

Chapter One

1951

Teddy ...

It's only been a month. It's been a whole month.

The boy from the post office in the township below Raine's hillside home panted up on his bicycle that tactlessly sunny April morning. He pushed the buff envelope into her hands, muttering, 'Telegram.' He didn't wait for a reply, or ask for a glass of water despite his sweating red cheeks. He lifted his feet to the bicycle's pedals and bumped down the track between the lofty eucalypts. Raine remembers the clatter of the wheels on the stones, a tuneless accompaniment to the ribald mockery of the kookaburra cackling from his red gum.

Did the kookaburra know? Kookaburras herald stormy weather. Perhaps the bird had an inkling of the suffering the telegram held.

The baby's yank at Raine's hem reminds her why she's out here, hearing the kookaburra's laugh again. She stands on tiptoe, grunts, 'Ugh' and lobs the sodden sheet across the line. The effort thrusts her backwards, heels bumping flat to the earth. The baby's fists flail at air and Raine snatches at his hand, saving him from a tumble down the muddy slope. He wails his panic.

'It's okay, Stevie, you're all right.' Raine scoops him up, presses his head against her shoulders, shushing him. She sways from foot to foot. 'Hush, hush, nothing happened, there, there.'

The wailing sinks to a hiccupping sob. Raine sways on, patting Stevie's back in a matching rhythm, wanting to comfort her own hurts.

She hadn't opened the telegram immediately. Kookaburras notwithstanding, telegrams are carriers of grief. Telegrams spell 'final' in broken hurried type. She left it on the pine table all day, leaning it against her unwashed cereal bowl while she tended a waking, crying Stevie with all the emotion of a puppet. When she opened it in the evening, after she laid Stevie in his cot and soothed him to sleep, after she made herself cocoa and took it to the sagging couch, drawing her legs underneath her and placing the cocoa on the table beside the arm, after she had done all that and taken a deep breath ... she did indeed find grief.

Stevie's cries turn to gurgles. Raine keeps swaying and patting, slipping into memory. Teddy's thin face close to hers, his green, hazel-flecked eyes unmasking griefs of his own. His handsome mouth made ugly by its downward curl.

Stevie squirms like a captive possum. Raine sits him on a patch of couch grass. 'Stay there.' She hands him a wooden peg as an ersatz toy and strides back into battle, unravelling the sheet, pulling it taut against a moist wind which soughs through the branches of the stringybarks lining the top of the ridge, whispering that all her efforts are in vain.

That would be right.

An abrupt sob chokes her. She swallows it down and reaches for a nappy. Stevie grizzles, a complaining frustration to match Raine's own mood. In Raine's case, add a heavy dose of anger, throw in a soupcon of bitterness.

Teddy ...

The grim morning darkens. Raine scowls at the clouds. Scattered drops of water plop onto her row of boiled nappies, taunting her.

'Bugger, bugger, bugger.' Raine has grown fond of profanity. As with the glass tumblers presented to her as a wedding gift, she brings it out on special occasions. There are more and more special occasions these days.

She tries rational thinking. It's only weather. The weather doesn't have it in for her. Her eyes fill with tears anyway.

Stevie lifts his face to the cold water and brandishes the inadequate peg above his quivering lips. His grizzle blossoms into a rebellious wail.

The drops coalesce, fall faster, whipped by the wind, harder, chillier. The wet sheet cracks like a jackeroo's whip.

'Bugger, bugger and bugger,' Raine cries into the wind.

Stevie's sobs gather fury. He waves his arms at his mother, pleading for the dry comfort of the house. Raine dashes the wetness from her lashes. She tries to throttle the sob snaking up her throat, a soldier on the attack. But as she leans to pick the baby up, the sheet kicks out a sharp, wet edge. Smack! The edge catches her eye, blinding her. She sweeps it away, gasping. Her tears break through this lapse in the defences, gather reinforcements in the streaming water soaking her hair and face and clothes and refuse to surrender to her gulping intakes of air.

Thunder rumbles. Stevie lets loose a full-throated cry of terror. Raine bends down, wraps her arms about the soaked child and runs to the house. She dumps Stevie onto the boards of the narrow verandah, draws in a breath and runs back into the storm to rescue the laundry basket and its sodden contents.

Dried and changed, Stevie bounces on a bunny rug in his playpen, waving a rattle.

Raine is composed also. She grimaces at her son. 'Noisy brat, aren't you?'

She hangs the wet garments on the clothes horse by the cast iron range, padding around in old bed socks worn thin on the soles because she uses them as slippers.

Just as the cabin's corrugated iron roof is worn thin with rust in patches, letting the damp soak through to paint brown-edged stains on the warped ceiling.

She should stoke the range, breathe more warmth into the place to dry the washing faster. She peeks sideways at the wood basket and pouts. Damn basket must empty itself. It had been Teddy's job, the wood.

She sniffs. Get on with it, Raine.

Stevie cheerily bangs the rattle against the bars of his playpen. He'll come to no harm in there, not in the five minutes Raine needs. She grabs the small axe – a sort of joke birthday present from Teddy when they moved to this three-roomed hut high in the hills with its wood-burning ancient range – drops it into the basket and scurries through the downpour from the back door to Teddy's cherished wood shed.

Building the shed was the first thing Teddy did after they moved into this, their first, home. How he glowed when his father nodded approval of the structure's attractively redundant hammer-beam roof – a more weatherproof roof than the one which shelters Teddy's family. Teddy had kept the shed stuffed to its swanky roof with split logs and piles of kindling.

Raine hacks at the logs, fragments of memory jerking into the cold air with each stroke. Like asking Teddy for a chicken shed. She'd tilted her head towards the wood shed roof and told Teddy chickens don't need such splendour. Privacy to lay an egg and a sanctuary against foxes is the be all and end all of chicken dreams as far as Raine knows.

Teddy nodded and muttered about not adding any more value to this rented property for the sole sake of their farmer landlord. The chicken shed was left unbuilt. Raine's fresh eggs continue to be bought from the farmer landlord's white-feathered Leghorns.

A tangled heap of splintered sticks lies at Raine's feet. She's breathing hard, her cheeks hot with effort. Her arms ache. Her back aches. She stretches her shoulders, puts a hand to her stomach and blinks away more invading tears.

It can't be. It simply can't.

Raine's mind flashes with the image of the fortune teller's hooded, over-mascara'd eyes, the last time she went to Luna Park. Her and Teddy and Maggie and Arthur, daring each other to learn their fortunes in Madame Zola's crystal ball. Raine had sniggered at the irony, telling the others, 'Zere will be much looovvve in my life and ze lotsa lotsa children.'

Hilarious.

Teddy was tight lipped about his own fortune. 'Nothin' I couldn't have worked out for myself,' he mumbled when pressed by Maggie. The way he eyed Raine made

her stealthily run her hands down her sides to check she hadn't mutated into a poisonous snake.

Raine scrubs her eyelids with the back of a grubby hand. She has to go and see what Stevie's up to. Can't stay out here in the shed blubbing like she was five years old. No loving Pop to dry her tears this time.

She tosses the kindling into the basket, adds more logs than she knows she should carry and staggers to the hut. Stevie is on his feet, a shipwrecked mariner clinging to his driftwood playpen bars. His bandy legs are spread, bent at the knees. He grins as hugely as Teddy did when the wood shed was completed.

'Open wide! Here's the train going into the tunnel!'

Stevie leans forward in his high chair, tunnel mouth wide to receive the mashed pumpkin.

'Good boy!'

It was a game Teddy played with his son from the time Stevie was weighing up whether he would bother with real food or stick to his diet of mother's milk. He'd refuse the solid stuff if Raine was near.

'You'll have to feed him,' she'd sulkily demand. She was rebelling too, not wanting the bond to be broken.

So Teddy fed the baby.

Raine would return from hovering outside where she'd been pretending to hang washing or weed the vegetable garden. 'He ate it all?' she'd say, eyeing the scraped-clean bowl.

Teddy would smirk. 'Course he did. Do anything for your ol' man, hey, Stevie?'

The grin they shared could make Raine jealous or her heart go pitter patter. Depending on how the other parts of her day had gone.

She's wiping pumpkin mush off Stevie's screwed-up face when the front door opens. A chill draught blasts through the gap, carrying the rowdy cascade of water tumbling off the verandah gutters. Raine twists around.

A dripping, leather-shrouded head peers through the door. 'Only me, Raine.'

She didn't hear Alf's motorbike above the clattering of the storm on the tin roof.

'Uncle Alfie,' she tells Stevie with a quick frown. She picks him out of the high chair and settles him in the playpen.

Raine's soaking visitor squelches inside and shuts the door on the slap of the downpour. He peels off his wet coat and leather helmet and hangs them on the pegs nailed into the wall.

'God awful weather,' he says. He pushes his hair back with his hands, forcing it to sit up in short nut-brown spikes. Raine is reminded of Mrs Tiggy-Winkle.

She smiles. 'What are you doing all the way up here?'

Alf shrugs. 'Had a half day off work. Wondered if you needed something.'

In the storm. An hour's ride from the city sprawling like a sleepy sunbather on the plain below. Raine can't protest. Her objections will fall on deaf ears, or worse, will wound.

'Hello, Stevie.' Alf reaches into the playpen to pat the coarse black curls springing from the baby's scalp.

Stevie stretches out his arms. 'U!' he squeals, bouncing on his bottom to show how 'up' can be done.

Alf understands. Stevie crows his victory from his rescuer's arms with a shifty-eyed wave at his mother. Raine is unmoved.

She gestures at the wood basket. A willing slave is not to be scorned.

'Could do with heaps more kindling chopped and a load of logs brought inside.'

'Sure, good as done.'

Alf hands the baby over and heads for the axe leaning by the back door.

'I'll make us a brew, and thanks Alf.'

Alf sets a log on the block and lifts the small axe. He tuts at the instrument's ridiculous lightness, drops it to his side and turns a full circle searching for the bigger axe Teddy kept in the shed. The axe is hidden behind a canvas sheet which also covers the front of Teddy's dusty motorbike with its flat tyre. Alf tests the axe's edge. Sharp. Good. Or not. He could've spent more time with Raine and Stevie, sitting on a stool by a roaring range, honing the axe.

Raine's a little peaky. Not a surprise. Is she sleeping? He's sure she's thinner. Her face is puffy too. Has she been crying?

Alf gathers wood into the basket, thinking, has she cried at all? Well of course she has, only not in front of him.

A small mountain of kindling fills a corner. The basket overflows with more. Should last a while, even in this weather. Alf hides the axe behind the canvas sheet against the possibility of thieves, checks the motorbike is chained to a wall support and carries the wood through the sheeting rain back to the house.

'Anything else?' Alf twiddles with the handle of his teacup, scanning the planked walls and low ceiling for jobs to be done, repairs to be made. He notes the ceiling stains. He needs to do something about the cabin's roof before winter sets in properly.

Raine clasps her cup in two hands, elbows on the table. 'Place hasn't fallen apart yet, Alf,' she says.

Alf nods an acknowledgment, choosing not to mention the stains. Raine's doing okay, really.

'Yeah, I suppose not. Anyway'—the needed roof repairs nudge Alf into saying this—'you're not intending to stay up here, are you?'

Raine subjects her tea to detailed scrutiny. 'It's too early to think about that.' She's gentle, rebuking a child who should know better.

Alf is shamed into silence. It's too remote, too far from friends and family, dangerous with just her and the baby ... all the rational arguments scuttle into their holes like crabs on a beach.

The silence goes on. Stevie breaks it with a tired whine which has Raine pushing back her chair.

'Better put him down for a nap. Give me some peace.'

Alf jumps at the chance of a redeeming topic of conversation. 'He's a good kid. Doesn't fuss a lot.'

'Yes,' Raine says. 'Didn't inherit that from his daddy, huh?'

So much for redemption. Alf's plump cheeks redden on behalf of his boyhood friend. He slurps the last of his tea and follows Raine into the baby's room, where she lays Stevie on a blanket on the chest of drawers.

The chest is a shabby pine piece bought cheap at a second-hand shop. Alf helped a pregnant Raine bring it home in the tray of Mr Greene's ancient ute and together they painted it white and glued on transfers of lugubrious dancing bears and beady-eyed monkeys wearing hats and red waistcoats. They'd cracked jokes about the nightmares a sleeping baby might suffer surrounded by the garish images and laughed harder when Raine showed off the spruced-up chest to Teddy when he got back from work.

Teddy didn't laugh. He pinched his lips and said, 'I was going to make the baby's chest.'

Raine had ignored her husband's pout. 'With curlicues and beading and carved whatnots?' she teased.

'What?'

'Thinking of the wood shed.' Raine had drawn Alf into the joke with a smug glance, and thrown out a hand to the chest, sticky with transfer glue. 'This is all we need for now. You can make a bed later, a toddler-sized bed. I'll sew an eiderdown for it, ask Faye to embroider a pillow case.'

Teddy had shrugged and later, after tea, he sketched a plan for the bed, with curlicues and beading and carved whatnots. Alf wonders where the plan is.

Raine tucks Stevie into his cot. 'Sleep tight, little man.' Finger to her mouth, she steals from the room.

Alf puts his own stubby finger to his full lips and quietly pulls the bedroom door partly closed.

‘If there’s nothing needing, I’ll head off home.’

He goes to the window where the rivers of water running down the glass have thinned to trickles. ‘Rain’s stopping, wind’s dropped too.’

He waits, hoping for a last-minute instruction. When Raine slowly shakes her head, Alf urges his body towards his coat and helmet. ‘Good,’ he lies. ‘Promised Mr Greene I’d give him a hand with a bit of extra work he’s taken on.’

Raine stiffens. Damn.

‘How are they?’ she says.

It’s a polite question, pretending she cares. Well, maybe she cares about Mr Greene. Mrs Greene has never given Raine any cause to care about her.

‘Pretty upset still.’ Alf finds something of interest in the whorls in the dark-stained wooden floor. He’s sorry he mentioned Mr Greene. He shuffles into his coat, delves into his pockets for the motorbike key and his gloves.

‘Blaming me?’ Raine’s voice is hard.

‘I don’t know. They don’t talk about you. Not to me.’

‘They don’t want to see Stevie, their only grandson?’

‘I don’t know,’ Alf says again. He wraps his fingers around the helmet and tugs it onto his head. ‘Should I ask? Suggest they come visit you?’ He means it to be helpful. It comes out aggressive, like he thinks Raine is being obtuse asking her question.

‘Would it do any good?’ Raine’s whisper suggests she lacks the energy to parley with her in-laws.

Alf shrugs, not wanting to drag the topic deeper into swampy waters. Raine wrinkles her nose in understanding.

‘Thanks for trekking all this way.’ She stretches up to give him a peck on his cheek. ‘It’s really good of you, but you mustn’t feel obliged.’

Alf opens the door into the misty drizzle. More winter than autumn.

‘It’s no obligation.’ He crosses the verandah, halts at the edge and turns back. ‘I’ve always looked out for you, haven’t I, Raine? Right from the start.’

Raine gives a slow smile. ‘Yes, you have.’