



'Beautifully evoked, pacy and unpredictable'
ROSE CARLYLE

SEE HOW THEY FALL

Perfect family. Perfect weekend. Perfect murder ...

RACHEL
PARIS

ONE

SKYE TURNER

GOOD FRIDAY

I couldn't face another fight. Duncan had been irritable for weeks now – ever since his dad's funeral – so I was silent on the drive north from Sydney, picking ceramic clay out from under my fingernails while dusty paddocks and straggly trees flicked by. Despite the throbbing bass, somehow Tilly had fallen asleep in the back seat, one arm gripping her beloved Mouse, and the other cuddling our labrador, Bo.

Fog was still rising when we rolled through Yallambee's ornate iron gates. Those gates were the only hint of what lay beyond the forest of gum trees ahead. From the ridge line, manicured gardens sloped towards crystal water and white sand. Ten years ago, when Duncan and I first visited his family's private bay, I'd thought I was entering paradise.

The main residence wasn't visible until the road carved eastwards. Then the vast collision of concrete, steel and glass swooped into view. Duncan called it his dad's Taj

Mahal – a monument to the wife who died too young, leaving him with three school-aged sons. But really, Yallambee was a monument to Sir Campbell, by Sir Campbell. It was my father-in-law's announcement to the world that the poor Turner kid from Gawler had made it big, as well as an enclave where he could entertain powerful friends.

We usually only visited Yallambee in midsummer, when the light was golden and guests arrived by superyacht and helicopter to join Campbell's glittering beach parties, so the estate looked strange under a charred autumn sky. The watchhouse stood empty, and the entranceway was coated in a sludge of brown leaves, as though it were already in decline.

Duncan's older brother, Jamie, had suggested the family meet at Yallambee for the Easter break. It would be the first gathering of the Turner family since Campbell's funeral. No security, no chefs, no nannies, just family, Jamie had insisted – though his definition of family hadn't included Cody. That was partly why Duncan was on edge, and for good reason. This weekend would be his son Cody's first introduction to the rest of the Turners.

At the sound of the engine, our niece, Arabella, bounded out of the house, her pigtails flying. She darted across the cobbled courtyard and accosted me when I opened the car door.

'Aunty Skye, guess what?' She grinned, gap-toothed, and placed a ball of crumpled tissue into my palm. It weighed no more than a cotton ball.

Tilly, suddenly awake, lunged forward to see. 'Careful, Mumma,' she whispered over my shoulder.

I unwrapped the delicate paper to reveal her cousin's tiny front tooth. Tilly's own teeth were wiggly, and she was desperate for her first visit from the Tooth Fairy.

Jamie and Nina emerged arm in arm, like the lord and lady of the manor. As usual, Jamie was smart in a bespoke suede jacket and cashmere pullover, while my sister-in-law was dressed like the love child of a nun and a Stepford wife in an absurdly prim white silk pantsuit, her icy blonde hair pulled back in a chignon. She air-kissed me on both cheeks and complimented my dog hair-covered sweater. Jamie gave me a warm hug and shook Duncan's hand.

'We choppered up last night,' Jamie said. 'You're in the largest guest house. Now, can I help with your bags?'

Duncan was furious that Jamie had claimed the main house. As we unpacked, he grumbled that Jamie had always been an entitled prick.

Here we go, I thought.

At eleven o'clock, we stood around on a terraced lawn overlooking the beach while Nina served hot cross buns and English breakfast tea. Tilly and Arabella thieved down to the sand, and I watched them collect shells in an old metal bucket over the delicate chink of teacups and conversation. They laughed when a breeze whipped their hair into their faces and sent sprays of seaweed scuttling. Bo was having the time of his life, barking and running in giddy circles beside them. When Tilly looked back up at me, she waved and blew a kiss. I pretended to catch it and blew one back.

'Do I get a kiss too?'

A hand gripped my waist. It was Duncan's younger brother, Hugo, in his signature look – cashmere hoodie, box-fresh kicks, a chunky chain and gold aviators. He reeked of cologne and was already twitchy from coke. I faked a smile. As always,

Hugo grazed my breast when he leaned in for a kiss and aimed his lips at mine before I jerked away. A sleek young woman was lingering at his side. She had the homogenous beauty of an Instagram influencer, which made her seem vaguely familiar. What would Jamie think, I wondered, about Hugo bringing a plus one after his strict family-only edict?

‘Are you going to introduce us?’ I asked Hugo.

‘Skye, meet Tamara,’ he said, reaching across me to take the last hot cross bun.

Tamara extended her perfectly manicured hand. ‘We met at Sir Campbell’s wake?’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ I said. ‘Sorry, it was a huge day.’

She flashed a sun-bright smile. ‘I work in publicity at Turner Corp. I’ve been doing media training with Duncan recently.’

I laughed. ‘God, that must be a challenge. Duncan’s so weird about journalists.’

‘I noticed.’

‘That’s why we keep Duncan hidden in finance,’ said Hugo, as if he had any say in the matter. Jamie and Duncan only tolerated him in the family business to stop him wreaking havoc elsewhere.

Tamara kept glancing at Jamie over my shoulder. I understood why she was nervous. It was intimidating to be the newcomer at Turner family gatherings, and doubly so for her, given that Jamie was her new CEO. It was up to me to make her feel welcome because Nina would make no effort. She preferred to be admired from a distance.

‘So, how long have you two been seeing each other?’ I asked.

Tamara blushed. ‘Hugo and I are just friends.’

The expression on Hugo's face confirmed that he had other ideas. 'I'm sick of always being the spare prick at these family things,' he said. 'Besides, Jamie okayed it.'

Before long, dark clouds began to roll in, so I summoned Tilly and Arabella back from the beach. Tilly had refused to wear her jumper, complaining that it was too scratchy, and I didn't want her to catch a cold and miss the upcoming book character parade at school. After much deliberation, she was going as Pippi Longstocking. Somehow I'd have to wrangle her mass of curls into two stick-out braids like Pippi's. I set a reminder in my phone to buy some pipe-cleaners and hairspray when we got back to Sydney, then I collected up the empty teacups and saucers and wandered inside to the kitchen – a magnificent statement in the most exquisite fragile Calacatta marble. I had an anxiety attack whenever Tilly went near it with a glass of juice or a felt-tip pen. The chefs didn't have to worry because this kitchen was just for show; all the meals were prepared in the huge stainless-steel scullery down the hallway.

I was jarred by the sight of Nina rinsing dishes at the sink in yellow gloves. Usually, a staff member would be hovering to take care of such a mundane task.

'We missed you at the gala on Wednesday,' she said in her cut-glass English accent, 'but it was so kind of you and Duncan to make such a generous donation.'

'I hope you raised a lot of money; it's a great cause,' I said, not quite remembering which of the Turners' worthy charities the gala was supporting – child cancer, marine conservation, Indigenous arts or women's empowerment. I began loading the rinsed plates into the dishwasher.

‘Remember, the Limoges porcelain has to be hand-washed,’ said Nina.

Why would anyone order plates that couldn’t go in the dishwasher? Then again, a decade on, there was still a lot I didn’t understand about the Turners. I unloaded the plates and rested them on the counter. To fill the pinched silence, I tried again. ‘Can I help with dinner tonight?’ I already knew Nina would decline my offer before she shook her head. No matter how hard I tried to connect with her, she always met me with polite resistance.

‘Thanks so much,’ she said, ‘but we’re all sorted. Hugo and Tamara are doing starters and dessert, and Jamie and I have the mains covered. It’s going to be super casual.’ She drained the sink and snapped off the latex gloves, one finger at a time. ‘Actually, perhaps you could mind Arabella for us this afternoon while we prep? Usually the boys would entertain her, but I promised to let them go on their screens because they won their tennis tournament last night.’ For once, Nina’s twins, Olly and Finn, were zombified on the sofa like normal thirteen-year-olds, their faces glowing blue from their mobile phones. It was a rare reprieve from practising algebraic equations, piano scales or some other self-improvement activity.

‘Of course. We’d love to look after Bella.’

‘Thank you.’ Nina smiled and squeezed my hand, which surprised me. She wasn’t the touchy-feely type.

The clap of a car engine in the driveway startled us both. It had to be Cody arriving. Everyone streamed around to the side terrace to watch him climb out of his rusted Ford Falcon.

‘So, this must be our nephew,’ said Jamie, taking in Cody’s shaved head and tattooed forearms.

Duncan was already striding across the courtyard to welcome him.

‘Fuck me,’ said Hugo. ‘The secret son. What’s the name again? Casey? Colby?’

‘It’s Cody,’ I said.

Hugo smirked. ‘Cody. Classy. I wonder what Dad would have made of this fucking soap opera?’

‘Give him a chance, guys,’ I said. ‘He’s been sweet with Tilly. I’m sure Campbell would have approved.’

Hugo scoffed. The truth was that Campbell would have been appalled by Cody – both the fact of his illegitimate existence and his unrefined appearance, neither of which aligned with the Turners’ carefully curated image. Then again, I didn’t exactly fit the mould either, and Campbell had accepted me eventually.

When Tilly saw Cody, she yelped with delight. ‘See, I told you I had a big brother,’ she bragged to Arabella. Then she tugged my arm. ‘Mumma, let’s go down.’

Jamie smiled. ‘Yes, Skye, why don’t you introduce us?’

Up close, I was struck anew by how much Cody resembled Duncan and Tilly, with his bright amber eyes and sharp cheekbones. He was so beautiful, even with a bolt through his lip and a new eyebrow piercing. When I hugged him hello, he smelled of weed and coffee.

Jamie and Nina gave Cody a gracious welcome, while Hugo and Tamara hung back, watching on from the terrace.

‘You can sleep in the room right next to me,’ said Tilly.

Cody scooped Tilly into the air and dangled her upside down while she shrieked with joy. ‘No one told me I’d have to sleep next to a monkey.’

My heart swelled to see them bonding after all the monthly disappointments that had left Tilly an only child.

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At six o'clock, we returned to the main house for aperitifs. Through the floor-to-ceiling windows, the last of the daylight was burning itself out, and the horizon was a vigorous impasto of blood orange and cadmium red. Nina was prim in another white-silk-and-cashmere ensemble, and Tamara had changed into a scarlet bodycon dress that plunged at her pneumatic cleavage. I glanced down at my sweater and jeans and wished I'd packed something smarter.

I chatted to Duncan and Jamie for a while, but before long they were debating the impact that the Chinese economic downturn would have on large cap mining stocks, and Tamara and Hugo were scrolling on their phones. The kids had taken Cody on a house tour so, as a last resort, I perched beside Nina at the kitchen island. She was polishing the crystal glassware. So much for a 'super casual' dinner.

'Need a hand?'

'Thanks, but I'm almost done.' She wasn't. God, she was tedious. How did Jamie put up with her? He was a bloody saint. No wonder none of her nannies ever lasted long.

'What did you do to yourself?' I asked. There was an angry red blister on her palm.

'I caught it on my straightening iron.' She smiled. 'I should really leave it to the professionals.'

'I meant to ask: how's your mum's health?' I said. 'Is she improving?'

'Unfortunately not. I was hoping she'd be able to come out to visit this year, but her doctor won't clear her to fly.'

‘Why don’t you travel to her?’ I asked.

‘It’s hard to find the time to get all the way back to England.’

I nodded, but it was a pathetic excuse. With unlimited money, nannies and a private jet at her disposal, she might have made more of an effort to visit her ailing mother. After all, she was an only child, and the poor old lady had been on her own since her husband had passed away three years prior. So many people took their parents for granted.

‘Now, we’re serving Thai dishes for the adults,’ Nina said, ‘but they’re quite spicy, so I’m just doing burgers for the children to keep it easy. Is that okay for Tilly?’

I confirmed that yes, of course, a burger would be just fine. We exhausted all of the usual topics of conversation – the children, her charities, my upcoming exhibition, in that order. When she raised the dismal weather forecast, I decided I’d done enough and offered to fetch her a drink to escape.

The house tour had concluded, and Cody was now showing Tilly how to muddle mint leaves in the bottom of a tumbler. He worked as a bartender in the city and had brought supplies to mix cocktails. I ordered two mojitos, extra strong.

‘Good job, that’s it,’ Cody said as he helped Tilly guide the pestle.

She glowed at the compliment.

As I presented Nina with her drink, a FaceTime call came through from Ana, my close friend and the owner of the gallery in Double Bay where I exhibited. Her topknot of flame-red hair and her black lipstick shuddered into view when I answered.

‘You promised you’d send me a photo of the Kngwarreye,’ she scolded in the husky drawl that betrayed years of Marlboros. ‘How does it look? I’m *dying* to see it up close.’

‘Sorry, I totally forgot. It’s spectacular. Look.’

I swivelled my phone camera around so that Ana could take in the glorious canvas pulsing with life along the back wall of the lounge room, the intricate patterns of layered lines and dots glowing like tiny stars. Campbell had acquired it at auction from a private collection shortly before his death, setting a record price for a work by an Indigenous Australian artist.

‘The lighting’s wrong,’ Ana declared through the speaker. ‘We need to adjust the angles and perhaps add some recessed directionals. I’ll send someone up next week to take a look. Right, I have to go – but don’t forget about lunch on Tuesday. Let’s meet at the gallery and we can walk from there.’ As always, she hung up before I’d managed to get a word in.

I’d met Ana twelve years earlier, when I was waiting tables in Surry Hills. She was dining with a photographer who followed my work and raved about it in front of Ana. To my amazement, she called the next morning. Back then I’d only recently begun experimenting with clay. Ana came to my studio (if you can call a half-share of a leaking basement flat a studio) and was taken most of all by my ceramic sculptures – hand-coiled vessels that resembled crumpled, lopsided hives and bird’s nests. I’d created them by instinct, but Australia’s leading art critic would later describe them as ‘ethereal meditations on the fragility of home and the need for belonging’, like he’d peered into my soul. Within a fortnight of our first encounter, Ana had signed me to her prestigious gallery, Betjeman’s, and my luck had finally changed.

A few months later, Ana and I had just finished up a meeting when Duncan arrived at the gallery to take me to lunch. Ana almost fell off her chair.

‘Why didn’t you tell me you were dating Duncan Turner?’ she whisper-hissed, trailing me into the stockroom when I went to fetch my bag.

‘Do you know him?’

‘Skye, come on! Every red-blooded woman in Australia knows about Duncan Turner.’

I frowned. ‘Really?’

‘Are you serious? Have you been living under a rock?’ She arched her thin brows. ‘How in the hell did you meet him?’

‘We got chatting at the Biennale. Went for a drink afterwards.’ I glossed over the fact that my flatmate and I had blagged our way into a VIP event for the free champagne and found ourselves smack-bang in front of the event’s sponsor. Just as he was about to turf us out, the hot guy behind us intervened and said we were his guests. The hot guy turned out to be Duncan. When his hand brushed mine, the electrical surge that passed through me could have blown the national grid. Later that night, we wound up together in a yakitori bar until closing time. He was so charming, so funny, so interested in what I had to say – nothing like the guys I knew, who still behaved like selfish teenagers. ‘What’s the big deal anyway?’ I continued.

Ana shook her head in disbelief. ‘It’s like you just blew into Bondi on a scallop shell. Don’t worry – I’ll fill you in on all the gossip, and there’s plenty of it. Sir Campbell Turner has been a client of mine for years. He’s Duncan’s father, you know.’

I’d learn later that Duncan’s dad had a MoMA-quality art collection crammed with Basquiats, Modiglianis and Rothkos, most of which was sheltered in offshore vaults for tax purposes.

‘Please don’t tell me,’ I said to Ana. ‘I want to get to know him without any preconceptions.’ All Duncan had said was

that he worked for his dad, hated it, and didn't want to talk about it, which suited me fine.

Ana laughed at my naivety, not realising I was just trying to outrun the shadow of my own past.

On the dance floor at our wedding, she'd given me a big drunken hug, her red hair tumbling down her back and her lipstick smudged.

'Good luck, my darling Skye,' she said. 'You'll need it.'

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By my third mojito, I was buzzing with a pleasant mixture of exhilaration and detachment. I drifted through to the lounge and sank into the armchair with the best view of the bay.

If I traced the ragged cuticle of coastline north to Queensland, I'd have wound up back in my home town, which was littered with broken bungalows and rusted-out cars, and where the scorching heat and cheap grog left everyone wilted and listless. Now, those memories felt like a reel of someone else's life.

'Mumma, what are you doing here all by yourself?' Tilly skipped into the lounge, her hamburger in one hand, trailed by Bo.

'Nothing much. Just thinking, baby.'

'I'm not a baby anymore.' She crawled onto my lap and tore off a hunk of her burger patty.

'You'd better not let Auntie Nina find you. She'll freak if she catches you walking around with your food.'

'I'm not walking around – I'm sitting,' Tilly pointed out. She tossed the meat to Bo, who was watching her intently, awaiting a morsel. 'I brought you a present.'

'Really? What?'

She tucked her hand into the pocket of her jersey and withdrew a heart-shaped grey stone. 'I found it on the beach. Do you like it, Mumma?'

'No. I don't like it. I *love* it.'

Tilly giggled at my corny joke. I kissed the top of her head and slid the stone into my jeans pocket. 'Now go and sit back down at the table with your cousins before we both get in big trouble.'

Tilly darted off to the kitchen. I drained my drink but wasn't quite ready to rejoin the others – there was only so much pretentious blathering from Hugo that I could handle on an empty stomach. I killed some time by studying the long gallery of black-and-white photographs in the hallway. Here was a young Campbell at Yallambee entertaining fellow billionaires. He must have been in his mid-forties then, and he was the image of Jamie, with his broad, handsome face, thick dark hair and those striking amber eyes that shone even in monochrome. And here was Campbell with a trinity of famous models on the deck of Campbell's superyacht, and in the next photograph smoking cigars with Hollywood royalty on the terrace of the Chateau Marmont.

My favourite photo was the one of Campbell at his sixty-fifth birthday party, sharing a joke with a former US president. He was tanned and confident, his eyes sparkling with mischief. That night had been my first visit to Yallambee, soon after Duncan and I had started dating. I ended up dancing on a table to Beyoncé's 'Crazy in Love', and then I shared a joint with one of the waiters before Duncan whisked me away to bed. It seemed like a thousand years ago now.

Campbell had been such a force, always surrounded by supermodels and celebrities, always the life of the party. His presence at Yallabee was still palpable, as if he might emerge from his private quarters to join us at any moment.

A noise startled me. The door to a guest bedroom along the hallway was ajar. When I approached, a rapid movement caught my eye. It was dark, but in the slice of light from the hallway, I glimpsed a silhouette. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust, and I was shocked to see that it was Jamie, grinding hard against Nina from behind. She had her long skirt hiked up around her hips and her face pressed away from me into the wall. They were really going for it. She'd always given off such frigid vibes. Who knew that, behind the scenes, she and Jamie screwed like teenagers in heat? I felt a pang of envy.

I carried on to the powder room, but the door was locked. There was some rustling and the whoosh of running water, and then Tamara emerged, her make-up freshly reapplied. I couldn't imagine what she saw in Hugo, but at least she was another woman to hang out with. We chatted briefly, and I suggested a walk up to the ridge the next morning if the forecast storm held off.

When I finally returned to the lounge, there was no sign of Jamie and Nina. I was still rattled by what I'd witnessed between them.

'Mumma, I'm *starving*.' Tilly was tugging on my arm.

'Then you shouldn't have fed your burger to Bo, darling.'

'But it hurt my wiggly teeth!' She opened her mouth and poked out a neon-pink tongue.

'Oh my God. What on earth have you been drinking?'

She grinned and her cheeks dimpled. 'Cody made me a special fizzy drink.'

I sighed. 'You know you can't have too much sugar. It makes you crazy.' I was still traumatised by her hyperactive meltdown on a flight when she'd duped the steward into giving her a Fanta.

'Uncle Hugo let me have ice cream too.'

'Come on, honey.' I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. 'You need some proper food, or you won't grow.' In the scullery, I dished her up a bowl of the rice and veggies sitting on the counter, and then sent her off to watch a movie with Arabella in the media room.

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We were all ravenous by the time Nina invited us to take our seats for dinner. Duncan and I helped her carry out heaving platters of spicy prawn and chicken curries and steaming white rice from the kitchen, while Jamie topped up the wineglasses. The long table was shimmering with crystal bowls of white tulips and flickering tea lights. Soft jazz was playing in the background. Typical Nina perfection. She made entertaining seem effortless in a way I never could.

Nina and Jamie were seated at opposite ends of the table. I'd been placed between Tamara and Hugo, who was being his usual boorish self, interrupting and talking over everyone. Once we'd all taken our places, Jamie tapped his knife against his wineglass and the table fell silent.

'Welcome, everyone,' he said. 'I'd like to make a toast to the late, great Sir Campbell Turner.' Jamie surveyed the table, making eye contact with each of us as he spoke, like Campbell used to do. 'Dad, you were an inspiration. We miss you every day. As your sons, we vow to continue your legacy, and to always put family first.' His eyes snagged on Duncan.

We all raised our glasses. In the Turner family, you didn't clink – that was considered basic, as I'd discovered early on, along with napkin rings, visible designer logos and flying commercial. Cody had a steep learning curve ahead of him if he wanted to become a regular fixture here.

'To Campbell,' we chorused.

It was a lovely, heartfelt toast, but across the table Duncan's jaw clenched. The fact that Jamie had slipped so comfortably into his father's role would be grating on him.

At the end of the first course, Duncan cleared his throat. 'I'd also like to make a toast tonight,' he began, and I found myself holding my breath. 'As Jamie said, family meant everything to Dad, and so I'd like to take this occasion to officially welcome my son Cody to his first Turner family dinner.' He patted Cody's arm. 'To new beginnings.'

Everyone joined the toast, bar Hugo, who took a deep swig of wine and leaned across the table towards Cody. His sneer announced something unpleasant would follow.

'Ah yes, Cody. My prodigal nephew.' Hugo wiped his mouth with the back of his hand then stared straight at Duncan. 'So, come on, tell us.'

'Tell you what?' Duncan asked.

'How long the two of you have been scheming about all this.' He feathered his hands at Duncan and Cody, as if he were a feudal lord addressing a couple of serfs.

Cody shrugged. 'Sorry?'

Hugo's face contorted into a grotesque smile – the same awful smile he gave to household staff before eviscerating them for poor service. 'Well, *Cody*,' he said, as if he'd just bitten into something sour. 'How convenient that you've crawled out

from fuck-knows-where straight after Dad's funeral. I can only assume you're trying to claim some inheritance?'

A fog of silence rolled in. Cody shifted in his seat. A vein was twitching at Duncan's temple. I kicked him under the table – a warning not to react. The air was flammable, and he couldn't give Hugo an excuse to ignite it.

'I'm not after any inheritance,' Cody said.

'Then why are you here?'

'I just wanted to spend time with my father and to meet you all, since – well, we're all family.'

Hugo laughed. 'Family?'

Beside me, Tamara squirmed and studied the weave of her placemat. Duncan leaned forward, poised to intervene.

'Well then,' Hugo continued, 'I trust you'll have no objection to sharing the results of your DNA test with my lawyer?' He eased back in his chair, linking his arms behind his head.

'Ignore him, Cody,' said Duncan. 'He's just drunk, or high – likely both.'

'Yes,' said Jamie, shooting his youngest brother a warning look. 'That's enough, Hugo.'

'Hit a nerve, did I, Dunc? And I'm curious, because you've been so coy about the one detail we most want to know.' Hugo's eyes were glassy, and beads of sweat glistened on his upper lip. He was such a creep. 'I never did get to the bottom of it. Which whore is Cody's mother?'

The air crackled, and there was a second of silence before Duncan rounded the table and lunged at Hugo. I cried out when he seized Hugo's throat, upending a glass of burgundy which bled across the white linen cloth.

Nina sprang to her feet. 'Please, everyone, calm down! Don't spoil the evening.'

Duncan ignored her. Hugo sputtered; he was choking.

I screamed at Duncan and tried to pull him off Hugo, but he wasn't letting go. He was never physically aggressive like that, and for a horrible moment I had a flashback to my first foster father – the crunch of cartilage, the smack of fist on flesh, the metallic taste of blood.

By the time Jamie wrestled Duncan to the ground, a ghoulis purple tinge had crept across Hugo's face. There was a stunned silence as Jamie dragged Hugo out to the hallway.

Duncan brushed himself off and turned to Cody. 'You okay?' he asked.

Cody looked at his father, then slowly took in the rest of us. Tamara was crying into her napkin. Nina was staring straight ahead, continuing to eat her meal, as if pretending everything was fine would see order magically restored.

'This is fucked up.' Cody rose, almost toppling his chair.

'I'm so sorry,' I said to him. 'Hugo's an idiot.' I was desperate to salvage his impression of the family – or his impression of me and Duncan, at least – for Tilly's sake.

'I'll make sure he apologises to you,' Duncan added.

'I'm sorry,' said Cody, 'but I can't stay here after that.' He turned to Nina. 'Thanks for dinner. And Skye, give Tilly a hug from me.'

Skye, Tamara and I cleared away the half-eaten dinner in silence, while Duncan and his brothers brokered a fragile peace in low, muffled voices in the next room. I found Tilly curled up like a comma beside Arabella on the sofa in the media room. Duncan scooped her into his arms, and together we dashed back to the guest house through the hissing rain.

‘Mumma, my tummy’s sore,’ Tilly said, all bleary-eyed, when I peeled off her wet clothes and slipped her *Moana* nightie over her head.

‘Sweetie, it’s probably that sugary drink.’ I poured her a big glass of water. ‘Have this, and then we’ll brush your teeth and you’ll feel much better.’

She drank obediently, then slumped against me while I buzzed the toothbrush around her mouth.

The rain was thundering onto the roof and rattling the bedroom windows when I put her to bed. She was asleep before I’d even snuffed out the lamp.

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The next morning, I woke with a chalky mouth and my stomach heaving from the curry. God, what time was it? It was barely daylight outside, and rain was still lashing the house. Despite Duncan’s loud snoring, I could hear Bo scratching to go outside. When I stumbled out to open the door, a colossal wave of nausea gripped me, and I barely made it down the steps before vomiting into a clump of banksia. Even Bo looked disgusted.

Sodden from the rain, I dried myself off with a sofa throw and staggered back to bed. Duncan was still out cold. For once, Tilly hadn’t slipped in between us in the wee hours, so I could stretch out under the cool sheet. I’d had my share of hangovers, but none this savage. It must have been the mixture of cocktails and wine.

I lay there napping for another hour or so and woke to find Duncan pulling on a t-shirt and boxers. ‘You okay?’ he asked.

‘No. I’m dying a slow, miserable death. Got any Nurofen?’

He smiled. ‘I’ll check the bathroom cupboard. I feel really rough too. Tilly still asleep?’

I nodded. 'Yes, that's the one small mercy.'

'I'll check on her.' He padded out of the room, and I suppressed another wave of nausea. I had to pull myself together.

'Jesus! Skye!' came Duncan's panicked call from down the hallway.

I tore into Tilly's bedroom to find her hunched over in her bed, crying softly, surrounded by stale vomit. Had she called for us and we'd slept through it? I should have checked on her sooner, knowing that she'd been feeling unwell when I tucked her in.

'Oh, baby.' I cradled her in my arms.

Together, Duncan and I peeled off her soiled nightie and bedding while tears slid down her cheeks. I was now covered in her puke as well – which was lumpy and bright pink. I silently cursed Cody for the disgusting drink he'd made her.

In the shower, I retched as I washed Tilly down with a flannel and shampooed her tangled hair before Duncan received her in a towel.

When I emerged from the ensuite, Duncan had set Tilly up in our bed, surrounded by a moat of bath sheets, with a kitchen bowl on her lap.

'Can you stay with me, Mumma?' she asked in a small voice.

'Of course.' I slid under the blanket next to her, rubbing her back. Bo sprang onto the end of the bed and nestled under her arm.

Duncan hovered over us. 'Shall I get some Panadol?' he asked.

I pressed my palm against Tilly's forehead and shook my head. 'She doesn't feel hot, and I'm worried it'll make her throw up again.'

I could feel Tilly's breathing shift as she drifted back to sleep.

Duncan phoned our city GP, who reassured him that Tilly had most likely picked up the contagious norovirus bug that was doing the rounds at primary school. She'd feel better in a couple of days. The important thing was to keep her well hydrated.

I went to fetch her more water. Before I stepped back into our bedroom, I sensed that something was wrong. I found her vomiting again, but this time crimson blood was gushing onto the towels, and she was emitting hoarse, guttural moans like no noise I'd heard before.

'Duncan!' I yelled, rushing to cradle her. 'Hurry!'

Duncan phoned emergency services, but all the rescue helicopters were grounded, as were the family's private choppers, because of the gale-force winds. The operator suggested driving to the nearest medical centre. I tossed some towels and Tilly's favourite *Bluey* PJs in a bag, along with Mouse, for the drive to Taree.

The rain was torrential, striking the windscreen in harsh needles, and I pleaded with Duncan to slow down when he sped around the blind corners.

Forty-three minutes later, we screamed up outside the Taree Family Health Centre, a tired building with peeling yellow paint and rain plunging into the gutter from a broken downpipe. The wind was so powerful that Duncan struggled to open the car door to scoop Tilly up. We burst through the entrance, drenched and wild-eyed, setting the bell jangling and startling the young pink-haired receptionist.

'Where's the doctor?' I asked, my breath ragged.

'She's on her lunchbreak until half-past. Take a seat and you can help yourself to water at the water cooler.'

‘You’re a fucking idiot,’ Duncan yelled, and pushed through into the doctor’s surgery, where a grey-haired lady was eating fruit salad out of a plastic container and reading a Terry Pratchett novel. When she saw Tilly’s limp blood-streaked body in Duncan’s arms, she jumped to attention, sending her long shell earrings swinging. She instructed Duncan to lay Tilly out on the examination bed. I gripped Tilly’s hand, while Duncan stroked her matted hair. She was making a strange wheezing sound.

‘It’ll be okay, baby,’ I whispered, willing myself not to cry in front of her.

The doctor checked Tilly’s pulse and temperature, then ran her stethoscope over her chest and back. ‘Your daughter’s having trouble breathing, so I’m going to give her oxygen and call an ambulance to take her to Sydney,’ she said.

A rush of alarm. ‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘Possibly a viral infection,’ the doctor said as she opened a cupboard and wheeled out a rickety oxygen tank that looked like a museum relic. I counted the white ceiling squares over and over again to calm myself, while Duncan paced up and down the room.

When the paramedics arrived, they whisked Tilly onto a stretcher, and I chased them through the oppressive rain to the ambulance. Tilly didn’t flinch when they fixed the heavy oxygen mask over her mouth and connected an IV drip into the tiny crease of her arm. I took Mouse out of my bag and tucked him in beside Tilly’s chest, kissing the top of her head and swallowing down tears. Then I sat in silence in the back of the ambulance, trying to spot Duncan’s car through the rear window and stroking Tilly’s hand with my thumb in time with

the steady loop of the siren. The whole trip back to Sydney, I prayed to every god I could think of to keep her safe.

When we surged into the hospital bay, the ambulance's rear doors swung open and Tilly was slid onto a hospital gurney. The paramedics were exchanging incomprehensible medical jargon with the hospital staff, but it was clear from their faces that they were worried.

My phone vibrated in my pocket.

'Why haven't you been picking up?' Duncan snapped when I answered.

'Why aren't you here?'

'I've just handed Bo over to Ana. I'll be there shortly. Jamie called and said Nina's really ill as well. What do the doctors think is wrong?'

'We haven't seen a doctor yet,' I said. 'I'm not sure what's happening.'

'For Christ's sake, Skye, demand to be seen! It's our little girl!'

I grabbed an orderly's arm. 'When will they know what's wrong with her?'

'She's bypassing triage and going straight to emergency, ma'am. Follow that lady with the red lanyard.'

Bile scorched the back of my throat. I chased Tilly's gurney down mottled grey corridors washed with disinfectant and artificial light to a glass-fronted room within the children's ER. The woman with the red lanyard was barking orders. Nurses in blue scrubs clamped a mask over Tilly's face and hooked her up to the monitors. Then one of the machines started beeping. Where the hell was Duncan?

'She's losing consciousness.'

Panicked, urgent voices now. A bell was ringing. Blood rushed in my ears. An emergency call sounded over the loudspeakers.

‘What’s happening?’ I screamed.

‘Your daughter’s in respiratory failure,’ said a nurse. ‘We need to intubate. Wait outside.’

An arm wrenched me away so the crash trolley could cut through. Hands were slicing through Tilly’s pyjama top and clipping tubes and drips to her chest and tiny fingers.

A doctor inserted a thick plastic duct into her mouth. My throat was aching, raw. I was yelling, smashing at the glass, desperate to get to her. Red lights flashed and Tilly’s body spasmed then stiffened. They were sticking pads on her chest and back. Someone shouted, ‘Stand clear!’ and the doctor delivered the shocks.

Clutched by seismic terror, I watched my baby’s little body convulse.