keys, and the other looked like a thick-necked football player and stood with his legs wide.

*Great, Anna thought. My new neighbours are thugs.*

She stayed at the sink to watch as the men put on head torches and rattled open the back doors of the van. They worked silently and efficiently, propping open the wire gate and ferrying bulging garbage bags and cardboard boxes up the path. The football player carried a big mattress single-handedly, scuttling sideways along the path, only his legs showing, the mattress jiggling.

Anna tipped the last of her water down the sink and dried her hands. A good neighbour would go and give them a hand, even if it was the middle of the bloody night. A good neighbour like her mother would carry a few cardboard boxes and show

herself to be a friendly, pitching-in type, someone who didn't judge people by their looks.

The house next door had been empty for two months, and Anna was surprised how unsettling she'd found the quiet. She saw now what comfort there had been in the sounds of Helen pottering about; the two cottages had thin timber walls and crappy insulation, so Anna could hear Helen walking from room to room. She knew there was someone close by, living a busy, contented life, but Anna wasn't required to interact with her all the time. They waved over the fence and had a few friendly words, and once a month or so sat down for a cup of tea. It was companionable in the best possible way.

She skirted around the kitchen table in the dark, glad the house would have people in it again, but not sure that these two would have been her choice.

The man's voice was loud through the open window. 'You just need to put out some bait. That'll wipe them out in a few days.'

She looked out. What was he talking about. Mice? Cockroaches?

The slim man crossed in front of the headlights, balancing a bar fridge on his shoulder like it was an empty box. He stopped halfway up the path and turned to look straight at Anna, his head torch glinting at her. He couldn't actually see her in the dark kitchen, could he?

'So, are you the kind who brings the new neighbours a homemade cake?' His tone was friendly enough but he stood there, as if waiting for a reply, his body lit up in the headlights, his face shadowed by the fridge. She stepped back from the window, her cheeks hot, and by the time she found her voice, he'd disappeared inside and she heard laughter and doors banging.

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She used to think that everyone was a bit of a voyeur but her dad said he didn't think so. He said *he* was, but only because cops were always anticipating what could go wrong. Whenever they went out with her brother Luke for Saturday-night Chinese or to the Ex-Services, her dad sat with his back to the wall and scanned the room.

'Always identify your exits,' he said to them. 'Know how you'll get out if you have to leave in a hurry.'

Anna never particularly worried about things going wrong, and she made a point of *not* identifying her exits. Watching other people on the bus or at a café simply gave her a sense of being invisible, of clocking out for a while. A bit like watching television. Reality television.

She climbed into bed and kicked the sheet away. It was only the end of November and already the nights were way too warm. She listened to the men walking around next door, and thought about dinner with Dave's kids tomorrow evening. Actually, this evening; it was past midnight. She wasn't ready to meet them. Surely it was too soon. She couldn't bear the thought of a couple of hours sitting across the table from his kids, trying to make small talk while they examined her, as well they should. There was something about the scrutiny of children, especially teenagers, that was particularly difficult. She remembered being a teenager and silently dissecting her dad's friends.

Finally, she felt herself drifting to sleep, the men next door still banging around in the truck.



She woke to the sound of a baby crying, a thin bleat drifting over from next door. She checked the time – 3 am – and got up to go to the toilet. Eyes closed, she made her way through

the dark house; successfully navigating her way around the furniture was a small, ridiculous triumph she allowed herself.

When she got back to the bedroom, the baby was still crying. When had it arrived? She stood at the window, and in the street-light saw a cardboard box on the front path and a broken plastic chair tipped over by the steps. The van was gone.

Quiet footsteps moved through the house next door, and a light came on in what used to be Helen's sewing room. Now the baby's room, where the mother would be jiggling and patting, stroking a soft head. Anna remembered the man spotting her at the window and imagined taking them a cake as a small, friendly joke – the sticky-topped banana cake her mum baked every Sunday to go in their lunchboxes. As a young girl, Anna never questioned the permanence of her home, its comfort and familiarity; she assumed it would always be waiting for her, that it arose effortlessly and organically around the four of them. After her mother's death, she learnt that it was her mother who made their home, and she learnt how easily it could be dismantled.

She climbed back into bed and rolled onto her side, one ear pressed into the pillow. The child was still crying.

## Chapter Two

When she woke it was barely light. She tried to will herself back to sleep but small feet pounded up the hallway next door. Through the window she saw that the cardboard box on the path was sodden and collapsing, and the cement dark and wet. She hadn't heard the rain; she must have slept more soundly than she thought.

In the kitchen, she slid open the back doors to the garden and bent to the terracotta pot on the top step. At last the chive seeds had sprouted; a dozen tendrils of green poked through the potting mix, some of them bowing slightly under the weight of a tiny black seed stuck like a hat to their tip.

She made a pot of tea and sat on the back step in the first of the sun. A couple of tiny grey skinks scurried into the garden bed at her feet. She and Luke used to call them penny lizards and for a while as a kid, she'd fixated on the fact that they could drop their tail if they were in danger, and grow a brand new one. One of the skinks paused in a patch of sun, and Anna could see the pulse in its neck.

She really wanted to make it work with Dave, and had no idea why he wanted her to meet his children so soon. To reassure them of something, perhaps? Or to reassure himself? But she knew it was too soon. She and Dave hadn't been together long enough to ride it out if his kids didn't like her. An uncomfortable meeting could so easily make things go pear-shaped.

She watered her pot plants – the rain had soaked only the first centimetre of soil – and pulled out a few weeds. Dandelion seeds had drifted through the garden and germinated all over the place.

Just after seven, Helen's back door banged open and a kid – perhaps four years old – bowled down the back steps and dropped onto the long grass, bawling and plucking at the legs of its green pants. Anna couldn't tell if it was a boy or a girl.

A woman appeared, young and spectral-thin, wearing an oversized white t-shirt. She slowly bent and picked up a big piece of orange fabric from the ground – perhaps a sheet or a doona cover – and carried it over to the clothesline, where she pegged it up.

The kid flung itself backwards onto the grass and the crying escalated. The woman ignored the child and kept pegging up the cloth. Anna made herself look away and go inside. She dropped two slices of bread into the toaster and cut open an avocado. She should get herself a curtain or just stop looking into their yard. At least the child had stopped crying.

'Hello?' A voice came from outside. It was her, the young mother, looking over the fence and smiling up at Anna.

Anna went out and down the back steps, then realised she still had the half-avocado in her hand. She smiled. 'Hello.'

Now she could see the woman properly, Anna saw she had a sweet, heart-shaped face. But her skin was so pasty. Her long, dark hair was pulled up on one side by a dozen hairclips stuck in at odd angles.

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‘Welcome to the neighbourhood,’ Anna said. Cigarette smoke drifted up over the fence.

‘Thank you.’ A trembly smile passed over the woman’s face. ‘Sorry to bother you, but do you have a glass of milk? I don’t have a car this morning and she really wants some milk.’

The child sat wide-legged on the grass, watching them. She had scruffy blonde hair that stuck out at all angles.

‘That’s what the tantrum’s about.’ The woman’s voice was high and a bit raspy.

‘Yes, of course. Hang on a tick.’

Inside, Anna pulled the plastic milk bottle from the door of the fridge. It was more than half full. She poured some into a cup for her tea then hurried down the steps. As she passed the bottle over the rickety paling fence, she felt a small flush of pleasure at being helpful, but also worried that she might be encouraging the woman to keep asking for things.

‘Thank you. I don’t need all that, though.’ The woman smiled and dragged on her cigarette. Anna thought how amazing it was that she had grown a child in that bird-like body.

‘You keep it,’ said Anna. ‘That’s fine.’ She heard her toast pop. She had half an hour to get out the door and to the bus stop.

‘Did you know her?’ asked the woman. ‘The old lady who died?’

‘Helen? Yes, I knew her.’ Anna glanced over at the child, who was watching them and plucking at the grass. ‘Do you have a baby as well?’

The woman coughed. ‘God, no.’

‘Oh. I thought I heard a baby in the night.’

‘No, it was this one. As bloody usual.’

The girl appeared at her mother’s side and tugged hard on the woman’s t-shirt, dragging it off one skinny shoulder.

'I want cartoons,' she whined.

'Just wait,' the woman snapped, and pulled her shirt back over her shoulder. Her narrow fingertips were blue-ish, as if cold.

'Hello,' Anna said to the little girl. 'My name's Anna.'

The child looked up, pale eyes unblinking, her sticking-out ears pierced with garish green studs. Her short hair had been hacked at.

'What's your name?' Anna asked.

When the girl didn't reply, the mother swapped her cigarette to the hand holding the milk, and lightly cuffed the child on the back of the head. 'Don't be shy.'

The girl didn't seem to register her mother's words and Anna wondered if she might be a bit slow. Her voice and the crying in the night were very babyish. But then the girl spoke, her voice clear.

'My name's Charlie.' She looked directly at Anna, who had the sense of being bluntly assessed in the same way she'd been assessing the girl and her mother. Any childish conversation Anna had in mind evaporated.

The girl reached her hand to touch the old, rough timber fence between them and said, 'Do you have a dog?'

'No. Not now. I used to, when I was a girl.' Anna imagined splinters in that soft skin. *Don't touch the fence*, she wanted to say. 'His name was Buddy.'

'What kinda dog was he?' The girl's small shoulders were badly sunburnt and peeling.

'A bit of a mongrel,' Anna said. 'You know, a mix of different types of dogs. He ran away when I was ten. And I really missed him.' She was shocked by the knot of tears that moved up her throat. She looked down at the ground for a moment and blinked back tears. Shit.



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The mother said, 'There's no way we're getting a dog. She has no frigging idea how much work they are.' She drew on her cigarette and turned her head to blow the smoke behind her. Her hand shook a little and Anna wondered if she was sick. Was that why she was so thin? Or could it be drugs? Who were these people Oliver had found to move in next door?

The girl gazed up at Anna. 'Buddy . . .' she said, as if she sensed Anna had lost her train of thought.

'Yeah. Your mum is right. Dogs are a lot of work. I had to walk Buddy every day and clean his water bowl . . .'

The girl looked away, down the yard, and picked at the peeling skin on one shoulder. Anna could guess what she was thinking, that Anna was a typical adult, siding with her mother.

The mother raised her eyebrows at Anna.

The girl turned back. 'Nella had Percy Dog.'

'Oh?' said Anna. 'Who's Nella?'

The mother shook her head. 'Will you stop going on about bloody Nella?'

Charlie marched over to the clothesline and disappeared behind the sheet that her mother had pegged up.

'Well.' Anna smiled and took a step backwards. 'I'd better get ready for work.' She wouldn't have time for a shower now. What was she thinking, sitting on the step for half the morning?

'What do you do?' asked the mother.

'I'm a graphic designer.'

'Oh. Nice. I guess you were good at art when you were at school?'

'Yeah, I was.'

The girl pulled on the sheet. A peg flew off.

'And you go to work every day, do you?' asked the mother.

Why was she asking that? 'Sometimes I work from home.'

‘I’m Gabby, by the way. Do you happen to have a sprinkler, Anna?’

‘No. I don’t really have any grass.’ In the middle of Anna’s backyard was a big square of cracked cement, and Anna had planted up every inch of soil around it. ‘But Helen had one. Have a look over near the tap.’ She could just see the yellow sprinkler beside the hose reel.

Gabby turned. ‘Oh. Right. Good.’

Helen had barely used the sprinkler; she watered everything by hand, including the lawn, which hadn’t been mown since Helen died.

‘Thank you very much.’ Gabby raised the milk carton in a salute and turned to go inside. The girl walked over the grass towards her mother, placing one foot right in front of the other, as if she were walking a tightrope, her too-short green trousers slipping down her bum.

Anna wondered what they would do all day. Watch television? Unpack? Walk around Helen’s house trying to make it their own, wondering which room Helen had died in?

A few blooms on Helen’s roses were perfect for picking, their big, red, velvety buds just opening. For the two months that the house had been empty after Helen’s death, Anna let herself in the front gate every evening to water the garden. It was a little unsettling being on the other side of the fence uninvited, but she couldn’t let Helen’s roses die.

Anna was heading up the street, satchel on her back, when Dave phoned.

‘Hello there,’ she said. ‘I was going to call you when I got to work.’

‘I have a meeting now, and then court all day.’ On the phone his voice had more gravitas. ‘Just a quick call to say that the kids have finally chosen the restaurant for tonight.’ He was walking

while he spoke. 'Look up the Blue Monkey in Randwick. It's Thai, unfortunately.'

A plane coming in to land roared overhead. She waited for it to pass.

'You know . . . I actually think it's best if I don't come. I think it's too soon for me to meet them.'

He was silent. Something *pinged* at his end. An elevator.

'It'd be better when we've been together for longer,' she said. 'When they can feel how solid we are.'

She turned the corner and ran across the road; she'd miss her bus if she didn't hurry.

He sighed. 'Okay, okay. So . . . sounds like you don't feel like we're all that solid.'

'Well, we're as solid as we could be after six or whatever it is . . . seven weeks . . .' She worried that he had some fantasy of their relationship. Which was strange, given he dealt with the law and its evidence and rationality all day long.

She saw her bus in the distance and picked up her pace. Then stopped. She couldn't have this conversation while boarding the 310 to the city. 'I'm not sure your kids would be dying to meet me anyway.'

He said, 'Okay, if that's what you want. But let me worry about my kids and whether they want to meet you.'

She felt a lurch of distance between them. There it was again, that faint hesitation she'd felt before.

*Shit.* Being single was so much easier. 'It feels like we're *heading towards* solid . . .' she said.

This was mad, all this talk of degrees of solidity. What the hell did *solid* mean anyway? She watched her bus pull in at the stop.

'Look, I'm happy, Dave. I'm *really* happy with us. We're just at the beginning of things, that's all.' She wanted things to work

out with Dave. She hadn't felt this way since Ben, which was all the more reason not to rush in and screw things up. 'There's no hurry, is there?'

'Nah, no hurry. It's all good. Don't worry about it,' he said. His cheerfulness sounded forced.

'Have a good day,' he said. 'And let's talk later. I've really got to go. My meeting's about to start.'

She hung up and walked slowly to the bus stop, feeling a bit sick. Had she just fucked things up? Outside the halal butcher, she dropped onto the bench and fished in her bag for a clip. As she tied her hair up into a messy bun, she pictured herself from above, a 37-year-old woman sitting quietly and waiting for the next bus, her dilapidated rented house around the corner, and her neat desk, piled with work, waiting for her in Redfern. A woman without children and unlikely – it would seem – to ever have them, someone whose greatest pleasure came from growing a garden from cuttings and cheap plants she bought at the hardware store.

She was not ambitious. Anna knew that about herself and she knew that some saw it as a flaw.

*This life is the rest of my life*, she thought. When she was twenty, anything had seemed possible, but she'd been certain she'd be a mother at some point. Even at thirty, she had sensed hundreds of different paths her life might take. Now, she guessed that this – more or less – would be her life. Maybe she'd always be on her way in or out of a relationship. Even so, this was a good, simple life, surely. Surely.



She was late to work and sat straight down to a phone call with a new client, Vita, a wellness blogger. Instead of taking notes, Anna found herself drawing the chives, their slender stalks and

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the small tightly packed buds that she knew would come. Anna made agreeable noises while Vita talked on and on about how clean and fresh the design needed to be, and she checked her phone in case there was a message from Dave. Nothing.



When she got home at dusk, the air was still balmy and the girl was running around the backyard, leaping over the sprinkler, her t-shirt stuck to her belly and back. Charlie skidded on the long grass and stamped on a pile of dark, wet cardboard boxes. The plastic milk bottle sat on the path, still half full. Anna's heart skipped at the sight of red blobs in the grass, then she saw they were rose petals. All the blooms had been stripped from Helen's roses and were scattered around the backyard.