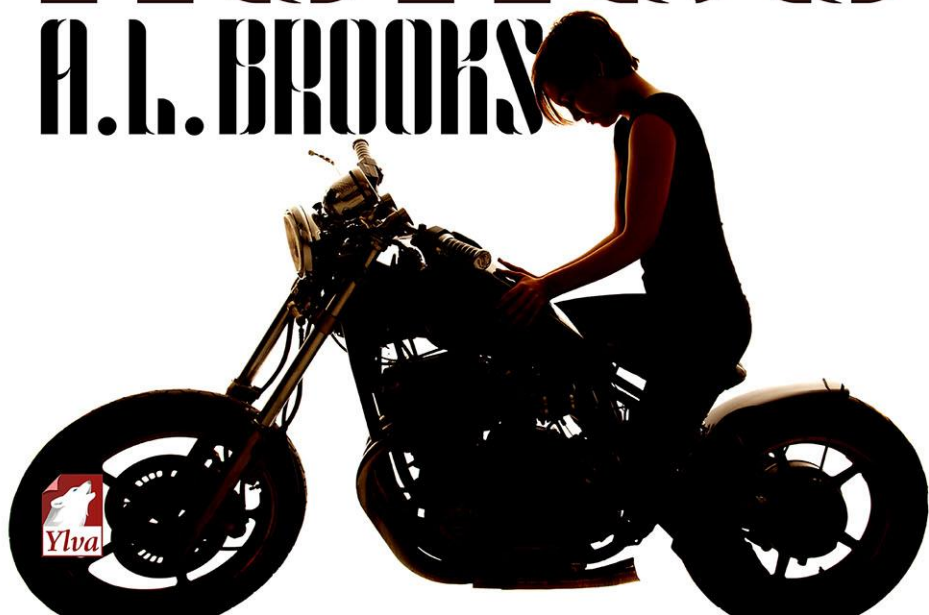


WARRIOR

HORSE

A.L. BROOKS



CHAPTER 1

“Me and Tash are moving in together.”

Nicole’s face shone with excitement.

Sadie was stunned. Out of nowhere, a blanket of hurt and misery swamped her. She knew it was childish, but once her old insecurities reared their ugly heads, she couldn’t shake them off.

“W-when?” Sadie’s heartbeat pounded in her ears; her hands shook, and she didn’t know if it was from anxiety or anger.

Nicole tilted her head.

“Whenever we can find a place we both like.” Nicole’s voice grew quieter. “Tash will sell her place, and I’ll give notice on the house-share. Then we’ll put our savings together and get a great big, fucking, grown-up mortgage.” She grinned, but it faded quickly at the lack of response from Sadie.

Somewhere, deep in the recesses of her mind, Sadie knew she should be pleased for Nicole and Tash. They were her friends. They had been seeing each other for nearly three years, and this was it. The real deal. And that meant living together. It made perfect sense. But somehow, Nicole’s excited words unleashed a torrent of repressed memories and old anger. The thudding in her ears got louder, and her stomach twisted in knots.

Nicole was leaving her.

Nicole was going off to find a life for herself. A life that didn’t include her. It was irrational, and not too far from the surface of her brain Sadie knew that, but she couldn’t stop herself from overreacting. She shuffled in her seat, fighting the urge to run.

“Sades?” Nicole reached out a hand and tried to touch Sadie’s arm, but she flinched away. “Sades, this doesn’t change anything, you know that, right?”

Sadie stared at her, willing her mouth to open and the right words to come out, but they wouldn’t appear. Of course it changed things; it changed everything. Nicole was her best friend, her rock. How could she just leave?

“Babe, I know what is going through your mind right now, but I swear to you, *nothing* changes. We’ll still be hanging out together just as much as we always have. I will still be ragging on you via text message night and day. You don’t get rid of me that easily, remember?” Nicole’s tone was earnest and pleading, but Sadie’s mind had gone into free fall and she couldn’t—or didn’t want to—stop it.

Tears formed, stinging her tired eyes. Nicole reached across the short distance between their chairs, but Sadie brushed her off and stood up.

“Sadie, this doesn’t change a thing.” Nicole stood too and planted herself squarely in front of her, hands on her hips. “Not a fucking thing, you hear me? Tash knows how important you are to me, yeah? Christ, the three of us have been hanging out ever since I started seeing her, so just because I’m moving in with her doesn’t mean that stops, right?”

She grabbed Sadie’s chin before Sadie could move out of the way, and pulled her round to look her straight in the eyes. “I love you, you stupid lump—always! Never forget that. Never.” Her eyes blazed, and Sadie wanted so badly to believe her. And yet...

Whatever it was Sadie’s mind couldn’t get past, it squelched all rational thought. She pulled sharply away, waving a derisive hand between them as if swatting a fly. Without a word, not trusting herself to speak with so much fear and anger eating her up, she stomped away.

“Sadie, *please*.” She heard Nicole’s plea but refused to turn back.

It was a lonely walk home in the balmy evening air. When she quietly let herself into her home, she had no recollection of which route she’d walked or any idea what time it was. She went straight to her room and threw herself onto the bed, acutely embarrassed at her immature response to Nicole’s news. But, simmering under the surface, there was still the anger. The fear. Nicole had been there for Sadie through the best and the worst, and Sadie couldn’t imagine life without her.

She tried to sleep but it was fitful. She tossed and turned in and out of dreams until, eventually, as the sun began to rise and a gentle light seeped under the blinds at her window, she gave up. Staring at the ceiling, she sighed. Thinking time was required, and that could only mean one thing.

She pulled on her clothes and reached for the keys to her Harley. Picking up her phone, she saw that Nicole had texted her about twenty times, each

message saying essentially the same thing: nothing changes, I still love you, you're still my bestie.

The ride out to Turimetta Beach helped—time on her beloved Harley always did. At first she rode too fast, as her anger and embarrassment about her actions the night before had her gripping the bike's controls way too tightly. Gradually, the empty roads, the breeze flowing over her body, and the rising sun lighting her way eased her mood. The thrum of the bike beneath her as it ate up the road gave her a satisfying buzz, despite the gloom that still pervaded her mind.

The beach was small but beautiful, enclosed by two headlands that broke the incoming waves. She found a spot on one of the vegetated hummocks at the back of the sand and watched the waves smash against the rocks. They didn't boom like big surf, but somehow whatever noise they did generate always helped ease her mood. The rhythmic flow and the shush of the water as it scurried back down the beach was almost hypnotic in its effect.

Sadie had never seen the ocean until she was seventeen and first arrived in Manly. It was love at first sight—something about the endless power of it had touched her deep inside and never let go. When she needed to think, the ocean always called her.

She sat for a while with an empty mind and let the rapidly warming sun and the gentle ocean breeze soothe her. Only then did she let her thoughts run and force herself to face up to what had brought her there in the first place. Nicole's news shouldn't have sent her over the edge like that. She had such a good life, and she made herself mentally tick off all that she had in that life to be thankful for. A fantastic friend in Nicole, and, by extension, Tash. An amazing home that she shared with her equally amazing grandmother. A great job that she loved and was good at. Why would she think for one minute that Nicole wanting to move in with Tash threatened any of that?

Stretching out her legs in front of her, she shifted her ass on the sandy hummock. She knew where her insecurity came from, but she also knew that, where Nicole was concerned, it wasn't justified. She cringed with embarrassment at how...pathetic she'd been the night before. She was more than this. Stronger than this.

The overwhelming need to make things right had her reaching for her phone. She tapped out the message quickly, her brain already formulating the plan for what to do next.

Sorry. I'm an idiot. Will see you soon. Luv u xx

She stood up and brushed the sand off her jeans. She knew what she needed to do—go to Nicole's place and apologise. Wholeheartedly. For all the times that Nicole had been there for her in the last twelve years, this was a shitty way to repay her. Sadie should be hugging her, congratulating her, and being excited for her. Nicole was the first of her friends to make this big move, the first of them to find *the one* and attempt the settling-down thing. Not that Sadie ever thought there was much hope of that for herself. She could see what Nicole and Tash had and, deep down, she knew she wanted it. She just had no idea how to get it, no idea how to let someone get that close.

As she climbed back up the steep steps from the beach to the road, she smiled. While an apology was definitely due, she knew Nicole would not let her grovel. There might be some arm slapping and maybe a bit of shouting, but they'd be right. They always were.



The ride back was almost as pleasant as the ride up, just slightly busier, because the morning had really started. Rather than heading straight to Nicole's house, she decided to detour home first to shower and check in with her grandmother. Eating would be good too, she thought, as her stomach loudly reminded her that she'd skipped brekkie again.

The bike slid to a gentle stop on the small paved yard in front of the weatherboard house she shared with her seventy-four-year-old grandmother, Elsie Thomson. Tucked in behind Pittwater Road, in Smith Street, the location was perfect for being near to everything Manly had to offer.

Taking a seventeen-year-old granddaughter in at the age of sixty-two had never been in Elsie's plans, but when the circumstances arose, she gamely agreed, and Sadie moved into the spare room. Elsie let Sadie decorate it and the adjoining bathroom however she wanted—and made Sadie do all the work

herself. *Character building*, her gran called it. One of her favourite phrases, Sadie was quick to discover.

Over their years of living together, they'd settled into a very easy rhythm that worked for them. The idea of moving out once she was old enough had never crossed Sadie's mind.

She dumped her helmet in her room and went in search of food before her shower. She strolled down the long hallway that ran the entire length of the house from the front door to the kitchen. Both her and Elsie's rooms, with their en suite bathrooms, were off that hallway, and the door at the end of it led into the open-plan kitchen/diner at the back. The generous space opened out via sliding doors to the small yard at the back, which had a paved area surrounded by planted beds. The doors were open most days, allowing them to pass freely from inside to out, and the paved area tended to be their lounge room.

As she passed through the door into the back of the house, Elsie was coming through it from the other side. Before Sadie could greet her, her grandmother whipped out a bony arm and slapped her hard in the bicep.

"Idiot," she muttered as she pushed past, ignoring Sadie's stunned face.

"Wh—?" Sadie began, then she heard Nicole's throaty chuckle from inside the kitchen, and she knew. She turned to say something, anything, to her gran, only to be met by her retreating back as she trotted determinedly up the hallway towards her own room. Sadie took a deep breath. *Okay, so that's the way it's going to be today. Right.*

Inhaling another deep breath, she stepped into the room. She came face-to-face with Nicole, who was standing in the middle of the kitchen with her hands on her hips, trying very hard to keep a stern expression on her face. Somewhere in Sadie's mind, a giggle formed—Nicole looked adorable attempting the fierce stance. Her black hair, its natural curls cascading down over her shoulders, framed a face that was quietly beautiful. Her petite frame was stretched to its full height, pushing her not insubstantial breasts fully out from her slender body. Nicole wore the usual multitude of thin bracelets on her left wrist, and they jangled softly like wind chimes each time she moved her arm.

Sadie had never been attracted to Nicole, thankfully—she wasn't sure they'd ever have become such good friends if she had been—but she could appreciate

her friend's sexy gorgeousness in that moment. She knew remarking on that right then was not the way to go, and instead focused her attention on the scowl that Nicole was attempting to maintain. But Nicole's eyes gave her away. Her deep-blue eyes, such a contrast to the bright green of Sadie's own, were sparkling with humour, and Sadie grinned, albeit sheepishly.

"Sorry," she mumbled, her chin somewhere down in her chest while her gaze flitted up to Nicole's and back down again.

"Elsie's right," Nicole snapped, but not without warmth. "You are an idiot. A great big, fucking idiot, actually."

Sadie exhaled and looked up properly this time. "I know. I..." Words wouldn't come, not past the big lump that had suddenly formed in her throat. She'd let Nicole down, after everything Nicole had done for her.

Nicole's entire demeanour changed in an instant, her face relaxing and a gentle smile parting her lips. She took three quick strides across the room to wrap her arms around the much taller Sadie, pulling her head down onto her shoulder.

"I know what you are afraid of," she whispered against Sadie's ear, "but I'm not them. Remember that, yeah?"

Sadie nodded, tightened the hug for a moment, then pulled herself clear. She swallowed and took a couple of deep breaths. Finally, she let her gaze meet Nicole's.

"I am so happy for you and Tash. That's what I should have said last night. Instead, I ruined it with my stupid insecurities. But, really, I am so pleased for you."

"Thanks." Nicole blushed and nudged Sadie gently with her shoulder. Then she threw her head back in a loud laugh. "It's a bit fucking scary, yeah? It's like this big grown-up thing to be doing. Fuck knows if I can handle it, but I won't know unless I try, will I?"

Sadie chuckled. "That's why Tash is so good for you—she'll stop you from screwing it all up too badly."

Nic didn't join in with Sadie's laughter. Instead, her face creased into a frown and her eyes widened.

Sadie took Nicole's hand in hers. "You're really scared, aren't you?"

"Fucking terrified," Nicole whispered.

“Hey, Nic, come on.” She squeezed Nicole’s fingers. “This is you and Tash. The mighty duo! You two have been so bloody right for each other since the minute you met. I’m amazed you haven’t moved in together before now, actually. What is it that scares you so much?”

“I don’t know, really. I guess I’m scared I’ll let her down somehow, once she sees me all day, every day. Or that I’ll find there’s something about her that annoys the fuck out of me. Or that—”

Sadie cut her off with a sharp pull on her hand. “Firstly, there’s no way you could let her down. She’s seen you, in all your glorious and not-so-glorious moments. Remember your birthday last year?”

Nicole blushed. “Jeez, don’t remind me!” She grimaced.

“And second of all,” Sadie ploughed on, “you are an amazing person, and Tash knows this. And she’s an amazing person too. I’d find it hard to believe there’d be anything about you or her that would annoy each of you so much that you couldn’t just talk it out, right?”

Nicole sighed, and nodded. “You’re right. I know you’re right. Why do I keep doing this?” She groaned and dropped her head.

“Because you care,” Sadie said without hesitation, “and that’s a good thing. Just don’t let it get in the way of actually...being.” She envied Nicole and Tash, and what they had. It seemed odd to be giving out relationship advice when she’d never really had one of her own. But seeing what they had together, she didn’t want Nic to run the risk of messing it all up.

Nicole raised her head and stared at her intently. “You are a fucking great friend, you know that?”

“Hey,” Sadie said softly, swallowing hard against the ball of emotion that was swelling in her chest. “I was taught by the best, remember?”

Nicole grinned, and pulled Sadie into a rough hug. “Yeah, and don’t you fucking forget it,” she whispered.

Sadie smiled into Nic’s hair. “Had brekkie?”

“No, and I’m starving! What’ve you got?”

And just like that, they were okay again. As always.

For the next few minutes Sadie busied herself creating a mountain of fruit toast and brewing them up a large pot of coffee. They took the food and their

mugs out to the yard, and munched contentedly in an easy silence borne of twelve years good, solid friendship.

Nicole left about an hour later when Tash called. They were off to view a couple of apartments.

“Tell me how you get on,” Sadie said as she gave Nicole a quick hug goodbye.

“I will. Wish me luck!”

Sadie shut the front door behind Nicole and turned to find Elsie leaving her room. Sadie wasn't sure what sort of reception she'd get this time. Elsie's face held the hint of a smile, and it widened as she took a few steps towards her. Sadie smiled in return, relief washing through her.

“Come here, you silly bugger,” Elsie said, opening her arms.

Sadie fell gratefully into them. Her gran was only a few centimetres shorter than Sadie's 175, and although a thin rake of a woman, she still had some considerable strength. Her hug was tight around Sadie's body.

“Glad you got that all sorted?”

Sadie nodded and pulled away to look her grandmother in the face. “I'm sorry if you were worried about all that.” She waved vaguely down the hallway towards the kitchen.

Elsie chuckled. “No, I wasn't. Never going to worry where you two are concerned. Been joined at the bloody hip ever since you met, and nothing's going to change that.”

“I guess you're right, Gran.” Sadie smiled. “Shame I couldn't remember that last night.”

“Shit happens,” Elsie threw out, turning to walk back down the hallway to the kitchen.

“Gran!” Sadie said in shock. “Language!”

“Whatever.” Her gran wafted a hand in the air somewhere over her left ear. Sadie laughed, and followed her to the back of the house.



They spent the rest of the beautifully sunny day in the yard, finishing off painting the new raised beds they'd been installing over the last couple of weeks. They chatted intermittently—about the weather, about the ride Sadie took that morning, about work at the cafe. Mostly they just worked alongside

each other, Elsie giving instructions and directions with Sadie doing the harder graft.

Finally, they sat back on the outdoor rattan chairs and admired their work, Sadie with a very cold stubbie in her hand, and Elsie with a glass of wine. They'd only taken a few sips each when the doorbell rang. Sadie opened the front door and was grabbed into a full-body hug by Tash. She let out a very girly squeak. Nicole stood behind Tash, laughing her face off. Sadie flipped her the finger behind Tash's back.

"I would never take her away from you!" Tash exclaimed in Sadie's ear. "Never! I can't believe you would even think that."

"Oh," Sadie muttered, mortified. "She told you, then."

"Yes!" Tash pulled back to glare at Sadie. "What the fuck?"

Tash rarely swore, unlike Nicole, so this just made Sadie giggle.

"Sorry," Tash said, blushing. "But, really!"

Sadie held her hands up in surrender. "I know, I know. I'm sorry. Please, let's just never speak of it again."

Tash nodded. "Absolutely fine by me. Now, can we come in?"

Sadie laughed and stepped aside, making sure to pinch Nicole's arm as she walked by.

"Ouch! No fair." Nicole's tone carried amused annoyance.

"Whatever," Sadie murmured, grinning as Nicole reached up on her toes and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

Beers in hand, Nicole and Tash joined Elsie out in the yard.

Sadie watched as Nicole took Tash's hand and smiled at her lovingly. Tash's pale blonde hair was a shade lighter than Sadie's golden crop, and shone in the late afternoon sun. Tash was slightly taller than Nicole, and slightly more solid in build. She looked good in a singlet over long denim shorts, so different from her daywear of full business suit with her hair normally pinned back.

Tash lifted Nicole's hand to her lips and kissed her knuckles softly.

"Are you two going to get all gooey again?" Elsie rasped, but there was mirth in her eyes.

Sadie laughed as Tash blushed. Despite the number of times Tash had interacted with Elsie since she and Nicole had hooked up, Tash still was never

totally sure when Elsie was joking or not. Elsie knew that and teased her mercilessly.

“Leave them alone, Gran,” Sadie chided. “They can’t help it. It’s pathetic, actually.”

“Gee, thanks, buddy!” Nicole reached across Elsie to slap Sadie’s bare knee.

“So, are you staying for dinner?” Elsie asked over the laughter. “I’ve some chicken breasts we could grill.”

“Aw, thanks Elsie, that’s really sweet. But we’ve got other plans,” Tash replied. “I’m taking this one out for a little one-on-one time. I’ve got a crazy week at work lined up and won’t be home until late most evenings.”

Elsie smiled widely. “Ah, bless you,” she said softly.

Tash blushed again, this time clearly from emotion rather than embarrassment.

Sadie smiled to herself. Sometimes her gran made her so proud it was like a physical sensation in her chest. Elsie hadn’t batted an eyelid when the newly out Sadie had been dumped on her doorstep, and had refused to see her granddaughter’s sexuality as anything other than just one more aspect of her personality, certainly nothing worth making a huge song and dance over.

Nicole noisily cleared her throat, and Sadie knew, without looking, that the emotion of the moment had affected her too.

“Right, well, I guess we’d better get going.” Nicole stood, placing her empty beer bottle onto the table. “Don’t get up, you two, we’ll let ourselves out. You’ve earned a rest.”

Sadie smiled at her friend and stood anyway to pull her into a quick hug. She turned to Tash and repeated the gesture, then watched fondly as they both bent down to give Elsie a kiss on the cheek before walking back into the house.

“They’re good girls, those two,” Elsie said, looking straight into Sadie’s eyes. “Good girls.”

Sadie beamed. “Yep, Gran. They are.”

CHAPTER 2

Sadie groaned when her alarm chirped at six the next morning. Although she should be used to getting up at this time, some days were just harder than others. Especially Mondays after the kind of weekend she'd just had. Sadie had—uncharacteristically for her—sunk four beers over the course of Sunday evening, and she was regretting that. The headache was one of those low-grade but persistent ones, just above her left eyebrow. She slapped the alarm clock into silence and pushed the sheets off her body. Stumbling into the bathroom, she stepped into the shower and sighed in gratitude as the warm water worked its magic.

She made herself walk at a sharp pace to the cafe, swinging her arms to get the blood flowing, rolling her head on her shoulders a few times to loosen up. After work she'd go for a run, really shake it all off. But first, she had to get through the day. With a sigh, she remembered the other reason she hadn't been looking forward to this particular Monday. She had to seriously wear her manager hat and give Nathan a final warning about his timekeeping and general attitude. She prided herself on remaining calm in most situations—Saturday night with Nicole being a very rare exception—but Nathan had pushed all the wrong buttons lately. She knew she'd have to work hard to keep her annoyance in check.

Trixie had just opened up the cafe by the time Sadie strode in through the front door, and there was already a short line of customers queuing for their early morning caffeine fix. The Bike Rack Cafe was in Darley Road, just where it flattened out at the bottom of the hill that led up to the Sydney Harbour National Park. Sadie had started working there just after finishing high school. Within a couple of years, Bill and Marie had taken Sadie to one side and offered her the chance to train up to manage the place. They wanted

to open a second cafe over in Mosman, and they needed someone they could trust to take over in Manly.

To her surprise, she'd discovered she was good at managing a cafe. She had a very organised brain, and she revelled in the decisions over shift patterns, orders with the wholesalers, and organising small events hosted at the cafe. She had a good team now—Nathan's issues aside—and the atmosphere was usually pretty happy.

She waved at Trixie as she walked through to the back of the building where her small office was located. It was nothing more than a converted cupboard. However, it did have a small window, and she popped it open the moment she reached her desk. The cafe backed onto someone's yard, and her window faced a line of gum trees. On just the right kind of day, with enough heat and breeze in the air, the scent of the gums wafting into her small room was heavenly.

She quickly changed out of her tee shirt into the plain white, cotton, short-sleeved shirt she liked all the staff to wear for work. Grabbing an apron and tying it around her waist, she left the office and headed behind the counter to help with the busy early shift.

The first two hours of the day sped by, as time usually did when serving a steady stream of commuters. When Nathan appeared at nine to start his shift, Sadie beckoned him into her office. She braced herself; better to get this over with.

"Hey, boss," he said with his usual swagger. Nathan was a good-looking young man, and Sadie didn't doubt that his appearance paid dividends for him in lots of situations. It just wasn't going to cut any ice with her.

"Nathan," she said, aware that her heart rate was already picking up. She breathed deeply to stave off her annoyance at his too-casual attitude. "Have a seat." She gestured to the chair. She herself stood by the desk, not intending to intimidate by standing over him, but not being able to help it in the confined space.

He flopped into the chair, his long legs sticking out in front of him. "What's up?" he said, and then he met her gaze. Suddenly, a little of the swagger was gone.

"On Friday you called in sick, yes?" Her voice was sharp.

He nodded warily.

“Right. So please explain to me how you were too sick to work but well enough to surf down at Bondi only two hours later?” She kept her tone firm but didn’t raise her voice.

“Who told you that?” He smirked, and Sadie’s hands clenched tight into fists against her thighs.

“Don’t even go there,” she snapped. “You were seen. By Bill. You know, the owner of this cafe?” She inhaled slowly, willing herself to keep it under control.

“Oh.” His eyes widened as he sat up straighter in his chair. He swallowed. “Look, I—”

“Don’t,” she said curtly, crossing her arms as the sudden urge to shake him almost overwhelmed her. “You know I’m pretty fair with everyone around here, yes?”

He nodded, his face a few shades paler than when he’d first walked in the room.

“So, hopefully, you can understand that I don’t really like it when someone abuses that, yes?”

He nodded again. Sadie noted the slight sheen of sweat on his forehead. He was blinking rapidly.

“Good. So, this is your last warning. You want this job, you need to respect it and me *and* the rest of the team. No slacking off, understand? There’s plenty more kids out there would love a job like this. You told me yourself you want to save up for that big trip next year, so don’t do anything to jeopardise that, okay?”

He nodded vigorously, and some of the colour came back to his cheeks. “I will, I promise. I really do want to work here. I-I’m sorry,” he croaked. “It won’t happen again.”

“It better not. Now go help clear up after the morning rush.”

He scrambled out of the chair, and she could hear his steps beating out a rapid tattoo down the short hallway to the front of the cafe. She let out a deep breath and allowed a smile to spread across her face. That hadn’t gone too badly. At least she hadn’t strangled him. And in dealing with him, she’d given herself yet another reminder of just how...grown-up...she herself had become. She was only twenty-nine, but the responsibility of running this place sat well on her shoulders.

She liked it.



The air was still warm from the day, but Sadie didn't mind a little perspiration. Her feet pounded the footpath in an easy, regular rhythm. She was just finishing up her five-kilometre run, a run that had, as usual, given her the time she needed to decompress from her day.

Slowing her pace, she turned the last corner onto her street and stopped to stretch against the side of the house. Once her breathing had evened out, she headed inside for a shower. Cleaned up and dressed in her favourite cut-off sweatpants and a sleeveless tee shirt, she went in search of Elsie.

She found her out in the backyard reading a magazine in the sunshine, and she paused for a moment to admire the older woman. Elsie still had her looks. Her hair, whilst a dark, platinum grey, was still quite lustrous, and her face retained its strong beauty, despite the ever-increasing creases and wrinkles.

"Hey, Gran." Sadie stepped out onto the warm slabs. Elsie looked up, smiling warmly as Sadie bent to kiss her on the cheek. "How's your day been?"

"Hello, love. It's been very pleasant, thank you. I went shopping with Diane and then had lunch with the Wilsons. I've been out here since I got back. Beautiful day again."

"Sure is. Just had a really good run." Sadie turned back to the kitchen. "I'm getting some juice. Do you want anything?"

"No, I'm fine. Thank you."

Sadie poured herself a tall glass of orange juice from the carton in the fridge and gulped down half of it in one go.

"So, Gran, what are your plans for tea? I'm meeting Nicole at that nice pub near her place, if you want to join us."

Elsie often ate with *her girls*, as she called Sadie and Nicole. Other people may have found it odd, but Sadie couldn't care less about that. Her quick-witted grandmother was great company, and as Nicole had spent a significant portion of her life hanging out with Sadie at Elsie's house, she was considered an adopted granddaughter to Elsie too.

"Thanks, love, but no. I think these old bones need to stay home for the evening."

Sadie smiled. “Cool. I’m just gonna watch some TV in my room before I head out to meet Nic.”

“Okay, I’ll see you later.” Elsie smiled affectionately at her before returning to her magazine.



For a Monday night, the Park Hotel was busy, but Sadie and Nic arrived early enough to snag one of the small tables in the quietest corner. They ate well and were feeling very mellow in the sultry, warm evening air when they moved out to the garden with their second beers.

“So, how did apartment hunting go yesterday?”

Nicole sighed. “You know, apartment hunting is *hard*. I mean, never mind the prices, which are pretty fucking terrifying, let me tell you. And the condition of some places was just gross. I mean, seriously, don’t people get that they’re supposed to be tempting us through the door? I swear, one place, I couldn’t even get beyond the lounge room. There was no way I was going to even look in the bathroom.”

Sadie laughed. “Ew! I am so glad I am at Elsie’s and never have to worry about that.”

“Honey, you are *so* lucky it’s not funny. I kind of got a bit disheartened by it all, you know? Tash tried to talk me down from the ledge, because even after one day, I’d pretty much had enough. Patience isn’t exactly my fucking strong point, you know?”

Sadie patted Nicole’s hand across the table. “I know you, remember?”

Nicole gave her the finger.

“Hey, it will just take time, and at least you’re doing it together. Tash will see you right.”

“True,” Nicole murmured. “But...we did kind of come up with another idea too.”

Sadie raised her eyebrows.

“Yeah, well.” Nicole paused, then cleared her throat. “Given that I’m still having fits over the whole let’s-be-grown-ups-and-live-together thing, we wondered if maybe the easiest solution in the first place was for me to move

into hers. Kind of take it a bit slower than buying somewhere together straight away, yeah?”

“Yeah, that could work. Try-before-you-buy kind of thing.”

Nicole nodded vigorously. “Might be better for both of us. I’m freaking her out with my freaking out.”

Sadie laughed. “I’ll bet you are.”

They called it a night after two beers and hugged goodbye on the front steps of the bar.

“Catch up later in the week, yeah?” Nicole called as she walked away.

“Any time.”

The house was quiet when Sadie opened the front door a little after nine.

She walked through to the kitchen to get herself some water, and found her grandmother sitting out in the low-lit yard, seemingly staring at nothing. The house phone was on the table beside her, along with a glass of wine that looked like it hadn’t been touched.

“Gran,” Sadie said softly, stepping out of the open doorway. “Everything okay?”

Elsie turned to her then, and even in the semidarkness, Sadie could see such pain etched across her face it made her breath catch.

“Sit down, love.” Elsie’s voice was quiet and tremulous.

Sadie quickly did as she was told, her heart thumping. “What is it, Gran? You’re scaring me.”

Elsie cleared her throat, but her voice still croaked as it came out. “It’s not good news. Your sister called about a half hour ago. It’s...it’s your mum. Christine is...”

Sadie felt her heart and stomach clutch in unison. She was estranged from her entire family, had been since that awful day twelve years ago. But that didn’t mean somewhere, deep down, she didn’t still care what happened to them.

“Tell me.” She shakily reached for Elsie’s hand.

Elsie stared at her. “Christine’s dying,” she managed to gasp out before huge sobs racked her chest, and Sadie gathered her up into her arms.

CHAPTER 3

Sadie took Elsie's hand and led her into the house.

"Sit down, Gran. I'm going to make you some tea, okay?"

Elsie nodded and didn't resist as Sadie gently pushed her into a chair at the kitchen table.

Sadie moved quickly to the other side of the room and filled the kettle.

"Tell me what Izzy said. Please, Gran." Sadie's hands were clenched tight as she sat down next to her grandmother. "If it's not too hard for you."

Elsie shook her head slowly from side to side. "Izzy didn't have too many details. It's...it's a brain tumour. They've found it late because her symptoms didn't show for ages." She dragged in a ragged breath. "And where it is and how big it is and how quickly it's growing, it's...it's just too late for it to be operated on." She stopped, her chest heaving.

"Stop, Gran. That's enough. I'll find out the rest later." Sadie was deeply concerned for her grandmother's own health right now—her breathing was too short, and her hands were shaking where she'd placed them on the table.

"No." Elsie waved one trembling hand. "I want you to know." She looked deep into Sadie's eyes. "The doctors have apparently said she could last up to six months, but really, they're looking at much less than that." At that her voice deserted her and sobs took its place.

Sadie wrapped her grandmother in her arms and held her tightly, rocking her gently as she would a child. She didn't know what made her feel worse—the news about her mum or the impact it was having on Elsie.

After some minutes, Elsie's sobs subsided, and she eased herself out of Sadie's arms.

"Thank you, love," she said quietly. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come home when you did."

Sadie squeezed her fingers. "I'm glad I was here. Let me make that tea."

She quickly boiled the kettle and made them each a mug of tea.

“So,” she said when she’d sat back down alongside Elsie at the table, “I assume we need to get you out there?”

Elsie nodded and carefully sipped her tea. “Yes. Can you help me with that? I’ll need to get a flight booked and—”

“Don’t worry, Gran, I’ll take care of it.” She left the room and jogged down the hallway to her room. She grabbed her laptop from her desk and her wallet from her jacket pocket.

Back in the kitchen, she opened the Qantas website. “So, as soon as possible, yes?”

It took over half an hour, but they finally got Elsie booked on a Jetstar flight that left for Melbourne around eight the next morning. Sadie didn’t stop to question how frantic this all was; this was no time for dwelling on any memories the stunning news dredged up. Elsie needed her, and she would be there for her. As she finished paying for the flight, plans of her own began to form in the back of her mind.

Because if her mum didn’t have that long to live, Sadie didn’t have long to try to understand all that had happened back then.

“It’s already past ten now, Gran. We should get you sorting clothes and stuff now, so that we can just throw them in your case first thing.”

Elsie nodded and slowly stood. She was still shaking, and Sadie hated seeing her so...vulnerable. Her gran had always been the strong one, never letting anything get her down.

Sadie escorted a trembling Elsie to her room, where her gran slowly directed her to all the clothes she’d want packed for her trip.

“It might not be the best time to talk about this,” Elsie said as Sadie rummaged in the back of Elsie’s walk-in wardrobe, hunting for her suitcases under piles of blankets and spare doonas. “But you ought to give some thought as to whether you will come visit too.”

Sadie snapped her head up, only just catching herself from thumping her head on the rail above her.

“Do you think so?” She didn’t want to let on just yet that she’d been pondering the same idea. Elsie had always held strong views on what had been done to Sadie all those years ago.

Elsie stared at her through the doorway. “I do. She’s dying. You will never get another chance to talk to her. To see if...well, to see if things can be mended.”

Sadie was stunned. Elsie had supported her wholeheartedly in her resolution to have nothing more to do with her family. She wouldn’t have imagined her gran feeling so strongly that she should return home.

“I’ll admit, the thought has crossed my mind, ever since you told me the news. But do you think it would really achieve anything, Gran?”

Elsie shrugged. “You won’t know unless you try.”



“Call me when you get there, okay?” Sadie told her gran firmly as she handed the taxi driver her grandmother’s two small cases for stowing in the boot.

Elsie nodded, and eased herself carefully into the back seat of the taxi. “I will. And please, think about what I said. I think it’s time. If not now, then when?” Her stare was piercing, and Sadie trembled slightly under its power.

“I’ve pretty much made up my mind to go, Gran. But let me know if she’s totally against it. I don’t want to make things worse.”

“I know. I’ll talk to her.”

Sadie leaned into the car and kissed her on the cheek. “Travel safe, Gran.”

Elsie smiled wanly and busied herself with fastening her seat belt. Then she was gone, whisked off to catch her flight. Sadie’s sister, Isobel—Izzy—was meeting Elsie to drive her back to the family home in Ballarat.

Sadie wandered back into the house. It was still early, not even five thirty yet. On any other day, she’d be getting ready for work but had texted Trixie late the night before to briefly explain events and ask her to handle the morning without her. She yawned. In spite of the circumstances, she thought she might be able to sleep some more.

She wandered back to her room, slid into bed and wrapped her doona over her, completely covering her head. She closed her eyes, but sleep wouldn’t immediately come. Her mind was in turmoil. What was happening to her mum was awful, but could Sadie actually go back and see her? She knew what her grandmother had said was valid. *If I don’t go now, I might never have the chance.* But going back had the potential to cause even more pain than she’d

already suffered. What if her mother didn't want to see her? Just because her gran thought it was a good idea didn't necessarily mean her mother would. And what about Izzy? And him?

She woke about three hours later, amazed that she'd managed to sleep given how much her thoughts had been whirling when she first lay down. She texted Nicole to say she was awake, and walked into the kitchen to make some coffee. Nicole would arrive soon, and she'd need her caffeine fix.

There was a message from Elsie on her phone. She'd landed and Izzy had met her as planned. There were a few more details about her mother's diagnosis, but she couldn't take them in. Despite the extra rest, Sadie was operating on autopilot. A numbness was slowing her movements, her thoughts, as if her brain knew it was too much for her to deal with and had painted a haze over it all to dull the confusion. When the doorbell rang, she found herself standing before the front door with no recollection of having walked down the hallway.

"Hey," Nicole said quietly as Sadie swung the door open. "I'm here all day, if you need me. I told Lynn she'd just have to cope without me for the day. I gave her the short version of why, and she was cool with it." Nicole worked as the receptionist for a medical centre. She'd worked there for over seven years, and Sadie knew she was one of their most reliable employees. If Nicole had said she needed a compassionate day, Lynn would have known it wasn't an excuse for something else.

"Thanks."

Nicole gave her a quick hug. "Come on, let's get some much-needed coffee inside me."

Sadie managed a weak smile at that and followed Nicole back to the kitchen. A few moments later, they were each flopped on a couch with hot mugs clutched in their hands.

"So, tell me the rest now. Obviously, you only had time to give me the short version in your text last night, but how much do you know?"

"To be honest, not much more than the short version. They call it a grade four malignant tumour. A high...some name that begins with *a* that I can't pronounce. She'd been having headaches and getting really tired, but apparently, she's been working really hard on some of her charity projects, so everyone just thought she was overworked from that. By the time the headaches got bad

enough that my...father—” she stumbled over the word “—made her go to the doctor, it was too late.”

“Jesus,” Nicole breathed. She reached out a hand across the armrests of the two small couches that sat at right angles to each other, wrapping her fingers in Sadie’s and holding tightly. “High-grade astrocytoma, yeah?”

Sadie glanced at her, realising suddenly that of course Nicole would know the correct term, given her job. “Yes, that’s it.”

“Shit,” Nicole muttered, “prognosis for those is never good.”

“That’s what the doctors told her. Izzy was in floods telling Gran, apparently. She and Mum have got really close...since I left, she said. So it’s hitting her hard.”

“How was Elsie?”

“Oh, God, Nic. I’ve never seen her like that.” Sadie’s voice broke slightly as she remembered her gran’s pain. “She just...crumpled in front of me. She’s... I’ve always thought of her as so strong, you know? But this has just completely knocked her. I know she hasn’t seen much of...Mum over the years either—it’s not like she ever really forgave them for kicking me out—but she’s still her daughter, and you’re not supposed to outlive your kids, are you?”

Sadie took a shuddering breath, fighting back tears; the memory of holding her gran while she sobbed was still very raw. Nicole rose from her couch and moved to sit close to Sadie, pulling her into her arms. Sadie sank into the embrace, needing the comfort Nicole was offering and not being shy about accepting it.

“And how do you feel about all this?” Nicole’s words were quiet, but they packed an emotional punch.

Sadie’s voice cracked, and she didn’t recognise how it sounded as she spoke next. “I have no idea.” She paused. The numbness that had protected her earlier had worn off, and raw emotions were searing her brain. It was a crazy and confusing mix of sadness, fear, anger, and concern. “Ah, that’s not true. I’m torn. Gran wants me to head back to Ballarat too, visit with Mum before...before she goes. And I’m thinking that’s probably a good idea. But I don’t know, Nic.” She huffed out a shaky breath. “They made it perfectly clear they never wanted to see me again. You know what happened back then. And how the hell am I supposed to deal with *him* in the middle of all this?” Fear

crept over her, and suddenly, thoughts of going home seemed like a step too far. “What would I even say to Mum? It just seems like too much time has passed. What’s the point in going back now?” Insecurity pushed back all the resolutions she thought she’d made about making the trip.

Nicole pulled away slightly. She gently cupped Sadie’s chin, rubbing her thumb along one cheekbone.

“So that you don’t always ask ‘what if.’” Nicole’s voice was gentle yet insistent. “So that you can maybe see if your mum has any regrets about what she did back then. To see if you can reconnect with Izzy. There are lots of reasons to go, Sades. You have to decide if any of them are strong enough to make you do it.”

Sadie looked away briefly, pondering the words. They stirred up the emotions that were swirling through her. She clutched at the sides of her head as if somehow physical action could temper the maelstrom inside. After a few moments, she looked back at Nicole. “I told Gran I probably would go, but I asked her to talk to Mum, to see if she was against me visiting. I definitely don’t want to just march in there and maybe make things worse if she’s not interested. I can’t even think about what his reaction would be, but if Mum definitely wanted me there, I’d feel it was the right decision.”

Nicole squeezed her. “See, that sounds like to me that there’s a big part of you that *does* want to go. That does want to see her.”

Sadie looked at Nicole for a long moment. Did she? Did she want to open up that box again and see what was inside? The lid had been kept locked tight for so long, and yet...

“You’re right,” she admitted, more to herself than to Nicole. “There is. It’s awful to have to do it in these circumstances, but...yeah, I do want to see her.” As she said it, she knew it was fundamentally true. If she set aside all the memories and the baggage, then deep down, this chance to understand what had happened twelve years ago was just too tempting. “Even after all this time, there’s definitely a part of me that refuses to believe she doesn’t have any love for me. Maybe that’s wishful thinking.” She shrugged. “With him, it was always clearer. He’d really struggled with who I was for so long that it didn’t come as a huge surprise when he did what he did. But with her...with her, I always thought she would stand up to him, when it came down to it. And she

never did.” Her voice was rising. “And, fuck, that hurt, you know? I guess I just want to ask her—did she ever regret that? Did she ever look back and think, ‘You know what? I should have stood by my daughter. I should have loved her no matter what.’?”

Nicole nodded slowly. “Then, I think your decision is pretty obvious, yeah? If you want to ask those questions, unfortunately you’ve now only got a limited amount of time to ask them in. So if not now, then when?” Nicole’s gaze was penetrating.

Sadie stared, as Nicole had unknowingly repeated Elsie’s words from earlier that morning. She exhaled slowly. She had no idea how she’d feel about facing...him, or Izzy for that matter, but she knew that not going to talk to her mum would end up being the biggest regret of her life. She pulled out of Nicole’s arms and sat back. She pushed her hands through the tight tufts of her hair.

“I need to make some calls,” she said, pushing up off the couch and heading for her room.



Elsie rang at midday. When she’d arrived at the family home, she had briefly seen her daughter before Christine went to sleep. She sounded drained, emotionally as well as physically. The normal spark in her voice was gone; sentences trailed off as if she didn’t have the energy to finish them.

“Gran, I definitely want to visit.”

“Oh, Sadie.” Elsie’s voice quavered. “I’m so glad. I know it won’t be easy, but I think it’s for the best. When can you come?”

“End of the week—I’m going to ride there on the Harley. It’ll mean an overnight halfway there, but I need...I need the freedom the bike gives me. Can you understand that?”

Elsie sighed. “I can. I won’t question it, love. I’m just happy you’re going to make the journey. However you make it.”

“Okay, so I’m going to aim to leave here Thursday, get to Ballarat Friday afternoon. Please let me know before then if...if she says she doesn’t want me there, okay? Otherwise I’ll call you when I get to town. I’m going to book a hotel room—I don’t think it would be smart to stay in the house.”

“Okay, love. I understand. And yes, I will let you know if she has any problem with you visiting. But I honestly don’t think she will. Please, come. She seems... different. Something...” Elsie’s voice trailed off again, but Sadie didn’t push her to finish her thought. She guessed facing death much earlier than you anticipated would change a person. It really didn’t need a lot of explanation. They ended their call, and Sadie leaned back against the kitchen counter.

“Elsie get there okay?” Nicole asked as she stepped back into the house from the yard.

“Yeah. She said Mum’s really tired. And, you know, changed.”

Nicole nodded. “I can imagine. Want some lunch?”

Sadie smiled at her friend, overwhelmed with love for this woman who had been there for her through everything during the last twelve years.

“You know,” she said, walking across the room to pull a surprised Nicole into her arms. “For me, *this* is what family means.”

“What do you mean?” Nicole’s arms wrapped around her waist.

“It’s not the bloodline you happen to be born into. For me, it’s the people who stand by you, no matter what. The people who love you for who you are, not who they want you to be. It’s why you will always be my real family. Not them. No matter what happens when I go back to Ballarat.”

“Aw, Sades.” Nicole sniffed, and Sadie could feel her friend’s tears dampening her neck.



The next day, Sadie went into work but only to hand over the reins to Trixie.

“I’ve decided to visit my mother. I spoke to Bill and Marie, and we all agree that you should take over here while I’m gone. Are you okay with that?”

Trixie nodded enthusiastically, a wide smile on her face—and then stopped herself. “Sorry, I don’t mean to be insensitive—”

“Don’t worry,” Sadie interrupted, managing a small smile herself. “I know you’re keen to take on more responsibility. It doesn’t matter that it’s because of what’s happened now.”

“Cool.”

“So, let’s get the rush hour out of the way, then when Nathan comes in, you and I can come back here and I’ll hand over as much as I can, okay?”

“Sure. Sadie, I am really sorry about your news. But, if I can say this, I’m really pleased you all think I can do this.”

Sadie smiled again. She knew she was leaving the cafe in capable hands.

By late afternoon, she had finished going over the Harley and packing for the trip. There wasn’t much of anything edible left in the house, so she locked up and walked down to a noodle bar on Pittwater Road she used to visit quite regularly. She’d just finished her last bite when Elsie called.

“Hey, Gran, give me a second. Just need to pay for my tea, and then I’ll call you right back, okay?”

“That’s fine, love. I’m settled in for the evening now, so whenever is good for you.” Elsie’s voice still had that same distant quality to it.

Sadie rang off, her nerves jangling. Had Elsie called to say that her mum didn’t want to see her? Just when she was all set to go? Would she go anyway, regardless of her mother’s wishes? Her mind went into a whirlwind again, and she pushed herself out of her chair. She needed to get moving to work off the nervous energy that was buzzing through her.

She paid for her food and strode out of the restaurant. Once she turned off the main street and into the quieter residential blocks that led back to their home, she pulled out her phone.

“Hey, Gran.”

“Hello, love. How was your tea?”

“Good, thanks. I went back to that noodle bar I used to like so much.”

“That’s nice,” Elsie replied, but Sadie had the distinct impression she hadn’t really heard her response.

“So, Gran, how’s it going?” Sadie tried to sound calm, but wasn’t sure she succeeded; her heart rate was picking up again with the anxiety.

Elsie let out a big breath. “Oh, Sadie, it’s so hard to see her like this.” Sadie’s heart clutched as her gran emitted a little sob.

“I’m here, Gran,” she whispered, wishing she could reach down the phone and wrap her grandmother in her arms again. Sadie waited while she cried, and then heard her noisily clear her throat.

“Sorry, love,” Elsie said quietly, after a few moments.

“No worries, Gran. Really.”

“Look, I spoke to Christine this afternoon. She’s glad you’re coming.”

Sadie shut her eyes and came to a stop in the middle of the footpath, her body flushing with relief. She hadn't realised how tightly she'd wound herself, waiting to hear that. If her mum was willing, then maybe...maybe she could get some answers, finally. At least she wouldn't have to worry about regrets.

"Good. I'm all packed up, ready to leave first thing."

"Izzy wants to see you too. She's...well, she's changed too. Not the stuck-up little girl she used to be."

Sadie chuckled—her gran's bluntness in some things still had the power to shock. The fact that Izzy *had* been totally stuck up when she was younger was not news. Elsie's refusal to be the blindly dotting grandmother, and to see her grandchildren exactly as they were, without the benefit of rose-tinted glasses, pleased Sadie no end.

She inhaled deeply before asking the next question.

"What about...him?"

"That...bastard," Elsie spat. Sadie could hear her breathing rate increase slightly.

"Okay, Gran, calm down."

"Well, really! He hasn't changed one little bit, let me tell you. Not one." Sadie heard her snort again. "That's probably all you need to know, isn't it?"

Sadie breathed out slowly. "Yep, I guess it is. But thanks for the warning. Now, at least I know what I'll be up against."

"Remember, love, you're an adult now. Yes, technically, you're still his daughter, but he has no control over you now, okay? You have every right to come back here and visit. Every right." Her voice was suddenly strong again, the normal voice Sadie was used to. It made her smile with love and pride.

"Gotcha, Gran."



The hotel room in Albury-Wodonga was a welcome sight for a sore body. Sadie threw the panniers onto one of the beds and her body down onto the other. She let out a groan of relief as her bones melted into the soft mattress. The room even had a full bath, which she planned to take complete advantage of just as soon as she could get vertical again. Trouble was, the bed just felt *so* good...

She snapped her eyes open, aware that she had started to drift off. No, no time for sleep just yet. Her aching muscles needed easing in a hot bath, and food would definitely be in order after that.

She stepped into the full tub and let out sounds she normally reserved for very good sex, as she eased her body into the hot water. Oh, God, that felt *so* good. She closed her eyes in blissful appreciation. As much as she loved her bike, six hours on its albeit comfy seat took its toll.

Still, if there was one good thing that had come from the ride, it was the time to think. As the distance to her destination—the town of her birth she never thought she'd see again—had diminished, hour by hour, so it seemed the distance to her past diminished also. The memories had become more defined, rather than the hazy blur they usually took when she didn't want to focus on all that past pain. She found she didn't want to fight them this time, though. Somehow the journey itself made it seem the perfect time to step into them again, to look at them with older but fresher eyes, to examine them from different angles. She'd lost herself easily in remembering, and had been pleasantly surprised at how the pain, whilst still there, seemed more manageable. Perhaps because she *was* going back and was going to be able to face at least some of it head-on. And deal with it, once and for all.

She kept her eyes closed as she replayed all that she had remembered during the journey.

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