

Cheyenne Blue

SOMETIMES WE FLY



CHAPTER 1

THE LATE NEWS

MAREN TOOK ANOTHER MOUTHFUL OF the baked salmon, closing her eyes in appreciation as the subtle flavours of lemon myrtle and Tasmanian pepperberry mingled in her mouth, enhancing the taste of the succulent fish. The new catering company was excellent. She'd certainly use them again for her next dinner party.

Next to her, Ethan, the producer of Channel 12's six o'clock news, sliced a potato with his fork. "Channel 12 is well-placed to lead the national news ratings into next year. TVEast's format is looking tired; their presenters are losing their edge."

Across the table, Maren's co-presenter, Luka Dokic, lifted his glass of wine. The pale liquid clung to the glass as he swirled it. "While we're hitting our stride."

Maren's lips twitched. Luka was just finding his form; she, as the veteran of the team, had been on point since before Luka had joined the station. But that was okay—they had sparkling chemistry together, and the viewers liked them.

Across the table, Zoey Hammond curved a practiced smile on her face. "Ratings have improved since you joined the team, Luka. Nothing against Rob, of course, but bringing in a fresh face can do wonders."

Ethan held out his glass for Maren to fill. "We were lucky to get Luka when Rob retired." He raised his glass to the younger man. "But the public's trust needs to be earned when it comes to the news. Rob

built that trust over a decade at Channel 12. Maren, too, has a high approval rating. The two of them easing Luka into the second anchor position went a long way in retaining that trust. And of course, Luka is doing a magnificent job.”

Zoey inclined her head. “We all are learning from the best.”

Maren noted the slight stress on the “we”. Spidey fingers twitched on her back again. Zoey was younger—in her mid-twenties to Maren’s own forty-six—and possessed a willow-slim elegance and coolly beautiful face. Impeccably styled chestnut hair framed her smooth, olive-skinned face and dark eyes—a face made for the camera, as Ethan liked to say. *And a body made for TV*, Maren added silently. Zoey’s role combined outside stories with studio fill-in if either Maren or Luka were away, and she’d made no secret of her ambition.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” She smiled at the younger woman. “We all keep learning in this game.”

Zoey toyed with a piece of broccolini and slanted a swift glance at Maren. “I consider myself lucky to have joined this team. I hope it’s my place for a long time to come.”

Maren inclined her head and raised her glass in response. *Play nice*. “I’m sure it will be.”

She glanced around the dining table. Apart from Zoey, everyone was eating with gusto. The only couple at the table, the weatherman Cliff and his wife Sula were too intent on their food to join the conversation. Maren suppressed a smile. Cliff loved his food—he was always the first to dive into the biscuit tin or fill his plate at the station lunches. No doubt, on Monday, he’d be complaining his pants were too tight again.

The soft—and flattering—lighting in the dining room added a warm and intimate feel to the dinner. Maren knew it added highlights to her dark hair, smoothed the faint crows-feet bracketing her eyes and mouth. She swept her gaze over the table. The messmate timber gained a softness in the light and set off her china with its bold geometric design. White linen napkins, and a rack of votive candles completed the scene. Maren was the only member of the news team to host regular gatherings at her home—and she liked it that way. It subtly reinforced her place as lead news anchor and senior member

of the team. Although “senior” at only forty-six seemed wrong, it was preferable to “veteran”.

She rose and went to the sideboard, before returning with a fresh decanter of wine. “I haven’t forgotten the red wine drinkers. This Nero d’Avola goes beautifully with salmon.”

Cliff nodded. “Your wine pairings never disappoint, Maren.”

She found him and Sula fresh glasses, and, leaving the decanter at their end of the table, returned to her seat.

She’d just picked up her cutlery again when the door opened, and her housekeeper slid into the room. Maren shot her a glance. Although Janelle lived in, her only role in Maren’s dinner parties was the cleanup the next morning. Maren felt the part of a competent and gracious host was better played if she gave the appearance of effortlessly arranging everything.

Janelle came up and leaned to whisper in Maren’s ear. “There are callers for you. In the hallway. They say it’s urgent.”

Maren frowned. “Thank you, Janelle, but I’m not expecting anyone. Please ask them to come back tomorrow.”

Janelle’s hand gripped Maren’s forearm, then slid down to grip her fingers. “It’s the police. I think you should come.”

Maren had to strain to hear her soft words, but when she did, her heart froze. The *police*? Had something happened to Orli? Then her muscles unclenched. Orli was in her room, no doubt watching TV or chatting online with her friends. This was no accident or incident.

Janelle’s fingers shook. “You need to come now.”

Janelle’s words fell into a sudden silence, as conversation paused. Luka’s and Ethan’s faces wore quizzical expressions, and Zoey’s intense gaze flickered between Maren and Janelle. Cliff helped himself to potatoes as Sula poured more wine.

“Excuse me for a moment.” Maren stood and set her napkin on the table. “Something I have to attend to. I won’t be long.” At least, she hoped she wouldn’t. “Please, help yourselves to more food and wine.” Her heels tap-tapping on the timber floor, she preceded Janelle to the door.

Once in the hallway, she turned to her. “Did they say what it was about?”

Janelle shook her head. “No, they wanted to speak with you. But they seem serious. I would guess it’s not a noise complaint or the like.”

“Thanks. Hopefully, it’s easily sorted, whatever it is.” She hurried down the long hallway to where two uniformed police waited by the front door. Anxiety pushed insistent fingers into her throat.

The officers wore sombre expressions, and the thick belts, weighed down with firearm, radio, baton, and handcuffs, seemed out of place in the elegance of her hallway.

She forced her mouth wide, letting it soften into her trademark serene smile. “Good evening, officers. How may I help you?”

Both officers held out their ID. “Maren McEvoy?” one asked. At her nod, he continued, “I recognise you, of course, from the news, but I have to ask. I’m Senior Constable Peter O’Grady and this is Constable Maria Castillo. It’s about your daughter, Orli Coffey.”

A gasp caught in Maren’s throat before she could subdue it, and her breath shuddered. A hundred scenarios ran through her head before she could suppress them: an accident, a kidnapping, maybe Marcus had made a complaint... That last one caught her up short. Marcus wouldn’t do that—their relationship was solid, still each other’s best friend, even with Rick now a part of Marcus’s life. And Orli was upstairs. She swallowed away the panic and asked, “What about her?”

Castillo stepped forward. “I’m sorry to break this to you, but she’s been arrested for joyriding in a stolen car. We’re holding her at Richmond Police Station. She refused to make a call, but as she’s a minor, we can’t interview her without a responsible adult present.”

Ice stole through Maren’s abdomen, and she wrapped her arms around herself. “You must be mistaken. Orli is upstairs in her room. Obviously, the person you arrested has given you a false name.”

The officers exchanged a glance. “We’ll wait while you check upstairs,” O’Grady said.

Their composure rattled her again, and Maren spun on her heel and stalked toward the stairs. Orli would be in her room. She’d deign to let Maren enter, and she’d find Orli sprawled on her queen bed, wearing her shapeless baggy jeans and a too-large T-shirt, the heating cranked as high as it would go to keep out the Melbourne cold. She’d raise her head from her phone, say, “Chill for a minute, my mum’s

just come in,” to whoever was on the call, then she’d put the phone face down on the bed so Maren couldn’t see who she was talking to. “What?” she’d say to Maren with a long-suffering sigh.

Orli’s door was closed. Maren knocked twice. “Orli, can I come in?”

Silence. Orli must be listening to music on her headphones. She banged louder. “Orli, if you don’t answer in ten seconds, I’m coming in.”

She waited fifteen, the curl of annoyance growing in her chest. The least Orli could do was respond. Then she’d know. Know that this whole thing was a huge mistake by the police.

Still no answer. “Orli, I’m coming in.”

She pushed open the door. Inside was dark, curtains drawn. But even the low light from the hall was enough to show the empty bed. She flicked the bedroom light on. Maren clenched her fists. Orli would be in the bathroom. That’s where she’d be. There was no way she was in a police cell several kilometres away. Not her daughter. Not her Orli. Joyriding? She may be a brat, but she wasn’t a lawbreaker.

But the en-suite door stood ajar, the room its usual mess of damp towels on the floor and spilled shampoo in the shower.

“Orli? Orli?” Her voice rose, and she took a deep breath. *Calm, blue oceans. Think of calm, blue oceans.* She pulled her mobile from her pocket and pressed Orli’s number. There was no sound of it ringing in the room. The call rang off.

She lifted her chin. Okay, so she had to return to the officers and tell them her daughter wasn’t in the house. But that didn’t mean she was at Richmond Police Station.

But what if she is?

Slowly, she descended the stairs. Castillo’s soft gaze rested on Maren’s face, while O’Grady’s eyes shifted away to stare at a point above Maren’s head.

“She’s not here,” Maren said.

Castillo nodded. “We are sure we have Orli in police custody. We arrested her and two of her friends; a fourth teenager escaped arrest by fleeing the scene.”

“What friends?” Maren asked. Her voice cracked, but she lifted her chin, gave Castillo her best cool newsreader stare.

“I can’t tell you that, ma’am. Will you drive yourself to Richmond?”

She nodded once. “I just have to let my guests know I’ll be absent for a while.”

A movement to one side of the hall caught her eye, then Zoey emerged from the direction of the bathroom. How much had she heard?

Maren closed her eyes. Orli was her priority; she wouldn’t waste time on Zoey.

“Is everything okay?” Zoey came across to where Maren stood and rested a hand on her arm. She wore her concerned, empathetic newsreader face, the one she pasted on whenever she had to report on a heartbreaking story. The expression that dropped like a final-act curtain once the cameras panned away from her.

“Fine.” Maren let out a breath and relaxed her shoulders, summoned what she hoped was an easy smile. “Nothing major, but something I have to sort out. Please, return to enjoy your dinner.”

Zoey’s eyes raked her face, searching for the cracks. She mustn’t have found any, as after a moment, she removed her hand. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.” Her voice oozed false sympathy. “It’s stressful when a child is involved.”

“Everything’s fine,” Maren repeated. She turned back to the officers, shutting Zoey out, waiting until she heard the tap-tap of her retreating feet, and the soft thunk of the dining-room door closing. “I’ll be a few minutes, but I’ll meet you there.”

O’Grady nodded. “That’s fine, ma’am.” The officers turned away to the front door.

Maren waited until they’d left, then sank onto the ottoman in the hallway. Her fingers trembled, and she clenched her fists to stop the movement. She sucked a breath, forcing herself to take the slow, deep breaths her yoga instructor insisted upon, then she rose and looked at herself in the mirror.

Wide, panicked eyes stared back at her, and she ran her palms over her hair, restoring her smooth, elegant bob. She smiled so it reached her eyes, then relaxed again. *Better*. After a final deep breath, she went

to the kitchen to update Janelle, and then to the dining room to let her colleagues know she had to leave, that Janelle would look after them, and they should enjoy the rest of their meal. That she hoped to be back in time for coffee and liqueurs, but these things could take an annoyingly long time.

She brushed away Luka's and Ethan's genuine concern, and refused Zoey's offer to accompany her, "so you have someone to lean on."

Then, thanking her lucky stars she'd barely had any wine with dinner, she snatched up her car keys and went out to the garage.

CHAPTER 2

BREAD AND WATER

NEARLY FOUR HOURS LATER, MAREN pressed her lips together as she stalked along the corridor of Richmond Police Station. Orli slouched by her side, hands stuck in the front pockets of her baggy jeans, hoodie covering most of her face. She had yet to say a direct word to Maren.

“Excuse me, Ms McEvoy.” A young policeman approached. “There are some reporters outside. We didn’t call them, but sometimes they listen to the police radio.”

Or Zoey gave them the tip.

“You can’t get to your car without going past them. Do you want me to call a taxi for you? It can collect you from the rear compound.”

“Thank you. That would be kind,” Maren said.

Orli huffed, and throwing her hood back, she mooched her way to the front entrance of the station.

“Orli!” Maren’s voice was sharp. “We will leave through the back.”

It was as if Orli was suddenly as deaf as her father’s goldendoodle. She pressed the green button by the door, and it slid open.

Maren gritted her teeth. Of all the stupid, unthinking things to do. Orli should have known that Maren would want to keep this on the down-low, and out of the press. She hurried after her, catching up with her outside the security doors. And as Orli waved and gave a thumb-up to the press, grinning for the cameras as if she’d just won

an Olympic medal, Maren realised that Orli had indeed known what Maren wanted.

Taking her daughter's arm, she tugged her toward her car, opened the passenger door and all but pushed her inside. Orli yanked her hoodie back up, slumped in the seat, and pulled out her phone.

Maren waited until they were driving along Punt Road before she spoke. "Why?"

Orli flicked her a glance. "Why not? I was bored."

"And stealing a car, endangering the public and yourself by driving over the speed limit, is a cure for boredom? Most people watch TV. You can't even drive."

Orli shrugged. "Obviously, I can. And I'm not 'most people'."

"You'll be very bored if you end up in juvenile detention."

A flash of worry crossed Orli's face. "But I won't, will I? Your rich-bitch lawyer friend will get me off."

"Helena might manage it, yes. Or the judge might want to make an example of you. Either way, it won't be pleasant. Even if you escape detention, you'll have bail, community service. Serious restrictions in your life."

"Yeah, yeah. That's just words. You got me out. You coulda bailed Raz, Eboni, and Leesh, too. Their parents aren't as rich as you."

"They're not my responsibility."

"Unlike me." Orli's voice held a bitter tinge. "I bet you wish you could have left me there—would have saved you having to *be responsible* for me."

Maren inhaled sharply as Orli's comment bit deep. "If that's what you think, you're wrong. You're my only child, and I love you deeply." She summoned a smile. "To the moon and back."

"I'm too old for that sentimental shit. I'm a woman, not a child."

"You're still a minor; if you want to be treated as an adult, you need to start acting like one." She reached out a hand and gripped Orli's knee. "We'll sort this out in the morning, but I'll be wanting some changes and promises from you."

Orli pressed her back against the door and stared out of the windshield. "And do I get to ask the same of you?"

“Right now, I’m the one calling the shots.” The illuminated clock on the dash ticked over to 2:00 a.m. “We’ll talk about this in the morning. Over breakfast.”

“Bread and water?”

“No, you can have your usual waffles, if that’s what you want. Or something healthy for a change. But, Orli...” She waited until Orli turned to look at her. “We will talk, and you will give me answers and assurances.”

There was no answer from the passenger seat. Maren pinched the bridge of her nose and wished hard for the night to end.

* * *

“Talk,” Maren said.

Orli continued pretending to read the back of the waffle packet. “Yada, yada, yada.”

“Very funny. Tell me exactly what you did last night.”

“Nothing. The usual.”

“The *usual*?” An ice block slithered down Maren’s spine. “You’re telling me stealing a car and nearly wrapping it around a lamppost is *usual* for you on a Saturday night?”

“Not every Saturday night. Sometimes, we just hang in the city.” Orli shot her a defiant glance.

“And that would be the nights you tell me you’re at Leesh’s house? Studying.”

“I don’t study. And not at Leesh’s house. Not often, anyway. Sometimes it’s just me and Raz.” She jammed two waffles into the toaster.

“And you steal cars?”

“Borrow,” Orli said. “We only borrow them for a short time. Sometimes, we don’t even go far. We just park up, smoke some weed.”

Drugs. It was getting worse by the moment. “And where do Raz’s, Leesh’s, and Eboni’s parents think they are?” She’d met them, of course she had, and they seemed decent people, parents who would know where their kids were.

“Here. They’re delighted, of course, that their kids have made such a nice friend.” She made finger guns at herself. “That’s me, in

case you're wondering. The lovely daughter of Australia's most famous newsreader, the popular Maren McEvoy."

"I'll be calling their parents. You're grounded, and you're not to have anything more to do with those kids." She glared at the sliced avocado and tomato she'd intended having on toast. Her stomach was churning like a washing machine; there was no way she'd keep anything down except coffee.

"Gonna be difficult when we sit together at school. What you gonna do? Tag around after me?" Orli hit her forehead with her palm. "Of course, you can't do that, as you'd have to take time off work to spend with your daughter."

Guilt slashed Maren like a knife through butter. She should have made more time for her daughter, but Orli always seemed so content. She had her friends—although not the good kids Maren had thought they were—her online chats, and she loved to read. Did she still do that? The pile of books in her room didn't seem to have changed much the past few months. "You could find yourself suspended from school. And you're not seeing your friends, full stop. Not in the evenings, not weekends. No more 'study sessions', no more hanging out in the city, and certainly no more weed. It's not legal for recreational use in Victoria, and you're too young even if it were. At least you didn't have it on you when you were arrested."

"Guess they didn't search the car properly."

Maren pressed her fingers to her temples where a headache threatened. "It's getting worse by the minute. You'll have to go to court, you know. It's anyone's guess if they'll put you in a youth justice centre. Anything else you want to tell me?"

Orli shook her head. For a moment, she stayed staring at the coil of smoke coming up from the toaster.

Maren held her tongue. Now was not the time to nag Orli about setting off the smoke alarms.

Orli turned to face her, and her eyes glistened with moisture. Her lips trembled and she pressed them together. "I won't go to jail, will I? I mean, your lawyer will get me off. All the rich kids get off. I'll just die if I have to go to prison."

Was it like this for every mother? The need to make things right for their kid, even when making it right was so very wrong? She bit back the automatic words that she'd do everything she could to keep Orli out of juvenile detention, that it was a first offence, nothing had gone terribly wrong, that it would be okay— *No*. Smoothing the path wasn't the best way forward here. That was the first step down a slippery slope. "It's called 'justice' for a reason. It may not be perfect, but it doesn't matter who the person is; people are judged on what they've done, not who they are."

A single tear trickled down Orli's nose and dripped off the end. "But you'll try to help me?"

Her heart expanded, and she took two steps and wrapped Orli in a tight hug. "Of course, I'll try. Everyone deserves a second chance. But there will have to be changes, Orli. Major ones. You're at a crossroads, and the choices you make now could affect the rest of your life."

Her daughter sniffed and wriggled to free herself.

Maren released her and stepped back, watching as Orli dashed at her eyes with the backs of her hands, then pulled the waffles from the toaster. Orli wrinkled her nose at the burnt edges and threw them in the bin, then reached for the packet again.

Maren watched, her heart alternately expanding with love and contracting with horror. Her daughter. How had it all gone so wrong? And, what did she need to do to move past this?

* * *

"I'm pregnant." Orli stood in the doorway of Maren's bedroom two days later, arms folded across her chest.

"What?" For a few heartbeats, time stood still. Maren clutched the freshly ironed shirt in front of her and stared at Orli. She searched her memory for anything in the past few weeks which might have indicated a pregnancy but drew a blank. Orli had asked for tampons a few weeks ago—how many weeks? She couldn't remember. She ate well, looked in peak health. Maren's breath huffed in shallow waves. Her sixteen-year-old daughter, pregnant. So not what she'd hoped for her. Not at this stage of her life.

Orli's mouth curled up at one side. "I said, I'm pregnant. Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

"Who's the father?"

"Raz. I haven't told him yet."

"Your boyfriend?"

"Boyfriends are so last year. He's just someone I hook up with sometimes."

Maren closed her eyes. *No judgement*. "Okay. I guess the first question is: are you sure? When did you do a pregnancy test?"

"I haven't. But my period is nine days late. I'm never late."

"There could be other reasons for that. Worry, stress—"

"I'm chill. No worries in my life."

Maren laid the shirt on the bed, went over to Orli and held out her hand. "Come sit with me and talk."

For a moment, she thought Orli would sneer and turn away, but after a long second, she put her hand in Maren's and allowed herself to be led over to the bed where she flopped on her back on top of Maren's ironed shirt.

"Orli, you've been arrested, suspended from school, and have a court date next week. Pretty much anyone would be stressed in that situation."

"Not me. My vibe is chill." Orli rolled over and propped herself on one elbow and stared back, one eyebrow arched.

The expression was exactly like Marcus's. Questions and comments churned through Maren's mind: *You're too young for this. What about your future? Why didn't you use contraception?* She suppressed them all. Those weren't the immediate issues.

"Well, whatever your vibe is, the first thing is to do a pregnancy test. Whatever you decide to do, you'll need the result." She tugged her shirt out from underneath Orli. It was wrinkled, not the pristine look needed for national television. "I'll pick one up on my way to the studio."

"What, and have your adoring public speculate you're pregnant? Divorced from your husband and all? Oh, the scandal."

She shrugged. "Do you think that's important?"

"No, but you do."

The words cut deep. Orli was right, and a shaft of shame knifed Maren's gut. Even as she'd said the words, she'd wondered if anyone would recognise her, whether some fabricated story would be plastered over the internet. It had been hard enough suppressing the story of Orli's arrest, even though juveniles weren't supposed to be named.

"I'll cope," Maren said. "I'd say for you to buy your own, but of course you're grounded. But no bread and water—Janelle's cooking pasta tonight."

"Of course she is." Orli's voice was strangely flat, as if all the sneer and fight had drained out of her. "Sometimes, when we're eating at the kitchen table, and she's asking me about my day, I pretend *she's* my real mother."

The breath left Maren's chest as if she'd been slammed against a wall. The words hadn't been said to wound, more a statement of fact. And that was what hurt. She sucked a breath and waited until she could speak without her words shaking. "Janelle is a loving, caring, person. We're lucky to have her with us."

"You mean you're lucky." Again, that expressionless voice. "If she wasn't, you'd have to, y'know, parent me. Pretend to love me." Orli levered herself off the bed. "You'll be late for work. Buy the test or not; I don't care."

"I do love you, Orli. So very much. And you know that—I tell you most every day." She rested her hands on her daughter's arms, even as the bile sat thickly at the back of her throat. Did her daughter really hate her this much? Or was it the defiant words of a scared teenager? "And if you're pregnant, I'll help you decide what to do. And whatever your decision—*whatever* it is—I'll support you." She pulled Orli into a hug.

For a moment, Orli stood like a plank, hard and unyielding, then like a sapling in the wind, she leaned against Maren's shoulder with a sigh.

The clock on the wall ticked on. She'd be late at the studio. But there was no way she could leave now. She shifted her position to cradle Orli's head.

With a sniff, Orli pulled back. "Yeah, well, let's see if you'll support me when it comes down to it. Maybe Janelle will drive me to the

abortion clinic or hold my hand while I'm in labour. Pretty words, but you haven't been here for me much lately." With a jerk, she tugged away from Maren's hands and stomped out of the bedroom.

The slam of her bedroom door echoed down the landing.

Maren's knees buckled, and she sat heavily on the bed. Tears pricked at the back of her eyes, and she pressed her palms to them so they didn't fall. Makeup wouldn't be happy if she appeared in the studio with puffy, red eyes.

For a moment, she thought of calling in sick, pleading an emergency. Ethan would understand. Hell, if this wasn't a family crisis, she didn't know what was. But the slamming of the door echoed in her head. Orli wouldn't be receptive to anything else tonight.

And she had a pregnancy test to purchase.

With a sigh, she pulled a fresh blouse from the wardrobe and donned it, before going downstairs to speak with Janelle.

CHAPTER 3

LINES ON A PLASTIC STICK

IT HAD BEEN HARD IN the studio to push thoughts of her daughter from her head. To banter with Luka, make the cross to Zoey in Federation Square, and keep the calm, professional façade she was known for. She thought she'd managed it, though.

"Are you okay, Maren?" Luka leaned across the console in a break. "You seem a bit on edge tonight. Is everything all right?"

Okay. Not so calm and professional then.

She pasted a fake smile on her face. "I'm fine. Everything's fine. I'm just tired."

Luka's eyes searched her face. "If you say so. Is Orli okay?"

She managed a shrug. "Is any sixteen-year-old ever okay? There's always drama in their lives."

"And Orli's more than most," he murmured. He knew about the arrest, of course. Zoey had seen to that, spreading the story around the studio under the guise of concern for Maren, and some papers had run guarded mentions without naming names. To Maren's charged gaze, it was obvious who they were referring to.

She managed an eyeroll at Luka. "Ain't that the truth, buster!"

He laughed. "Your American accent isn't getting any better."

Then the producer signalled they would be back on air, so she composed her professional face, and glanced at the teleprompter for the updates on the Minister of Foreign Affairs's visit to China.

* * *

Once home, Maren snuck into Orli's bedroom and left the pregnancy test on her bedside table. For a moment, she stood, watching her daughter. In sleep, Orli's face was softer, more child than woman.

How had it come to this?

She turned away. It was late. She needed sleep, because who knew what fresh horror tomorrow would bring?

* * *

Maren was on her third coffee of the morning when Orli appeared. Her dark hair stuck up in tufts, and she had pillow creases on her face.

Janelle rose from the table, murmuring something about needing to prepare the grocery order.

"Stay," Orli said. "You're as much my family as Mum is."

With an apologetic glance at Maren, Janelle subsided into her chair.

Maren summoned her composure and waited as Orli poured a coffee, and put waffles in the toaster, then grabbed butter and plum jam from the fridge. *Did you sleep well? It's a lovely morning. Have you got what you need for school?* Inane questions that had no part of this morning. Besides, the school had suspended Orli. Unless they allowed her back, Maren would have to arrange a private tutor.

Her heart slammed against her ribs. Whatever Orli said now, there would need to be changes, adaptations. A way forward found, one that would bring them closer together.

She already knew Orli wouldn't like it.

Orli threw a plastic stick on the counter. "Negative. You can start breathing again."

Negative. Thank god.

She closed her eyes for a second. "How do you feel about that?"

For a moment, Orli's tough façade cracked. "Relieved," she whispered. "I was so scared. I don't want to be a mother. Not now. Maybe not ever."

Maren rose and went to her, taking her in her arms. One part of her mind registered that this was the second time in twelve hours.

Before that, when had she hugged her daughter? Guilt shafted as she realised she couldn't remember.

"It's okay." She smoothed Orli's hair back from her forehead. "I've got you. I've always got you."

Orli sniffled and burrowed closer.

The door clicked shut as Janelle left them alone. Maren pressed a kiss to the top of Orli's head. There were still hard words to be said, and tough decisions to be made. Decisions that would surely catapult them back to their previous state of detente. But for now, it was just the two of them, mother and daughter, and the unbreakable, but oh so fragile, bond between them.

* * *

"It was negative, Marcus," Maren said. "Orli was obviously relieved." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm in a holding pattern, wondering what the next crisis will be."

"Do you want me to come down?" Marcus asked. "Spend time with her? Talk with her? Oh, not as the big He-Man sweeping in"—he laughed self-deprecatingly—"but to take some of the pressure from you. It's times like these I feel doubly bad I'm not on the doorstep."

"It's up to you," Maren said. "But please talk with her. Right now, she's not listening to me. I'm trying to strike a balance between scaring her as to consequences and supporting her."

"I'll call her tomorrow. And you... How are you doing?"

"Not well." She sighed. "This...everything. Things Orli said...that I didn't want her around... That hurt. So much. And it's forced me to think hard about a few things. My career, mainly."

"Don't be hasty. Orli has two parents, even if I'm not close by. There's nothing that says you should sacrifice everything you've worked for because of our child."

She pictured him holding the phone, brown hair falling over his eyes, maybe biting a thumbnail. "There's nothing that says I must do that, but I feel I've failed her. For Orli's sake, I have to make some changes."

"I'll support you in whatever you decide," Marcus said. "Rick, too. He loves our troublesome daughter as well."

“You’re lucky. You found a good man.” She sighed. “I’ll let you know, of course. I may need your help.”

“What are ex-husbands for? You have it, Maren.”

* * *

Ethan shuffled papers on his desk, then fixed his gaze on Maren. She kept her newsreader easy smile on her face as she waited for his answer.

“And you’re sure this is the best thing to do?” Ethan leaned forward. “A year’s a long time in this industry. Right now, you’re at the top of your game—in twelve months’ time, who knows? Lots of eager, young things out there, lining up to take your place.”

Like Zoey. This news would make her week.

She spread her hands on the desk. “I have to take that chance—I’ve given my career my all these last years, but it’s been at the expense of Orli’s wellbeing. That has to change—for her sake. I’m trusting that at the end of the year, I’ll be able to slot back in.”

Ethan’s face softened. “There’ll be a position, of course. If it were up to me, your existing one would be open for you, and this would simply be a career break. But the higher-ups will look at ratings, popularity of your successor, and so on.”

She kept the smile fixed on her face. “Of course. I understand.”

“It can only be for a year,” Ethan warned. “Past that, you’d either have to formally apply to work from Sydney or resign.”

“I understand. I’m hoping a year will be long enough to help Orli balance herself again.”

“Maybe you can treat this break as an opportunity to reevaluate. Not that I want you to go, but you could court other offers. Many newsreaders move across to the current affairs programs. I’ve always thought you’d be a good fit for that.”

“Maybe.” That progression had been in the back of her mind, flickering away like a candle, for some time now. But the current affairs slots were even more tightly held than the lead newsreader ones.

“How is Orli taking this?” Ethan came around the desk and took the chair next to hers.

Maren sighed. “Not well, as you’d expect. But she has no choice. I have no choice. I need to take her away from Melbourne. Give her a fresh start where no one knows her. A new school.”

“She’ll always be known as your daughter.”

“There’s nothing I can do about that. The hearing...” She hesitated, wondering if, despite their friendship, she should tell Ethan. She plunged on. “My lawyer friend, Helena, represented Orli. She was sentenced to a period of community service and nine months’ probation—all her friends were.” Maren heaved a breath. “She’s completed her community service over the last three months, and I’ve applied to have her probation moved to New South Wales.”

“She’s lucky.” Ethan looked down at his polished shoes. “It could have been worse. So, what’s the plan?”

“I’ve bought a house in Suttons Bay, in southern Sydney. It’s a quick settlement. We’ll move in two weeks in mid-November so that it’s close enough to the end of the school year that Orli needn’t start school until the new school year in February. And, of course, Marcus and Rick live in inner Sydney. So, when Orli decides she can’t stand me, she can stay with her father.”

“And what will you do? You’re not the type to go all hippy-dippy earth-parent. You can’t watch Orli twenty-four hours a day.”

“Marcus found the house for me, and from the photos I’ve seen, it needs a fair bit of work. I’ll have to oversee that. Past that, I don’t know. Lots of yoga maybe—I certainly need the calm. Right now, my priority is Orli. It has to be. I’ve left her alone for too long. Now I must show her she’s the most important thing in my life. And hope she accepts it.”

“Good luck,” Ethan murmured. “You might need it.”

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Sometimes We Fly

BY CHEYENNE BLUE

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