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the  
making  
of  
christina

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CHAPTER SAMPLER

# chapter one

## *Four Weeks Till Christmas*

Not for the first time, Christina considers how life has narrowed to something she endures. Here she stands on the verandah of the farmhouse in which she grew up, forty-five and living with her mother. Two desiccated women facing an uncertain future with only each other to cling to. The truth arrived like an act of God. It swept through their lives carrying away possessions and experiences, shattering memories, reminding them how temporary and illusory control over life really is. In its wake is guilt. Guilt tattoos Christina with the scars and scabs of a rash that came with the first knowing and never left. A kind of braille blistering over her skin, telling her story. The truth fixes nothing. For one thing, it hasn't brought back Bianca.

She can hear her mother shuffling about inside. Imagines Rosa's hand searching through her personal darkness for the next landfall, gripping the back of a chair or the corner of a table as she charts a tentative course through the house she

has lived in for fifty years. In these last twelve months, Rosa has lost her husband Massimo, who buckled under the stress of the trial never to find his feet again, and much of her eyesight as Christina's tragedy grew to become hers too. Rosa rides grief as if it is a bucking horse, grim in her determination not to be thrown. Christina knows Rosa cannot understand how she allows anguish to trample her so. Her mother sighs and clucks but unlike the old Rosa, the sharp edges of her words have worn smooth. Words, like heartbeats, are finite and long weeks inside a courtroom have used up all of theirs.

Bianca, who has more to say than either of them, is not here to utter a single sound. She is spilling her words out in some Costa Rican village where she teaches English courtesy of Christian philanthropy. A place chosen as much for its distance as its inadequate telephone services. Bianca communicates via gaudy postcards, which Christina reads aloud at Rosa's insistence, before sticking them in an untidy row on the fridge. Before she left, Bianca promised she would be home for Christmas but Christmas is only four weeks away and Christina has heard nothing more about it. Perhaps Bianca will return when her students are fluent in asking a passing stranger for the time or when the next bus to the city will arrive. Or maybe not. After all, they both know she owes her mother no common courtesies.

Rosa calls out from the cool recesses of the house, 'I hear a car.'

Christina looks up, shading her eyes. She sees nothing. 'Are you sure, Mama?'

'Course I'm sure. I'm blind not deaf.'

Walking to the edge of the verandah, Christina sees a cloud of dust rolling along the fence line past Mr Graukroger's place.

Rosa cracks open the screen door and turns a milky stare in

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the direction of the sound. 'It's been a long time since we seen our little girl, eh?'

'We haven't heard from her. Wouldn't she have called?' Christina's voice waivers, hope strangling logic.

The car stops at the edge of their property. A person climbs out to open the gate. Even from this distance Christina can see it's not Bianca. They might be estranged but her daughter's halo of chestnut hair, her long easy limbs, the way she covers her mouth when she laughs; details like that are imprinted forever.

The stranger drives through the paddock gate and shuts it behind them. Turning towards the house, they raise a hand and shield their eyes from the beating sun. Christina feels the gaze lock on her and sinks into the shadows.

'It's not Bianca, Mama.' The words squeeze out in a panic. She never answers the phone unless she recognises the number. They never have visitors they don't know. No email, no Facebook, no way to contact her, or use people of a vague acquaintance to find out where she is. It's safer that way; he has allies.

'Maybe we should go inside, Mama.'

'Why, Tina? Who is it?'

'I don't know.' Christina takes her mother's arm and presses her towards the house.

Rosa shakes her off. 'Well is it a man or a woman?'

'I can't tell.'

The noise of the car climbing the drive brings the geese honking and flapping from the cool shadows of the house. The occupant attempts to shoo them away and the old gander snaps at their hand. Christina hears a woman's squeak. As she drives closer, her features coalesce into a face Christina thought she'd never see again.

She sits in the car, as if acknowledging she is trespassing and seeking permission to come closer. Christina focuses her

gaze centimetres above the woman's head, refusing to admit her presence.

Rosa hollers Italian expletives at the geese and the birds draw back from the car, snapping and hissing, unwilling to relinquish their role as guardians. 'Can you see who it is, Tina?'

'Yes.'

'Well?'

Christina cannot believe the gall of the woman. That she would even dare presume to come here. It raises the hairs on the nape of her neck. 'It's Sarah Plummer.'

'What does she want?' Rosa spits.

'I don't know.'

'You gonna find out?'

Christina sighs, takes the steps one at a time, in no hurry either to rescue the woman or find out why she is here. She claps her hands at the geese and sends them away. When they are at a safe distance, Sarah Plummer clammers out, running a hand through cropped hair now a dirty grey. She closes the car door and leans against it, casting a wary eye at the geese, which have lost interest and sought the shade of the hydrangeas.

'This is a nice place.'

'What are you doing here?' Christina says.

Sarah digs her hands into her jeans and takes them straight out again, rubbing them down her thighs. She glances up at the house where Rosa stands staring, listening, and back at Christina. 'It's so damn hot. Is it possible to sit in the shade?'

Christina twists her mouth. She spent many years in the opposite corner to this woman. Sarah playing the indignant wife to Christina's role as home wrecker. Neither of them owes the other a thing. Christina stomps up the steps, leaving Sarah to figure it out for herself.

Sarah offers a tentative hello to Rosa who responds by going

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inside, letting the screen door wheeze and smack against the frame. Sitting on the steps, Sarah worries a gold cross back and forth along its chain. With her head bowed, Christina can see the toll this past year has taken on Sarah. Her hair has thinned along the part, the skin stretches around the heavy bone of her jaw. She knows how that feels – to wear your skin so tight it crushes you.

‘My children have taken this thing with their father very badly. Ashleigh’s out of control,’ Sarah begins.

The mention of Ashleigh reminds Christina of Anne Rushmore’s words about damaged children. The detective is often in her thoughts; Christina misses her reassuring presence in her life.

‘Simon, well he’s cut from the same cloth as his father.’

Christina glares over the paddocks.

‘Oh I didn’t mean like that.’ Sarah’s hands flutter. ‘I meant hard, uncompromising, well, you know.’ Her smile is grim.

Christina doesn’t want to hear about Sarah’s pain. She is as much to blame as Christina. Perhaps more so because she was his wife for all those years before. Years when Sarah saw or heard nothing. If she had opened her eyes, acted, stopped him, they wouldn’t be standing here in the scorching summer heat. They wouldn’t even know each other. Christina would be free of the burden of misery.

‘Josh was the surprise but you may have guessed that.’

Christina grips her arms by each elbow, stilling the tremor rising through her core.

Sarah gives a slow nod of comprehension, as if Christina has responded. ‘He was always quiet, to the point of being withdrawn. I assumed, well, that he chose to be that way because it was impossible to compete for centre stage with his brother and father.’



Christina glimpses through the veil cast by her own anger and despair. Sees the tears spill, tracking along the grooves of the woman's face. Sarah Plummer is defeated. He has made her old. He has made them both old.

Sarah shifts on the step, chasing the shade. 'I assumed it had to be Ashleigh because she's always been such a handful. The piercings, the tattoos, that awful black lipstick.' Sarah shudders. 'When she turned thirteen this violent dark person emerged. She even tried to kill me once, but you probably already know that.'

Sarah's appalling confession transfixes her. She keeps talking, assuming Christina shares an interest in the details of her children's lives. It is hard to believe Sarah thinks their shared experience gives them some sort of sisterhood. All Christina keeps thinking is, *Why are you here?*

Sarah continues, 'Anyway, the point is, I assumed it had to be Ash because she was always daddy's little girl. Because she was highly strung and unpredictable. She fitted the stereotype.' Sarah is breathless, exhausted by her words.

Christina watches her anguish, thinking how right Sarah is. How they were raised in a generation when only little girls were thought of as vulnerable. Before everyone realised how institutionalised and widespread this violence really was.

'All the time it was Josh.' Sarah hunches her shoulder as if this will protect her. 'I didn't realise until after the trial when he tried to hang himself.'

Christina raises her eyebrows.

Sarah nods. 'Yes, from the railing in his wardrobe. It's got this especially high railing because the boys are so tall.' She draws it with her hands and then drops them to her lap, realising what she has said. 'Of course you know that.'

A flush rises up Christina's neck. Sarah continues, 'Thank

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God I got to him before any real damage was done. The alternative doesn't bear thinking about.'

Christina swallows against the surge of pity churning in her guts. The mutual destruction of their families is not a good enough reason for Sarah Plummer to come all the way from Sydney to bare her soul. She waits, expecting more.

The copper pipes shudder and clang as water travels from the outside tank to the kitchen. Christina hears the tap running, hopes Rosa has tested the temperature before scalding herself like last time. She shifts her weight in readiness for a cry for help.

Sarah Plummer clears her throat. 'And Simon is living in New York. He cut off all contact after the trial. I tried reasoning with him but he said from now on if anyone asked about his parents he planned to say they were killed in a car crash.'

Christina rubs her hand across her face, swallowing against the sickness rising in her belly. As if by wishing something true made it so. How like the father is the son.

Sarah's voice drops to a confessional whisper. 'I was only twelve when I met him, you know. He was a few years ahead of me and a surfie; cool. Even at sixteen he had swagger and all the girls at school were besotted with him. When he asked me out, I thought I was so special. Right from the start, I'd do anything for him. Anything at all.'

Christina shivers and brushes her hands over her arms. The words could be hers.

'I fell pregnant when I was fifteen. I didn't want a baby, I was no more than a child myself. Jackson was so angry, told me I was a stupid slut for getting knocked up. But the thing is, I wasn't trying to trap him. It sounds incredible now, but at fifteen I didn't understand how easy it was to fall pregnant. He dragged me around to my parents' place and told them he'd



marry me. They weren't thrilled but they adored Jackson and at least we were doing the right thing. They offered us the granny flat behind the garage, as if two young kids had any other choice. If they ever heard the fighting, they never said anything. My parents were old school. What goes on behind closed doors in a marriage is nobody else's business.'

Sarah rubs the sweat from her palms and stares out over the paddocks shimmering in the afternoon heat. 'Jackson never hit me but he was often cruel with words. In the first few years of our marriage, he demanded sex every day, even at that time of the month, because he didn't want to be one of those poor bastards who never got laid again once they were hitched. Those were his exact words. I didn't like it but I wanted to do the right thing. I can still remember how embarrassed I was hanging the sheets on the line to dry. The stains were so stubborn. What did my mother think?' Sarah appeals to Christina and Christina can see that vulnerable girl in Sarah's eyes, still nursing her hurt after all these years.

But she can't allow herself to feel sorry for this woman. The possibilities contained in her words make Christina angry. 'Why did you stay?'

'At first because I fell pregnant again and my parents couldn't exactly take me in, could they? Anyway, where was I to go at nineteen with two kids under four?'

'Yes but later, when the boys were older.'

Sarah shrugs. 'By then we'd launched TBK and I was useful. I'm good with numbers.'

It was a fact Christina had heard a million times before.

'But the point is, he settled down once we started making money. Life was good. Everything was moving in the right direction. I put it down to him being young and frustrated and blaming me.'

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And there it is – this other version of the story, similar enough but different to the version Christina knows, the one where Sarah is the culprit. She has already spent endless hours trying to reconcile her past with the truth; she isn't sure she has the energy to go there again. 'Why are you telling me this?'

'I feel so guilty about the kids.'

The flush on Christina's neck deepens. 'But you supported him in court. Every day you and your children sat there sneering. You called me a lying bitch!'

Sarah's mouth opens and closes, the words dry in her throat. Christina fights the urge to shake the answer out of her.

Averting her eyes, Sarah whispers, 'I believed him. I *had* to believe him because if you were telling the truth, I had married a monster.'

The truth hangs there, a belligerent guest, demanding attention.

A coughing fit rattles Sarah's body. Duty makes Christina run into the house to fetch a tumbler of water. Leaning against the coolness of the sink, she notices Rosa hiding in a twilight corner by the kitchen window. She opens her mouth to speak but Rosa presses a finger to her lips. Outside, she stands over Sarah's crumpled figure holding out the glass.

Sarah sips the water and when her breath calms, she says, 'You remind me of me. All twisted up inside, eaten away by guilt. Plenty of time on your hands to ask all the questions with no right answers.'

Christina wonders what Rosa thinks of Sarah's notion that there are no explanations for what happened to them and recognises what a nonsense it is.

Sarah picks a leaf off the camellia bush and shreds it down the spine. Studying the pieces, she asks, 'How's Bianca?'

The small flame of compassion Christina feels towards Sarah flares and dies at the mention of Bianca. ‘That’s none of your business.’

Sarah’s face dissolves into pity. ‘Christina, I have little hair left and what I do have is grey. I’ve lost my appetite and what I do eat makes me ill.’ She rips open the buttons of her shirt. There, where there should be a breast, is an angry crescent-shaped welt. There are two round knobs where her collarbones meet her shoulders; rows of ribs strain against her chest. ‘Mastectomy a year ago, right after the trial. The other one comes off in a month.’

Stunned, Christina mumbles, ‘I’m sorry,’ turning to where she knows Rosa is listening behind a veil of lace.

‘Don’t be. I’m not after your pity. I’m here because my time has run out. But yours hasn’t. You must make peace with yourself, Christina, because guilt,’ – here Sarah clutches the scar which whitens beneath her fingers – ‘guilt will destroy you and then he has won.’

Christina cannot help staring at Sarah’s mauled chest. One breast sags under the wrinkled nipple that once gave life to her children. The other has been ripped from her body, leaving a puckered scar that travels into her armpit. Sarah sits there half naked and unashamed. Christina remembers her when she was an elegant woman in expensive heels with a perfect manicure. That woman would never have stripped to the waist and bared her disfigurement.

Sarah smiles. ‘I know, I’ve become repulsive.’ Her hand fumbles over the buttons.

Only when she has finished does Christina breathe again. ‘You haven’t told me why you came here today.’

Sarah smiles. Christina is sure she can see the red welt pulsing beneath her cotton shirt.

‘Josh kept diaries. After he tried to,’ Sarah gestures, she will

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not say the words again, 'he showed them to me. I could only read a few pages. That Jackson could do that to his own son.' A sob escapes her lips. She clasps her hand over her mouth as if to catch it. Christina feels a lump rise in her own throat. Too much pain, so much failure.

Sarah clears her throat. 'I've asked him if he wants to press charges. Josh says he won't. Not after what he saw Bianca go through.' Sarah smears her mascara as she wipes away the tears. 'You've survived, Christina. You should be proud of Bianca, she is a brave young woman. After everything he has put you through, that's worth holding on to.'

But Christina finds it hard to accept that Jackson's ex-wife has travelled all the way to Tasmania, ill as she is, to sit on their front verandah and seek absolution for her part in this singular tragedy.

'I don't blame Josh for not wanting to dig over the past, but maybe if he'd said something sooner, we could have helped you.' Sarah cannot hold Christina's eye. She searches her pockets for the car keys before realising they are still in the ignition. Struggling to her feet, she walks to the car.

Christina watches her, unable to think what comfort she can offer this broken woman.

Sarah pauses once she opens the car door, swipes against the tears. 'I'm sorry, Christina, I truly am. But please make peace with yourself. You cannot let him win,' and then she climbs into the car and rolls down the hill in a cloud of dust.

Christina watches Sarah open the paddock gate, drive through and return to close the gate. Sarah gives a wave before climbing back into the car, not waiting to see if Christina returns it, then drives away.

Christina moves into the shade of the verandah, listening to the whining thrum of the cicadas and the cackle of distant hens.

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Sarah Plummer had no right to come back into her life, to say those things, to bare her brutalised chest. No apology will ever be enough to make up for all the damage Jackson has done, for all that Sarah should have done, for all that Christina did not do. The past is a place she'd prefer never to revisit but it dogs her, refusing to let her go.

## chapter two

Christina stood on the pavement as her boss Oscar squeezed his 4WD into an impossible parking space. It was the only one within cooee of the Plummer's house and, like a lot of streets in Sydney's salubrious beachside suburbs, parking was at a premium. She studied the bland veneers of the expensive houses separated by clipped hedges and expanses of glass. The surfwear millionaire wasn't the only one around here making money hand over fist. In preparation for today's meeting, Christina had done her research and knew that his company TBK had been bounding up *Business Review's* Fastest Growing Aussie Companies list for the past three years. He counted entrepreneurs, fund managers and CEOs as neighbours. Maybe that's why he was so blasé about leaving his garage door wide open exposing the two Mercedes Benz, the Porsche, the Range Rover and the sunflower yellow Lotus to the passing public and potential thieves.

Walking down the front path, she caught a glimpse of the sparkling ocean. Two attractive ceramic pots filled with agaves

guarded the front door, but those aside, the house was horrible. Christina pressed the doorbell, frowning at Oscar who was poking the end of his pencil into the failing mortar. When the door whooshed open, Christina stepped back in surprise. The man standing before her looked nothing like his corporate headshots. Jackson Plummer was wearing board shorts patterned in pink elephants and an oversized crimson shirt. His blond hair stuck out from his head like a cartoon character that had stuck its finger in an electrical socket, and when he smiled, his whole face crinkled up like a walnut. It reminded her of her father.

‘Jackson Plummer. Come in. Come in,’ he said, shaking their hands before bounding down the stairs shouting, ‘Coffee?’ over one shoulder. Oscar shot Christina an amused smile and they followed the millionaire down to an open-plan living area carpeted in olive-green shag pile.

Once Jackson had produced them each a mug of coffee from an expensive-looking machine, he took them on a tour of the house. He entered each room with a flourish, his pride louder than his shirt. A king in his castle, Christina thought. They ended the tour on a vast timber deck. Below, a lawn sloped down to a wooden gate hanging from its hinges. Beyond lay the sands of Forty Baskets Beach. The location, unlike the house and its seventies sensibility, was spectacular.

‘So you don’t need me to tell you the house is crap.’ Jackson grinned, balancing his empty mug on the handrail, and collapsed into a director’s chair. ‘But this is what I think we need to see.’

Christina sat too and took notes as he laid out his ideas for the house’s makeover. He spoke with his hands; hands with broad palms, manicured nails and a wedding band that flashed in the sun. Even his feet fidgeted, wiggling inside battered dock-siders as he spoke. Jackson Plummer was a man in constant motion and it made her want to be quiet and still.



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Oscar, clearly put out that the entrepreneur had not once asked for his expert advice, injected himself into the monologue. ‘So to summarise, Jackson, you and your wife Sarah want the house to allow space for your three children to grow, to be able to entertain clients and to reflect the relaxed feel of your business. Less seventies chic and more beach culture.’

Jackson frowned at the interruption. ‘Not just beach. We manufacture snow gear as well as surfwear and next year we’re launching our range of casual apparel. Hello, Princess!’

A dark-haired child slunk from the shadows of the house and burrowed into her father’s embrace. He stroked the nape of her neck and the little girl’s eyelids fluttered with pleasure. Unbidden, an image of Jamie sprang to Christina’s mind. The way he always clutched Bianca in an awkward A-frame hug, patting her back as if he were burping a baby. It hurt Christina that Jamie could be so unfeeling as to keep his only child at such a distance. Since the split twelve months ago, Bianca needed her father’s reassurance that she was still loveable, that the collapse of her parents’ marriage was not her fault. One thing for certain, Jamie would never let Bianca curl up on his lap as content as a kitten.

The little girl stayed there, twirling a strand of hair first one way then the other, until on impulse she slipped from her father’s lap and disappeared into the shadows from where she had first arrived. Christina realised that this was the problem with the house – too many hidden corners.

‘What are your initial thoughts on this, CC?’ Oscar asked, drawing her into the conversation.

Christina smiled at the two men, wondering if they were even conscious that their body language sent a clear signal that they would never be able to work together. Too much ego between them. ‘The house is a rabbit warren. Opening up the

public areas will maximise the natural light and create a flexible living space for the family and entertaining. Using different textures will add warmth so you don't feel like you're living in a specimen box.'

Jackson Plummer grinned. 'Sounds perfect,' he said, and she basked in the warmth of his approval.

A week or so later, Oscar popped his head over her cubicle wall and shared the news. Peterson Partners had won the Plummer contract. Christina was surprised and then embarrassed when Oscar added there was one proviso. Jackson Plummer had insisted that Christina manage the project. As the senior partner, Oscar had every right to have his nose firmly out of joint, but if it was, he had the good grace to hide it. Later, Della reminded her that Oscar Bennett never let anything stand between him and a pot of gold, so perhaps it was less graciousness than pragmatism.

Whatever the reason, Christina was glad it was she who had to spend the following weeks walking through the rooms of Jackson's home. She had done as much as she could with her tiny two-bedroom apartment and being unleashed on Jackson's seaside home was heaven. Together they despaired at the stench of mildew pervading the ground floor and argued over colour charts and fabric swatches as if it were life and death. Jackson railed at Christina's attempts at economy, refusing to compromise on quality. His natural instinct for design was obvious, although at the time it surprised her. In years to come Christina would tire of Jackson's need to constantly remind people that he was the creative brains behind TBK and Sarah was the bean counter. How he'd then laugh and, of course, his audience would always laugh with him.

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In all those weeks, Christina only saw Sarah Plummer the once. One day Sarah came home when Christina and Jackson were outside discussing decking options. Christina watched her fling her car keys on the kitchen bench and pour herself iced water from the fridge before leaving the room. Not even a hello. Jackson just shrugged and said, 'Design makes Sarah's eyes glaze over.'

She told Della later that Jackson's wife was a cool blonde who hid her dumpiness behind expensive linen and high heels. But in a funny way, Christina was grateful to Sarah. Without a third party to appease, Christina was free to help Jackson realise his vision. This was his personal domain, the expression of his achievements. And she was the woman he had chosen to make that happen.

Around them, builders demolished walls, jimmed up burnt sienna kitchen tiles and lifted the olive green shag pile. Every day Christina and Jackson shared a coffee and the thrill of watching the deconstruction of the house. Working with Jackson was an inspiration. Christina was sure that a part of it was Jackson's super abundance of charisma. His energy was infectious. He made her feel that she was the linchpin of the project, critical in the fulfilment of his dreams. It was tempting to believe Jackson when he told her how fabulous she was, but she had already noticed that he tended to shine a light on everybody within his orbit. There was a very good chance she was imagining Jackson thought she was someone special.

As Christina returned to her modest apartment after another long day on site, she reflected that this was another problem with spending so much time around Jackson. Keeping up with his boundless energy was exhausting enough but it had also become an exercise in severe contrasts. For instance, she had spent the day ordering the very best Italian tiles for the bathroom floors

at an exorbitant cost per square metre and arguing the importance of fair trade timber with a man who cared less for cost than aesthetics. Now here she was, trudging up the darkened stairwell to her apartment, weighed down by a tired and grumpy Bianca, her school backpack and her own shoulder bag. How she wished she were coming home to a house where the lights were on and the scent of a delicious meal wafted from the designer kitchen. And it was all very well Rosa tut-tutting and saying she should have stayed with Jamie for the sake of Bianca, but even if Christina had stayed, she'd still be coming home in the dark with no better prospect for dinner than scrambled eggs on toast.

After she'd tucked Bianca in bed, Christina poured herself a glass of wine to steel herself for the weekly chore of sorting the mail. The sight of a window envelope always chilled her heart. It didn't matter how hard she worked, mortgage repayments, childcare, utilities and groceries absorbed her monthly salary. Opening another envelope, she saw her car rego was due and the insurance premium had risen again. Christina thought of Jackson and the way he bandied about his black American Express at the tile shop. The difference smacked her in the face. Her life and Jackson's were worlds apart.

And so it might have continued except that one day something happened that changed everything. She was rechecking the measurements of the narrow walk-in wardrobe off the master bedroom when she heard Jackson arrive. Christina always knew when he was on an international call because he had this habit of talking louder as if his voice would carry across the oceans. She was reading the plans as she walked out to greet him and hadn't realised how close he was. She walked around the corner and straight into his arms. 'God! Sorry, Christina. Misjudged that one by a mile,' he grinned as he shoved the phone back in his pocket and gestured for her to go ahead.

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Christina rubbed her arms to smooth the goosebumps that had risen at his touch. She was mortified by her reaction, grateful that walking in front in some way hid her embarrassment.

‘What about these wardrobe railings, Christina?’ Jackson had ducked into Josh’s room.

Christina turned and gripped her clipboard to her chest. ‘Yes?’ It was an accident but she was sure he’d held on to her, maybe just a heartbeat too long. Jackson was a bit of a flirt. It didn’t mean anything.

Jackson cocked his head, ‘Are you with me? You look like you’re miles away.’

She blinked and smiled, glad he could not read her thoughts.

‘I said, can we make the top rails in the boys’ wardrobes higher? They’re both already over six foot tall and bloody Josh is only twelve.’

She was probably reading way too much into it. Jackson was like her father. One of those guys who could make an old lady with her hair in curlers feel attractive. He wasn’t trying to charm her in particular, that was just his nature. Clearly Christina needed to get out more. She made a note to alter the railing heights.

Christina revisited the incident as she flicked through the TV channels that night. Bianca had insisted on three stories, Christina had only had the energy for two. There’d been tears. Christina had given in and not for the first time felt the burden of being the centre of her child’s unrelenting attention. The more she thought about it, the more certain she was Jackson had held her when she ran into him. The question was why. Jackson was a wealthy and influential client. Crossing the line would put a lot at stake for both of them, but especially for Christina. Jackson was a married man. She could lose her job.

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Christina and Bianca sat on the floor with their backs against the hallway wall waiting for Jamie. By the door was Bianca's overnight bag with Bluey Baa-Baa tucked between the handles and one of Bianca's paintings from preschool Christina had framed for her father. To pass the time, Christina played 'This Little Piggy Went to Market' with Bianca's stubby toes sticking out from their sandals.

Bianca wriggled away from her. 'Where's Daddy?'

The question set Christina's teeth on edge. Sighing, she said, 'He's late, sweetheart.' Jamie was always late. He had a casual disregard for the value of other people's time, coupled with an obvious reluctance to spend any of his with Bianca. 'Do you want an apple juice?' Christina offered as a distraction. Anything to avoid the threat of heartbroken tears.

She sat Bianca at the kitchen bench and whilst her daughter was preoccupied poking her straw at the ice cubes bobbing in her juice, Christina tried to get hold of Jamie. His mobile went straight to voicemail, the home phone rang out. Christina checked the time. She was supposed to be at Jackson's house in half an hour. Their weekly project meeting with the builder had been shifted to Saturday to accommodate Jackson's travel schedule. There was no way she could miss it. She tried Jamie's numbers again, fighting the rising tide of desperation.

'Mummy, I need a wee.'

Christina threw the phone on the bench and followed Bianca to the toilet.

She helped Bianca pull down her pants and popped her on the seat. Outside she was calm but inside she seethed. Once again, Jamie was so wrapped up in his own life that he had forgotten about Bianca. Why couldn't he see that even though she was only two, Bianca sensed that she was not important to him. One day she'd be twelve and refuse to have

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anything to do with Jamie and he'd be asking Christina why. Jamie had put her in an untenable position. She had no choice but to take Bianca with her to the meeting. It was unprofessional to let down a prestigious client at such short notice. Between flushing the toilet and washing Bianca's hands, Christina sealed their fate: she would take Bianca with her, just this once.

'A bridge, Mummy,' Bianca shouted as they approached the gangplank connecting the footpath to the Plummer's front door. She pulled Christina across, chattering away about billy goats and trolls. Veering around the skips overflowing with scraps of timber, bricks and broken glass, Christina steered Bianca down the side path to the garden.

Jackson and the builder had set up camp under the ancient Norfolk pine. Hunched over plans weighed down with a coffee pot and mugs, they didn't acknowledge Christina's arrival. She settled Bianca on the grass with crayons and a colouring book before pouring herself a coffee. As had become her habit since the wardrobe incident, she stood at a point furthest from Jackson. Any closer and her mind wandered to the golden hairs springing from his forearms or contemplated how the slight hawkish bent to his nose made him seem patrician rather than calculating. Maintaining a physical distance kept her focused. She tuned into the conversation.

'It's all going to have to come up and be laid properly with a waterproof skin,' the builder drew his finger over the plans to emphasise his point.

Jackson tilted back in his chair, squeezing the bridge of his nose. 'It's not the money, it's the bloody time. How many weeks d'you reckon?'



Christina stayed silent. She'd warned Jackson about downstairs right at the start. Some bright spark had cut corners by laying the original concrete floor directly onto the ground. This allowed the damp through, hence the mildew and the awful smell. It was a specialist job. More to the point, they would have to allow weeks for it to cure before they could continue the works.

'Mummy, I'm thirs-ty.' Bianca tugged at Christina's shirt.

Jackson and the builder stopped talking.

Christina crouched down, shielding her little girl. 'You had an apple juice before we left home, sweetheart,' she whispered, tucking an errant curl behind Bianca's ear.

'But I'm thirs-ty.' Bianca pulled away.

Christina took her hand, drew her closer. 'Well, we packed your water bottle and a snack in your bag. Shall we get that?'

Bianca's eyes welled with tears. 'I lefted it in the car.' Such was her nature that even the smallest incident assumed disastrous proportions. 'I'm sorry, Mummy,' she whispered, heartbreak written across her little face.

Christina enveloped Bianca in a hug. 'It's okay, sweetheart. Mummy will pop up and get it in a sec.'

'Mummy!' Bianca's voice rose another octave.

Christina contemplated the uphill trek to the car with a reluctant toddler in tow. If she didn't act quickly, Bianca might have a meltdown. More fool her for bringing a two year old to a client meeting. She could make excuses. Bianca had had a late night. It was hot. And then she felt bad for making Bianca the centre of her poor decisions.

Out of nowhere, Jackson swooped down and swung Bianca up onto his shoulders. 'Why don't you come with me, Missy Moo, and we will find you a nice cold drink of water in the house, hey? If you're lucky, there might even be ice blocks.'

Surprised and charmed, Bianca squealed, 'I'm Busy Bee not

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Missy Moo, silly!’ Christina watched her swaying on Jackson’s shoulders, clutching fistfuls of hair as they lurched towards the house. She trailed behind, listening to the delighted shrieks and giggles as Jackson pretended to lose his balance and staggered up the hill. But Christina could see he kept a firm grip on those little thighs wrapped around his neck and she couldn’t help but smile.

Some men just have a way with children, Christina reflected on the drive home. She suspected it had something to do with their ability to tap into their inner child. Her father always loved clowning around, often to Rosa’s annoyance. Then again, with three children of his own, Jackson must have had heaps of experience wrangling mercurial toddlers. Whatever it was, he had secured Bianca’s wide-eyed adoration. Christina could hear her babbling away in the back seat, ‘It was the best play date ever, Mummy. And he says I can visit again, Mummy. Mummy? Please?’

‘We’ll see.’ Christina smiled into the rear-vision mirror. There was no point explaining to a two year old that Jackson was just being nice, but it did have one advantage. Bianca seemed to have forgotten all about Jamie’s no-show.

As it turned out, neither of them saw Jackson again for a while. He disappeared to Vietnam for the new season’s production meetings, leaving written instructions for Christina and the builder. At first, Christina was indignant at the lack of notice, before remembering he paid Peterson Partners for her services; he wasn’t answerable to her. It was a firm reminder that at the end of the day she was just another employee. But the house, though loud with demolishing and rebuilding, seemed hollow in his absence.

It did offer one opportunity though. Motivated by an imagined Jackson, Christina was determined that on his return he would be amazed at how the project had progressed without his steady presence. That he would see her as a safe pair of hands he could rely upon. She'd learned a lot about managing people observing Jackson, and Christina put it to good use, in turn arguing, cajoling and praising the team to keep them on time and on budget.

Della told her she was obsessing. 'Petersons do not pay you enough to work seven days a week, CC,' she said as she rolled out homemade pizza dough on the marble slab. Friday night was pizza night in the MacAllister household and Christina and Bianca had a standing invitation. Often Mary-Lou and her tribe turned up too, which made for an instant party.

Christina pureed the roasted tomatoes for the sauce in the Moulinex. 'That's not strictly true, Della. I get paid to deliver a project. If I have to work seven days a week to do that, that's my problem.' Like her mother always said, you do what it takes to get the job done.

Della paused in her rolling. She opened her mouth to say more but, for whatever reason, changed her mind. Christina wasn't fooled though. She knew Della sensed there was more going on here than professional dedication. But what Della always forgot was that she no longer worked. Each night she welcomed home an adoring husband and every day she relished the demands of two young children. Her sister regularly turned up with her three in tow and often with their mother and a little something for morning tea as well. Rosa and Massimo may have been only be a phone call away but as to popping in for a coffee? Tasmania may as well be on the moon. Once she'd tucked Bianca into bed at seven o'clock, Christina was on her own and what else did she have to do but work on the Plummer

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project? She knew she sounded a bit pathetic, but imagining Jackson's delight when he saw what she had achieved in his absence went some way to driving out the prickling loneliness.

And as unexpectedly as he had disappeared, Jackson reappeared. Christina arrived at the house one day to hear his voice echoing around the empty rooms. She rushed to greet him, pleased to be able to share with him the work that had been done whilst he was away. They toured the house, Christina updating him as they went, jotting down his comments in her notepad, her pleasure bubbling beneath the surface. She lifted the painter's plastic sheeting taped to a doorway and Jackson brushed against her as he passed. But this time there was no apology. Time slowed. They went from room to room, spending too much time in empty spaces, barely pausing in those where the tradesmen worked. It was not a hot day but sweat trickled between her breasts and warmed her thighs. She concentrated on her notes until there was nothing more to add.

'Have lunch with me,' he said.

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## ‘A welcome new talent’ CAROLINE BAUM

Interior designer Christina Clemente is caught off guard by an intense affair with her charismatic client, Jackson Plummer. He quickly becomes both the cure to Christina’s loneliness and a surrogate father to her young daughter Bianca.

When Jackson suggests moving to a rundown farm in the mountains, Christina soon forgets her initial hesitation and absorbs herself in restoring the rambling century-old house, Bartholomews Run, becoming obsessed with solving its mysterious history.

But while living on the isolated farm, her once effervescent child transforms into a quiet sullen teenager and Christina increasingly struggles to connect with her.

Because Bianca has a secret.

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