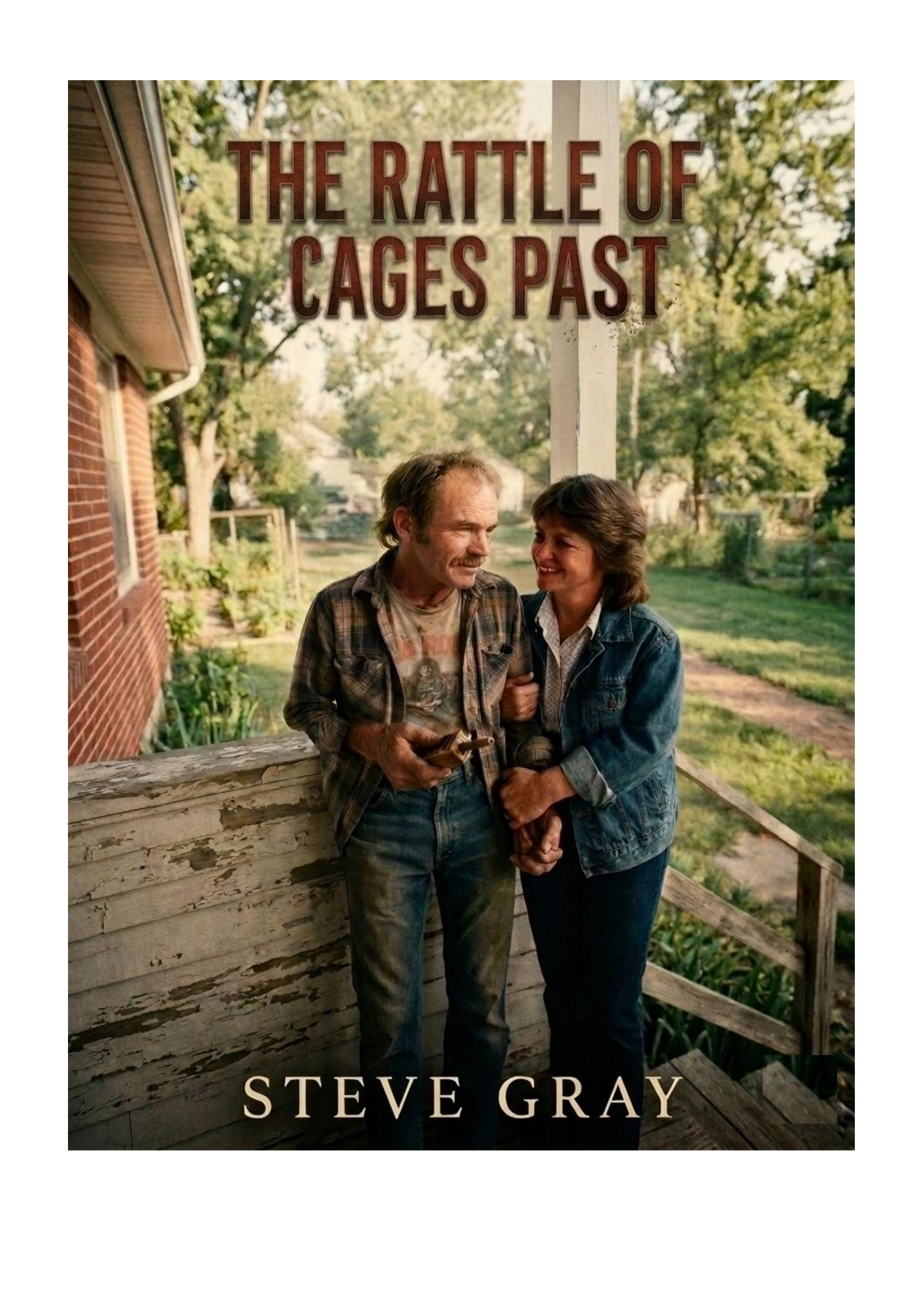


A photograph of a man and a woman standing on a wooden porch. The man, on the left, has a mustache and is wearing a plaid shirt over a t-shirt and jeans. He is holding a small object in his hands. The woman, on the right, is wearing a denim jacket over a patterned shirt and jeans. She has her arm around the man's shoulder. They are both smiling and looking at each other. The porch has a wooden railing and a brick wall is visible on the left. The background shows a green lawn and trees.

THE RATTLE OF CAGES PAST

STEVE GRAY

- *The Rattle of Cages Past* -

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Chapter One

The sun rarely caught Forty-Five McBain Street at its finest anymore. A classic weatherboard, typical of Altona and the mid-century era, it sat on timber planks that had long since settled into the shifting coastal soil. The cream paint, once a crisp statement of suburban pride for the Banks family, had gone chalky under the harsh Australian sun. Around the windows and along the fascia, a deeper trim, once a proud, dark contrast, was now peeling in thin, brittle ribbons.

Along the front boundary, initial pride had faded into the quiet compromise of suburban routine. The fence was a simple affair of galvanized wire mesh between weathering posts, its base permanently choked by a shifting population of dandelions, and wild onion grass. Cobwebs spun thick across the wire in places, gathering dust until a rare burst of weekend gardening cleared them away, only for the spiders to reclaim the territory by nightfall. Time was its own worst enemy here, wearing down both the paintwork and the enthusiasm that had built it.

A slow walk down the boundary toward the driveway unveiled the rest of the front yard. A low fence with an angled, treated-pine top rail ran along the side, separating the driveway from a narrow garden bed. Inside, a resilient mix of low flowering plants, hardy geraniums and weathered marigolds, struggled against the salty air. This garden bed hugged the fence line before turning sharply to trace the front of the house, offering a small splash of color against the faded cream weatherboards.

The driveway was an anomaly for the neighborhood. While most featured a standard two strips of concrete with a ribbon of weeds growing up the center, Forty-Five boasted a solid, continuous sweep of concrete leading all the way to the back. The money saved by opting for a simple timber carport instead of a brick garage, had been poured directly into that smooth expanse of cement.

At the end of this driveway, the front of the house featured a small, concrete porch. A heavy wire fly-wire screen door stood guard, its mesh slightly buckled from years of being kicked open, hiding the solid timber front door behind it.

From around the back, smartly turning onto the driveway, came Josh. He was on his way to work. Slung over his shoulder was a 1970s era army surplus satchel bag, its olive-drab canvas faded to a dull grey, holding his lunchbox and a few miscellaneous bits and pieces. On

mornings like this, Josh felt drearily weighed down by a graveyard of lousy memories. They surfaced when things were tough or when the Melbourne weather turned bleak and grey. There had been good times, of course, but his mind had a cruel habit of letting the bad memories strike the hardest, hammering away over and over. Yet, just when the weight felt entirely unbearable, a tiny ‘glimmer of hope’ would spark, a stubborn, unexplainable feeling that things might eventually change for the better.

Reaching the end of the driveway, Josh turned to his right, setting his face toward the Altona train station. It was a journey he performed day after seemingly dreary day. One foot fell after the other, trudging, plodding, with his left foot somehow always feeling slightly heavier than the right as he made his way down the footpath.

Born and raised in McBain Street, Josh spent most of his mental energy trying to find a way to make his existence useful. Too often, it felt like an uphill battle. Growing up, his desires had evolved. Now, he wanted the pillars of adulthood: a stable life, a secure income, and the simple dignity of standing on his own two feet. But as a kid, his ambitions had been much simpler. He had craved a shiny new bicycle, a homemade billy cart with matched lawnmower wheels, the taste of decent chocolate, and the validation of being picked for the school sports teams. The bigger concepts of value, dreams, and long-term goals would only form later, as the innocence of childhood began to peel away.

One early lesson in geographic irony was the school across the road. From his front yard, Josh could see the classrooms of the local Catholic primary school. Yet, because his parents refused to pay the fees, Josh had to walk a considerable distance to the state school. His route took him over the railway line, past the industrial edge, and a few streets down from the main shopping center. Whenever he complained about the long trek in the winter rain, his dad would simply shrug from behind the paper and say ‘It’s good exercise.’

When he finally grew old enough to escape the eye of his parents, summer meant the beach. Only a few blocks from home, the Altona foreshore became his sanctuary. He and his mates would spend entire days swimming in the shallow bay water, playing chaotic beach games, and inevitably getting ‘burnt to a crisp’ under a harsh summer sun. Winters were different but equally unconfined. Life retreated indoors to TV cartoons, marathon board games, and neighborhood fun. It was the golden afternoon of the era: kids would vanish into the streets first thing in the morning and only return when the orange glow of the streetlights began to hum to life. There wasn’t a care in the world.

Organized sport, however, was a different story. It tried to loom large in Josh's youth, but his physical capacity always betrayed him. Blessed with short legs and a frustratingly low lung capacity, his athletic endeavors were short-lived. He would dutifully sign up for the local football club every winter, only to spend three quarters of every match shivering on the bench in an oversized guernsey. He never forgot the sting of overhearing one of the parent coaches muttering on the sidelines: *'That Banks kid has the lung capacity of a gnat.'*

Schoolwork provided little refuge. Learning was a constant struggle of friction and confusion. Teachers pushed for homework, parents pushed for results, and caught right in the middle was Josh, quietly drowning while trying to secure decent marks. A 'B' or a 'B+' was a rare achievement; 'C's and 'D's were his true par for the course. More often than not, he was lost in his own daydreams, finding the view of the clouds out the classroom window infinitely more alluring than the chalk scribbles on the chalkboard.

The years trudged on regardless. Josh transitioned from walking, to riding his bike, pedaling toward school, rain, hail, or shine. Through every wet winter morning, he comforted himself with a single, burning 'glimmer of hope': one day, all this schooling stuff would finally end, and something brighter would be waiting for him on the other side.

His domestic life was a quiet, predictable tableau. In the evenings, his father could always be found reading the Herald newspaper in the dining room, while his mother stood over the vinyl-tiled kitchen stove, cooking meat and three veg. Outside, the backyard beckoned with open space for neighborhood kids, though it carried one iron-clad rule shouted from the back porch: *'Keep off the veggie patch at the back, please!'*

It was an idyllic setup for the era, but it came with a side of street-smart education. His dad would regularly meter out advice based on the stories Josh brought home about his school friends.

If Josh mentioned a father who handed out brutal, unpredictable punishments: *'Avoid that house, mate.'*

If he mentioned a mother who seemed unsteady on her feet and slurred her words: *'Avoid.'*

And if there was a family who kept a creepy relative living in a makeshift timber bungalow at the back: *'AVOID.'*

Fads swept through McBain Street like summer storms. Skateboards arrived in a flash of fiberglass and urethane wheels, leaving a trail of friends with broken wrists and grazed elbows before the craze died down. Then came various toys and gadgets, clackers, yoyos, and plastic trinkets, that were either swiftly banned by the school principal or rendered instantly redundant by the arrival of the next big thing. A boy's prized possession could be the height of cool on a Tuesday and deemed 'oh so daggy' by Friday afternoon.

Then, the school years simply whizzed by. As students reached their senior years, teachers began throwing out serious thoughts regarding employment. In a working-class precinct in a suburb like Altona, apprenticeships were the holy grail. Both parents and teachers hammered home the same economic gospel: *'Get yourself a good trade, son, and you'll be set for life.'*

When Josh turned to his own parents for that same definitive map, they merely offered a gentle blessing. *'Whatever you do, Josh, let's just hope it's useful and makes you happy.'*

To a teenager standing on the precipice, that sentiment meant very little. It was comforting, certainly, and he knew they meant well—but it offered absolutely nothing in the way of a direction.

Chapter Two

The arrival of the letter on a Tuesday carried the heavy, embossed authority of the Victorian Railways. Josh's mother chose not to open it immediately, instead propping the envelope against the glass salt shaker on the dining table. It stood there like a small white monument, silently aiming to dictate the trajectory of the family's future. When Josh finally trudged through the back door, his satchel heavy with textbooks that had seen little use, his eyes were drawn to it instantly.

There was no need to read the contents aloud. The single word *ACCEPTED* in sharp, crisp type told the whole story. At the age of seventeen, the innocence of his childhood came to a sudden halt, signaled not by a school ceremony but by a piece of formal government stationery.

Arthur, his father, returned from his own shift at five, carrying the familiar scent of coal dust and tobacco. He lifted the letter with calloused hands, studying the words twice before looking at Josh over the paper's edge. His face, usually a map of hard-won lines, softened for a rare moment.

'There's a glimmer of hope for you, boy,' Arthur remarked, his voice dropping into a tone of uncharacteristic warmth. 'Well done.'

The year was 1963. While the world's axis was shifting, a secure job in Melbourne's western suburbs was still defined in capital letters by a government department. A railway apprenticeship offered the pillars of adulthood: a trade for life, a secure pension, and the dignity of a respectable career.

Josh soon discovered that his education hadn't ended at school; it had merely transitioned into something more earnest. Textbooks were replaced by vast, drafty brick halls, and his new teachers were men who communicated in grunts, judging a lad by the sharpness of his tools and the silence of his obedience.

His mates were all busy carving out their own small corners of the world. Some found jobs in the local meatworks or started bricklaying, while others spent their evenings chasing girls at local bars after twilight. They were generally a source of constant anxiety for their parents, navigating an era of strange and reckless transitions.

The lingering weight of the post-war years was lifting, replaced by a frantic desire to live fast. Young men often drank more beer than they should, drove their FJ Holdens under the influence far too frequently, and avoided trouble largely because the local police were probably engaged in the same behavior.

Following a suburban dance or a raucous backyard party, Josh would join the procession of young men staggering through the demure streets of the outer suburbs. He would eventually slip through the back door of his parents' weatherboard house, a home identical to the rest on the block with its faded cream paint and sagging iron roof.

Inside, the house seemed to hold its breath. His Mother, Vera, would lie awake, her ears tuned to the sound of the backyard path. Only the distinct, metallic *clack-thud* of the flywire screen door closing allowed her to finally turn over and find restful sleep.

This was the plight of the suburban parent. The neighborhood was divided by silent terrors. Those with daughters prayed they wouldn't be caught out by a smooth-talking lad with a fast car, while those with boys harbored a dark dread of their sons being entrapped, by girls with ill intent.

The last thing any decent household wanted was a girl from three streets over, standing on the porch in the dead of winter, announcing she was pregnant. It was a time of strict cultural standards and the ever-present fear of a daughter getting 'caught out' or a son losing his way. Tears, fears, some beers and a final 'oh well, we have to accept all this now.' Was the norm

By morning, the cost of the previous night was paid in full. A lethargic, hungover body would sit slumped over a bowl of Weet-Bix, the brain throbbing in time with the ticking mantle clock. The reality of the daily grind was a sharp contrast to the brief freedom of the weekend.

Vera would move through the kitchen with noisy efficiency, putting the kettle onto the stove. 'I worry so much when you're not back home,' she would remark with her back to him. 'I can't get to sleep until I hear that back flywire screen close.'

Josh's tongue usually felt like wool. 'Yes, mum,' he would mumble into his tea, his mind still lost in the fog of the night before.

Later, Arthur would stop him by the garden gate, a lunch tin tucked under his arm. Avoiding direct eye contact, he would whisper, 'You know your mother worries herself sick about you, son.' It was the same predictable story, day after seemingly dreary day.

Monday morning arrived with the clarity of a whistle blast. Josh would head down the driveway, to walk to the station. This journey, performed day after day, was a steady, unthinking plod as he made his way down the footpath.

In childhood, the train had been an instrument of pure adventure. He and Toby had spent their pocket money on weekend tickets to Flinders Street or the flat plains of Laverton just to watch steam engines roar past. Back then, the tracks had promised a way to escape.

Now, in his working years, the train held a completely different significance. It was no longer a chariot; it was a conveyor belt. He would wait on the bitumen platform while the winter fog rolled off the bay, a dreary wait before the screech of steel arrived.

The train carried him to the Newport Railyards, a kingdom of iron, smoke, and sweat. Josh started his electrical apprenticeship alongside fifty other lads, all appearing small and pale in their oversized overalls. His first weeks were spent learning to file a block of steel perfectly flat.

'Work hard and get ahead,' his father's voice would echo during those long hours. The workshops were brutal; in January, the iron roofs turned the workshop bays into ovens, while in winter, Antarctic winds ripped off the bay, numbing his fingers until he could scarcely feel the copper wire.

The weather was predictable, but the men were not. The apprenticeship was loaded with psychological challenges, including systematic pranks by third-year apprentices. Josh learned to check his boots for grease and never to go looking for a 'bucket of steam' when sent by a smirking tradie.

He grew to know the rolling stock intimately: the timber interiors of the Red Rattlers and the blue-and-silver Harris trains that smelled of vinyl and ozone. He knew every rattle, every rhythmic squeak of the bogies, and the exact pitch of the air-horn blast as it approached.

Get on. Get off. Shuffle to the workshop bay. Work eight hours. Shuffle back to the platform. Throughout it all, a sense of discontent hummed in his chest. Like others of his generation, he had been raised on the doctrine that your first job was your last.

The extremes of the seasons tore at them. Bleak July mornings saw them bundled in heavy woollen coats. In January, they stripped to singlets, their skin white and glistening with sweat. It wore people out, changing the temper of the whole suburb at times.

Relief came in small doses on the way home. Josh and his fellow apprentices would sometimes drop off the train early for a quick one in the public bar. On a meager wage, he could only afford a few beers a week, but the catch-ups were worth every penny.

He loved sitting on the periphery of the smoke-filled room, watching older apprentices swap stories with seasoned tradesmen. This was where the real education happened, learning the politics of the workshop floor, the foremen to avoid, and which horses were tipped to win the Melbourne Cup.

The pub was a volatile place, where tempers could rise after a long day. But the hotel had a secret weapon: Beryl behind the taps. A solidly built woman with hair the color of a sunset, she could spot an underage drinker from forty paces.

'Pull your heads in, you lot,' she would bark, her voice cutting through the din. Beryl possessed a powerful right index finger; with one sharp point toward the double doors, you knew you had overstepped the mark and were banished for the rest of the afternoon.

'OUT,' she would say. There were no appeals. The offender had to perform the long, silent walk of shame past fifty grinning faces, their boots squeaking against the sawdust on the floor. It was a harsh education in suburban routine and the unwritten rules of the era.

Four years of an apprenticeship was a long, slow slog of turning up, taking orders, and retreating home. Some days Josh would walk through his back gate so thoroughly fatigued that his face looked grey, weighed down by a graveyard of lousy memories that surfaced when things were tough.

'Worn to a crisp,' Vera would say. He wouldn't answer, instead collapsing onto his single bed in his work clothes, sleeping a dead, dreamless sleep until dinner. This bone-aching sense of fatigue would haunt Josh for all his working days; a permanent inheritance from the railways.

His father would grunt about how hard work never killed anybody, but after watching his son come home utterly frazzled month after month, even Arthur started to wonder if the modern world was demanding a different kind of toll from the youth of the neighborhood.

By 1965, Josh had found a purpose for his sweat: he started to save for a car. He wanted a brand-new Toyota Corolla, a small Japanese import that was appearing on Melbourne roads. Arthur was horrified, strongly advising him to get a good, second-hand Holden instead.

But Josh hated the sense that a second-hand car gave off, like someone else's discarded life. He wanted the smell of factory vinyl and the solid sense of personal achievement. Vera told him he was stark raving mad to take on debt, but Josh went to the bank anyway.

Using his apprenticeship papers as security, he secured a small bank loan. When he drove it home, the little white sedan symbolised absolute freedom. Josh was nineteen now, and while some mates had inherited vehicles or received financial assistance, Josh had done this entirely alone.

Weekends transformed overnight. No longer bound by rigid railway timetables or the limits of their bicycles, the boys could head to dances in Sunshine or Footscray without a worry. They had 'old Joshie' and his Corolla, which parked prominently out the front of every gathering.

Toby Jones remained the anchor to his past, a mate since their first day at state school. They had been inseparable since their teens, frequently warned by teachers for being 'as thick as thieves.' Toby lived just around the corner, and the pair had always been a fixture of the street.

Toby hadn't won a railway apprenticeship; he had left school at fifteen and ended up in a drafty supply warehouse, loading heavy pipes and ceramic basins. His palms were permanently calloused from the rough hemp of burlap sacks, a visible testament to his own daily struggle.

On Friday nights, sitting on the bonnet of the Corolla, the pair would compare notes, eventually asking who got paid more. Toby's dad had given strict instructions never to discuss wages, but Toby didn't care for his father's old-fashioned secrets, telling Josh his weekly amount down to the last pence.

There were more important things to be concerned about than a few shillings difference, things like the price of petrol, the look from the girl in the street, and the long, open road stretching out before them in the headlights of Josh's new car.

Chapter Three

The hotel bar was thick with the scent of stale lager and the heavy, lingering tobacco smoke that seemed to define the era. Mixed in was that distinct, industrial grease that never truly washed out of an apprentice's knuckles, no matter how hard they scrubbed. It was a Friday afternoon at the local, that sacred golden hour where the grueling weight of the working week was finally traded for a cold glass of Carlton.

Across the scarred timber table, a senior fourth-year sparkie took a long drag of his cigarette. He watched the blue smoke curl toward the water-stained ceiling tiles before casually dropping a piece of suburban gold.

'Moving out next month,' he muttered, shaking his head with a weary, knowing grin. 'Got a flat with the missus a few streets back from the main drag. It's a good little spot, but mate, we're suffocating each other. Time for a change.'

Josh sat up a fraction straighter, his hand pausing on the handle of his pot of beer. He was on the final leg of his own four-year sentence as an apprentice electrician. The grimy hands, the perpetually scuffed steel-caps, and the canvas overalls torn at the knees were a testament to the hard yards he'd put in. For years, he'd lived under his parents' roof, bound by their rules and the predictable rhythms of family life. But lately, a restless itch has taken root. He was earning decent money now, or at least, decent enough.

I could probably afford a place, he thought, the realisation hitting him like a sudden jolt from a live wire. *Wouldn't that be the proper next step in the grand scheme of things?*

He leaned in, the background noise of the pub fading as he began probing for details. 'Whereabouts is it exactly? What's the damage on the rent?'

As the senior apprentice laid out the specifics, Josh's mental map of the western suburbs began to light up. The flat was nestled in a quiet, brick-veneer pocket just a few streets over from his parents' house. By extension, that meant it was barely a five-minute drive from Toby's place. Toby was his partner-in-crime, a mate he'd known since they were kids scraping their knees on the asphalt.

When the figure for the weekly rent was spoken aloud, Josh's stomach dropped a fraction. It was a bit steeper than his optimistic estimates. On a single tradesman-in-training income, things would be tighter than a rusted conduit. But the calculation shifted instantly

when he factored in a wingman. If he went halves with Toby, the financial chokehold loosened into something completely manageable.

That weekend, the conversation happened over a couple of stubbies in Toby's garage, surrounded by half-assembled car engines and old milk crates.

'Think about it, Tobe,' Josh said, leaning against the workbench, his voice tinged with the infectious energy of a bloke selling a vision. 'We move into this flat, we get total freedom. No one asking where we're going, no one nagging about the noise. It's two bedrooms, solid brick, plenty of room. We'd just need to scrounge a few sticks of furniture, a fridge, and we're laughing. Whaddaya reckon, mate?'

Toby's eyes lit up, the unadulterated prospect of an independent life hitting him like a lightning bolt. 'Are you serious? Man, let's do it. Let's bloody do it.'

A few days later, they found themselves standing on the concrete porch of the flat, meeting the landlord. Signor Rossi was a man in his mid-thirties, possessing the sharp, no-nonsense demeanor of one who ran a tight ship without the patience for red tape. He wore a crisp polo shirt, smelled faintly of expensive aftershave, and sized the two twenty-year-olds up with an intense, calculating gaze.

'The rules are straightforward, boys,' Rossi said, his accent thick but his delivery razor-sharp. 'You pay the rent on time, or you bugger off. Simple as that. I don't want any dramas, and I don't want the cops called here. I will be around every single Thursday evening to collect the cash. You be here to hand it over, or you make arrangements with Miss Falsgott next door to pay it on your behalf. Understood?'

Josh and Toby nodded in unison, looking like two schoolboys promising the headmaster they wouldn't throw spitballs. Rossi chose to look past their youth, operating on the calculated gamble that at twenty, these lads possessed a modicum of maturity absent in the chaotic first-year apprentices he usually encountered. He shook their hands, took the bond, and tossed Josh the keys.

Settling in was an exercise in pure suburban hunting and gathering. The flat became a living museum of secondhand charity and mates' cast-offs. Josh's uncle contributed a vinyl couch that squeaked every time someone sat down; Toby's mum donated a mismatched set of chipped plates and a kettle that took ten minutes to boil; and an older mate parted with a

warped laminate dining table in exchange for a six-pack of Victoria Bitter. It wasn't slick interior design, but to the boys, it was a palace.

The true test of their adulthood came a week later when the respective parental delegations arrived for the official inspection.

Josh's father stood in the center of the small lounge room, hands tucked firmly into the pockets of his heavy trousers. He surveyed the vinyl couch, the milk-crate coffee table, and the solitary poster of a Holden Torana tacked to the plaster. He let out a long, slow whistle, a rare, proud smirk breaking through his rugged exterior.

'Well, look at this,' his dad said, clapping a heavy hand onto Josh's shoulder. 'Proud of you, son. To be honest, there's still a glimmer of hope for you yet.'

Toby's father shared the same sentiments, expressing a quiet relief that his son was finally taking responsibility for his own laundry, even if the kitchen sink was already showing signs of a dirty plate pile-up.

Life quickly settled into a comfortable, chaotic rhythm. Weekends were unscripted affairs, revolving around local pub gigs, barbecues, and the occasional economical holiday. For Josh and Toby, a vacation didn't mean flights; it meant packing an ancient canvas tent into the car, driving into the bush until the radio reception cut out, and setting up camp by a riverbank. It was cheap, it was rough, and it was invariably a monumental drink-fest under the stars.

The simplicity of these trips was a sharp contrast to the structured family holidays of Josh's youth. His last trip with his parents had been a predictable driving tour of Albury, a world of bakeries and early nights. This new era was about cheap firewood, warm beer, and nursing hangovers in the morning heat.

For the most part, the domestic partnership worked. But two young blokes sharing a confined space meant friction was inevitable. There were weeks when they found themselves entirely in each other's pockets, every minor annoyance, like Toby leaving the milk carton empty, magnifying until the air in the flat grew tense.

They developed a natural release valve. Without fail, Toby would disappear over to his mum's every Sunday for a weekly roast dinner, soaking in the comfort of a home-cooked

meal. Josh did the exact same thing, though his visits were a fortnightly ritual. These brief retreats allowed them to reset, returning to the flat with fresh patience.

The only real complication was the revolving door of girlfriends. Both boys had varying love interests, mostly short-term flings that burnt brightly for three weeks before fizzling into awkward silences.

The girls they brought home often viewed the flat with amused skepticism. To a twenty-year-old woman, a place occupied exclusively by two tradesmen felt like an untamed ecosystem. There was an unspoken tension, a sense that the property belonged strictly to the brotherhood. They frequently used the arrangement as a convenient excuse to avoid staying over. 'I'll head back to my place,' they'd say. 'Don't want to get in the way.'

The passing of time was marked by the evolution of Josh's career. After four long, grueling years of early mornings, biting winter winds, and the relentless physical toll of pulling heavy cables through tight ceiling spaces, he finally completed his apprenticeship. He was a fully qualified A-grade electrician.

The physical toll of those years was etched into his gear: his hands were perpetually calloused, his leather boots were deeply scuffed, and his favorite overalls were a patchwork of minor tears and burn marks from soldering irons.

When he showed his mother his official trade certificate, her eyes welled up with an intense, quiet pride. His father, true to form, looked at the document, gave a solid nod, and delivered his ultimate verdict: 'Yep. You put in the effort, you get the rewards, lad. Simple as that.'

By this stage, Josh and Toby had been anchored in the flat for two full years. They had survived the initial novelty of independence and settled into a routine of survival. Friends drifted in and out on Friday nights; girls came and went with the seasons.

While the apartment frequently descended into standard bachelor chaos, the boys maintained a shred of self-respect. Every few weeks, driven by a mutual wave of guilt, they would get stuck in and clean the place from top to bottom, scrubbing the linoleum kitchen floor until it looked respectable again.

But in the early days, the rubbish was their Achilles' heel. Empty beer bottles and pizza boxes had a habit of stacking up on the small back porch, completely forgotten until the wind

caught them. This brought them into frequent contact with Miss Falsgott next door. She was a sharp, fiercely independent woman in her late twenties who viewed the two boys with neighborly duty and exasperated amusement. Without fail, on garbage night, a sharp, rhythmic knock would echo through the boys' front door.

Josh would open it to find Miss Falsgott standing there, hands on her hips. 'Alright, boys, it's rubbish night. Get those bins out to the kerb before the truck gets here at dawn. I don't want to smell your weekend by Tuesday.'

Sometimes the boys got the message, scrambling to drag the bins down the driveway. Sometimes, deep in a television show, they completely forgot, earning themselves a stern, tight-lipped look from her across the driveway the following morning.

Chapter Four

It was a Friday night, and the air was thick with the oppressive warmth of a classic Victorian summer. Inside the flat, the boys were set, a palpable energy buzzing between them. Tonight, they were heading out to the local in Werribee to see a live rock band.

Josh splashed water on his face, threw on a clean button-up, and checked his reflection. Toby was already by the door, tapping his keys. They were sorted, primed, and ready for whatever the night had to offer.

When they arrived at the pub, the venue was packed to the rafters. Heat had driven everyone indoors, and for some inexplicable, miraculous reason, the gender ratio was heavily skewed, there were far more girls in attendance than guys, a rarity for a rock gig in the outer west.

As they scanned the crowded, smoky room, a mutual friend spotted them from a long timber table and frantically waved them over. 'Hey! Josh! Toby! Get over here, we've got space!'

They slid into the group, pulling up stray stools. The table was a lively hub of laughter and shouted conversations over the thumping of the band's bass. Josh settled in, taking a slow sip of his beer, his eyes naturally drifting across the faces gathered around them.

His gaze traveled down the long expanse of the timber, bypassing familiar faces, until it stopped dead at the very far end.

Sitting insulated by a tight-knit circle of her own mates was a girl who instantly caught his attention. She wasn't looking his way; she was entirely distracted, laughing. She had an aura of effortless elegance that seemed completely disconnected from the rugged atmosphere of the Werribee pub.

Josh nudged the friend next to him, eyes locked on the end of the table. 'Okay, who's that girl down there? The one at the very end?'

The friend squinted through the dim light. 'Oh, that's Jeannie. She works in town at some high-falootin' office. Real professional type.'

Josh didn't care about where she worked or what her job title was. At that moment, none of the logistics mattered. He just thought she looked absolutely beautiful, and an intense, undeniable urge to know more took hold.

He stood up, excusing himself for a trip to the bar. The queue was deep, and by the time he fought through the crowd and navigated his way back to the table, his heart sank slightly.

Her stool was empty. Jeannie was gone.

Josh sat back down, a wave of disappointment washing over him. He took a moody gulp of beer and scanned the room. Within seconds, he spotted her. She was out on the dancefloor, moving naturally to the music. Josh leaned against his stool and simply watched, captivated by the easy, unselfconscious way she carried herself.

The song drew to a close with a dramatic crash of cymbals. The lead singer stepped up to the mic: 'Alright folks, we're gonna take a quick twenty-minute breather. Go get yourselves a drink, hit the toilets, and we'll be right back with some more rock and roll.'

Instantly, the dance floor began to empty. Jeannie broke away from her group, heading back toward the long table. Her friend abruptly changed course. 'I'm just going to hit the ladies' room, Jeannie! Back in a sec!'

Josh saw his opening. The table was almost empty now. Seizing the moment, Josh casually slid up a few spots, occupying a stool that dramatically increased the chances of being closer to her.

She sat down heavily just one space away, letting out an exhausted sigh as she grabbed her half-empty drink. From the way her eyes twinkled, Josh's internal radar kicked in. *Well,*

it's definitely not her first drink of the night, he thought with a grin, *and it probably won't be her last*.

He didn't say a word right away. Instead, he put on a massive, beaming smile and held it, looking straight into her face. Jeannie turned her head, her gaze meeting his. Seeing this bloke sitting there with a ridiculous, unwavering grin, she couldn't help but smile back. With a very slight, endearing slur, she managed: 'Well... hello!'

Josh gave a confident nod. 'Hi there. I'm Josh.' Without breaking eye contact, he carefully shifted his weight, claimed the seat right next to her. 'I see you can dance. Good work out there.'

Jeannie took a deliberate sip, leaning her elbow on the sticky timber as she looked him over. 'Yep,' she said, her voice dripping with playful wit. 'And I see you can smile... Mr. Josh.'

Josh burst out laughing, the ice shattered into a million pieces. The next few minutes passed in a blur of effortless conversation. They traded blueprints: he was an electrician, she was an office worker; he lived nearby, she was from Altona. The list went on, fueled by the natural chemistry of two people who clicked without trying.

When Jeannie heard the word *Electrician*, a shift occurred. To her, a trade meant stability, a young man who knew how to work with his hands, with a reliable future. She was also drawn to his physicality; he was a lean, fit lad with a happy disposition. Josh, for his part, kept the banter light and let his natural warmth do the talking.

Slowly, the rest of the patrons began returning. The atmosphere grew louder as the band climbed back onto the stage. As they talked, Josh observed Jeannie closely. She seemed incredibly confident and possessed a remarkably vibrant personality. Little did he know that underneath that exterior was a young woman who carried hidden doubts and occasional struggles with self-esteem.

The band exploded into life with a driving riff. Without hesitation, Jeannie grabbed Josh's hand, beckoning him toward the dancefloor. He could hear that the alcohol had fully taken hold of her now, and Josh was 'primed enough' to get over any self-consciousness about his own silly moves.

They hit the floor, and Josh fell back on his trusty weapon: the good old Aussie two-step. Three songs in, the room was a wall of heat. Suddenly, the band transitioned into a slow, melodic song. The flashing lights softened into a deep, moody blue.

Jeannie stopped, looking suddenly coy. Sensing the shift, Josh held out his arms for a traditional waltz embrace. She stepped forward. They locked into a close, warm embrace, shuffling slowly about the floor. Josh felt an intense tingle of excitement as her weight rested against him.

In the middle of the song, Toby walked past them, a knowing grin on his face. 'Go Josh!' he shouted, giving a theatrical wink. Josh and Jeannie both burst into smiles, the moment drawing them even closer. By the time the house lights flickered on, phone numbers had been eagerly exchanged on crumpled napkins.

A stretch of time passed before Josh and Jeannie arranged their next catch-up. During those days, Josh was a changed man, walking around the flat with a permanent, goofy smile. Toby noticed the shift immediately. Every time Josh stared blankly at his shoes, Toby would let out a loud cackle. 'Alright, lover boy, settle down! You're losing your mind.' Josh didn't even try to defend himself; he just giggled.

Two nights later, the doorbell rang. Josh found Jeannie on the porch, flanked by a close girlfriend. Jeannie didn't have her own car yet; she was meticulously saving up every spare penny from her office job. Her friend had agreed to act as chauffeur, a strategic move allowing Jeannie an opportunity to see exactly how the boys lived.

The visit was brief, a strategy to avoid overstaying their welcome. They sat in the lounge room, drank a cup of tea, and used the time to organize their next date. For Jeannie, it was a successful scouting mission; for Josh, it was validation that she was just as interested as he was.

By the following week, the casual visits evolved into structured group outings. They were back at the pub with friends, spending the night partying until their feet ached. Josh was so smitten that he opened up to his father during a Sunday visit, admitting he had found a serious 'love interest.' His dad listened quietly before offering just one piece of advice.

'Josh,' his father said, his voice dropping into a rare, serious tone. 'Be nice. Listen carefully to her. And above all, keep your wits about you.'

For once, Josh didn't roll his eyes at the old-school rhetoric. He realized the advice was sound, a blueprint for self-preservation and respect. As the weeks rolled on, the pair began spending their days off entirely in each other's company. They would go out shopping in the city, or simply take long, aimless drives across town, watching the urban landscape fade into the countryside.

Jeannie even suggested an afternoon at the Melbourne Museum, walking through the grand exhibits hand-in-hand. It was wholesome, steady, and incredibly nice. It wasn't long before the holding of hands became a permanent fixture of their walks, and Josh officially considered them to be boyfriend and girlfriend. The wider social circle followed suit; they were universally seen as a couple.

Jeannie was twenty now, possessing a level of maturity that came from having worked full-time since eighteen. She had worked her way up from shop assistant to clerical work in the heart of Melbourne, navigating the corporate world with a sharp mind. Josh found her fascinating, an intricate puzzle compared to the predictable blokes he spent his days with at work.

One evening, while helping his dad maintain his car, Josh spoke about Jeannie's sharp wit and her sudden shifts in mood. His father wiped his greasy hands on a rag and let out a quiet grunt. 'You know what they say, lad. Be careful. You might just marry your mother.'

Josh frowned, unsure of the cryptic warning. He brushed it off, but as the months rolled on, the fog began to clear. He started to recognise familiar behavioural traits in Jeannie that mirrored his own mother's personality. There were sudden moments of deep anxiousness over minor things. Later, as the initial honeymoon facade began to drop, waves of genuine depression started to show through.

Despite the emotional heavy lifting, their bond deepened. They began taking weekend trips together, exploring the state. They spent a sun-drenched day wandering through Ballarat and later booked a small motel in Bendigo. Free from the distractions of their normal routines, they were getting to know each other on a profoundly intimate level.

Then came the ultimate hurdle: meeting Jeannie's parents. Josh spent the drive over trying to stop his hands from sweating on the wheel. When they arrived, he did his best to hide his immense nerves, standing straight and shaking hands firmly. After he left, Jeannie's mum smiled: 'He seems like a genuinely nice guy, Jeannie.'

Jeannie's father thought he was okay too. He respected the work ethic as a sparkie, though he privately confessed to his wife that he was unimpressed with Josh's lightweight taste in beer. 'The lad drinks water disguised as lager,' he muttered, but it was a minor grievance. Josh was in. Reflecting on the journey, Josh would lean back and say with absolute certainty: 'My rock has arrived.'

Chapter Five

1969

Wedding plans happened quickly, Josh and Jeannie were now delighted Fiancees, Her father was caught off guard, not having planned effectively to do his duty and pay for the wedding. Stubborn as an ox, like many others from his era, he said he would find a way to make things work, his wife didn't know how but there was no stopping him, or so it seemed.

A barbeque catch up with Jeannie's family, lunch was done and a casual sit around the outside table ensued. Uncle Allen was in full song, as were others who had now settled in to finish the catch up with a low fanfare.

The tea in the cups had long since gone lukewarm by the time Uncle Allen reached into his coat pocket. They were huddled in the small, concrete-paved courtyard behind Jeannie's parents' place in Footscray, where the late June wind carried the sharp scent of the nearby river through the gaps in the paling fence.

Jeannie's father, Arthur, sat with his calloused, heavy hands flat on his knees, his face a map of tight, hard-won lines. He was a man who measured his worth by the timber he split and the iron-clad rule of paying bills on the first of the month. When Allen slid the long, heavy cream envelope across the table towards Josh, the resulting silence was louder than the drone of suburban traffic on the asphalt.

'To give the boy a leg up,' Allen remarked, making eye contact with Josh, and then Arthur, with an obligatory nod, his voice dropping into that expansive, easy tone of a man whose bank balance allowed for flourishes. 'Weddings aren't cheap these days, Arthur. There's no shame in letting the family put their collective shoulders to the cart.'

Arthur didn't look at the envelope; he studied his tea instead. His chest rose beneath his flannel shirt, a slow, suppressed swell of suburban pride that had nowhere to go. He had the money, or a decent chunk of it, if he stretched the savings in his bank book, but he lacked the abundance that allowed for such easy gestures.

Later, in the narrow kitchen while the kettle whistled its second round, Jeannie's mother, Martha, didn't spare the rod. She snapped the tea towel against the vinyl bench with a sharp *crack*.

'Dad should have been saving much earlier,' she muttered to Jeannie, her eyes darting toward the back window where Arthur now stood alone by the lemon tree, hands shoved deep into his trousers. 'He knew his daughter would get married someday! Now he'll go about looking like a dog that's been kicked because Allen's tipped in some cash. Mind you, your Uncle Allen has plenty to put in, just ask him, he'll tell you exactly how well he's done out at the concrete works. He likes the giving.'

Josh, sitting on the small vinyl stool near the breadbox, tucked the envelope into his inside jacket pocket. It felt heavy, like an anchor or a debt, despite being a gift. He and Jeannie exchanged a quick look, the private shorthand of two people realizing they were about to build a life out of other people's opinions.

There were heartfelt thank yous and comments made about how it would be put to good use, Allen just smiled and said, 'You're welcome.' Arthur was still silent, not sure what to say and not sure how he felt, humiliated? No not sure, silence ensued. The afternoon capped off nicely with Allen's bold gesture.

The trip home and Jeannie counted the cash, a substantial sum for sure, her dad would cover the rest, and even so there was still a question about 'would it be enough?' The day finished and the work week began.

It was the sort of day that left no mark on the memory, a 'muchness of a muchness' day where the fog hung low over the corrugated-iron roofs and the smell of grease and damp wool coats was thick in the air.

Carriage number 302M, a Harris 'Blue Harris' motor car, had been shunted into the repair bays early that morning. The steel-bodied boxes were notorious for their internal heat and stubborn drafts, but today it was just a collection of mechanical grumbles. The bogey

gangs were already underneath, their heavy spanners clinking against the leaf springs, their voices muffled by the iron underframe.

Josh carried his leather tool bag up the wooden steps into the interior, where the air smelled of stale tobacco and old linoleum. His job was simple: a routine check of the 110-volt DC lighting circuit that had been flickering on the Williamstown line.

'Isolated?' he called out toward the driver's cab.

'Yeah, mate. Dropped the pans myself,' a voice came back, young Billy, the first-year apprentice whose boots were still too clean for the shops. 'All cold.'

Josh nodded, reaching for his pocketknife to strip the cotton insulation off a terminal block. The world was normal. Outside, a steam shunter whistled. Someone laughed three bays over. He reached his left hand behind the panel.

The universe didn't sound like an explosion; it sounded like a high, thin hum that existed inside his own skull before it tore through his chest. It wasn't the killing 1,500-volt traction current, but the heavy, stubborn auxiliary feed that hadn't been grounded.

The current seized him, freezing his muscles into an iron knot and clamping his fingers onto the copper like a vice. His heart fluttered like a trapped bird. For five seconds, he was part of the Victorian Railways electrical grid, his teeth grinding until his jaw cracked.

Then, the sudden, violent convulsion of his own muscles tore him free, throwing him backward off the ladder. *Thump*. Josh hit the floor of the carriage, his head striking the edge of a mahogany bench seat. Outside, the fluorescent tubes gave a strange, blue flicker before straightening out.

When he woke, he wasn't at Newport. He was staring at a crack in the plaster of an unfamiliar ceiling, and his mouth tasted of old pennies. There was a blank memory and now he was in hospital for a while, then rehab, then home.

The union representative, Mick, came to the rehab place a few weeks later, sitting in the chair, while Jeannie made tea with hands that wouldn't stop shaking.

'The lad didn't pull the main isolation link,' Mick remarked, staring at his boots. 'The apprentice. He dropped the pans, but didn't check the back-feed. The boy's green as grass, but the book says he should've been supervised.'

Mick looked up, his eyes heavy. 'The Department wants to call it an 'unfortunate misadventure.' We're calling it a breach. But the doctor says the juice did a number on your nerves Josh. You're not to go near a live board for six months. You're off the tools.'

The rehab unit at Caulfield smelled of boiled cabbage and floor polish. Josh spent his days lifting wooden pegs, his fingers clumsy and numb, like he was wearing thick leather gloves. His words had to be fetched from a long way off.

Jeannie's father drove her down every Thursday in Josh's Corolla. Arthur didn't say much, but he kept his hand firmly on the gearstick, his eyes fixed on the road as if his sheer attention could keep the car from breaking down like the boy had.

One Thursday in October, Jeannie forgot the rent.

She had spent hours by Josh's bed, and by the time she got back to the flat, the sun was well and truly down. Pinned to the front door was a small, torn piece of ledger paper held by a brass tack.

Missed you today, Jeannie. Please see me regarding the balance. – Signor Rossi.

Her stomach dropped. She walked three doors down to his house, her pocketbook clutched against her ribs like a shield. He answered the door, the smell of lamb chops behind him. He held up a hand before she could open her purse.

'Miss Falsgott told me about Josh,' He said softly, taking the payment. 'Tell the lad we're asking after him.'

Josh's parents were there on Sunday. His father, Arthur, fixed a dripping tap while his mother, Vera, sat next to Jeannie, her hand resting on the girl's knee.

'He's our boy, Jeannie,' Vera said, her voice thin but steady. 'But you're the one keeping the roof over him now. We'll take you down on Tuesday. We want to be sure he's got a home that's solid when he comes out.'

When Josh went back to work in 1970, the tools were gone.

They gave him a desk in the Stores Clerk's office, a timber table facing a wall of grease-smudged calendars. The doctor had written *VERY LIGHT DUTIES* in purple ink across his card. Management saw a liability, but the Union roared back: 'You'll keep him on the books until he's sixty-five.'

So Josh sat. He checked part numbers on carbon-paper dockets. His muscle strength never quite came back; a heavy ledger would make his shoulder tremble with a dull, sickening ache. The driving ban lasted four months, and during those months, the dream returned.

It wasn't a nightmare; it was just a place he went. Every morning, he would walk out his front gate, his boots heavy on the footpath. He would sit on the wooden bench under the corrugated iron canopy, holding his ticket between his thumb and forefinger. He just watched the silver Harris trains slide into the platform, their sides gleaming like knives.

Life was flat. The wedding was put off 'until Josh feels more himself.' The dates on the invitations were rewritten by hand in Jeannie's neat script. The world was a series of small, grey squares on a calendar that someone else was turning.

The church was small, and Josh's collar felt too tight. His right hand shook slightly when he slipped the gold band onto Jeannie's finger, but her hand was steady, cool, and dry. They spent their honeymoon in a guest house in Olinda, where the air smelled of wet earth and mountain ash.

They walked in Sherbrooke Forest, the ferns shutting out the sun until the light was the color of old glass in a church. They walked down the timber tracks, their boots sinking into the deep, rotting loam of the forest floor.

'Your mother wants to know when she's going to be a grandmother,' Josh said one afternoon. Jeannie laughed, but it was a short, sharp sound. She was looking at the way his hand rested on his knee, still slightly curled, like he was waiting for the current to hit him again.

'Her hints are louder than a freight train, Josh,' she said. 'She asked if I'd started buying the linen yet. I told her we haven't even got a kitchen table that belongs to us. I don't want anything grand, Josh. Just four walls and a bit of grass where you can sit without hearing the neighbors through the plaster.' Their talk soon turned to houses and how to move forward.

The manager's office at the bank in Footscray had framed prints of sailing ships and a leather blotting pad stained dark blue. Mr. Albright didn't look at Josh; he looked at the numbers through his bifocals.

'The regional branch is being very particular,' Albright said, tapping a ruler. 'A weatherboard in Altona... you're looking at twelve thousand. My director wants to see a twenty-five percent deposit. Most young chaps are taking a second shift, or some side hustle to help grease the wheel.'

'No,' Jeannie said, her voice dropping into that register that reminded Josh of her mother settling a bill. 'Not with Josh's health. We buy what we can afford on what we have. We're not going to kill him for a lounge room in some new estate.'

Albright cleared his throat. 'In that case, you might look at the Housing Commission's rent-to-buy scheme. It gets a lot of people a foot in the door.' Details were sought and the pair now had a new focus.

The Housing Commission office was a cold room with green linoleum. Mrs. Clitheroe slammed her wooden stamp down with rhythmic precision. 'Laverton,' she said. 'Three-bedroom timber-framed brick veneer. Close to the railway line.'

She looked at them, her eyes softening as she noted Josh's careful signature. 'The grass will be long, but they're solid houses. Standard layout. Kitchen, lounge, inside toilet. There are three currently to choose from, she showed them the plans, they picked one.

They drove over to have a look, they had a key to get inside and make sure it was okay. They liked what they saw. They walked down the road. The houses sat on black volcanic soil. Josh stopped at the gate, looking back toward the station. 'It should be an easy walk. Ten minutes, maybe less.'

'It'll do,' Josh said, his voice clearer than it had been in months. He reached out with his right hand, his clumsy hand, and unlatched the wire gate. 'Let's go look at the kitchen.'

The pair were excited, a home of their own eventually, and what a great way to get started. When the minimum rent period was up they could opt to buy the house or move on. The place was cheap at just over \$8500, but it was after all just three bedrooms and one bathroom, no landscaping, therefore the lower price.

They signed up later that day, full of excitement and good cheer. It would be a week for the paperwork to be processed.

The ink was barely dry on the settlement paperwork when Josh claimed his first stake in their new reality. The very next afternoon, he borrowed his father's old petrol mower, a heavy, sputtering beast that smelled of rich oil and cut grass. He spent a few hours merrily taming the overgrown lawns. Over the course of the following week, the pair returned to the empty house like eager ghosts, dropping in during the golden hours of the afternoon. They would cup their hands against the dusty glass of the front windows, peering inside to map out the geography of their future: where the sofa would catch the morning light, and where the television would sit.

It was during one of these window-gazing excursions that they met the neighbours next door, Carol and Arnie Hynes. The encounter was pleasant, punctuated by polite handshakes over a weathered fence line. Years later, looking back, the couple realised they never actually had much to do with the Hynes. Their interactions were strictly seasonal, limited to moments when Arnie would appear at the boundary line bearing arms full of excess silverbeet, stone fruits, and heavy, sun-warmed tomatoes from his prized vegetable patch.

They were inherently nice people; it was simply that the world grew up between them. Over the decades, the saplings in the Hynes' front yard matured into a dense, leafy screen that quietly and completely blocked the two houses from each other's view.

When the actual moving day arrived, the weather refused to cooperate. A persistent, grey rain had turned the driveway, which was still nothing more than a strip of unformed grass, into a slick, muddy bog. Trailing hand-me-down furniture across the threshold became a messy, frustrating test of patience, leaving damp footprints on the bare floorboards.

Amidst the chaos of cardboard boxes, the arrival of Jeannie's parents provided a massive beacon of relief. Backed up to the door was a brand-new Astor refrigerator, its pristine, gleaming finish a stark contrast to their mismatched second-hand belongings. It was a magnificent moving-in present. The tiny, shuddering unit they had used in their old flat was notoriously inefficient, buzzing like a trapped wasp and barely holding a carton of milk. This new appliance saved them a small fortune and a lifetime of kitchen frustration, leaving them profoundly grateful.

The driveway, however, remained a sore point. The promised concrete strip driveway took months of bureaucratic wrangling before the builders even acknowledged it as a

contractual obligation. The dispute bounced back and forth through tedious phone calls and letters, a frustrating exercise in stalling. When the cement mixer finally arrived, the workers laid down just enough twin concrete tracks to reach the rear edge of the house, leaving the rest to imagination.

Beyond the driveway lay a sprawling, blank canvas of a backyard. It was a classic Australian rectangle of stubborn green grass, dominated by the obligatory Hills Hoist clothesline carefully positioned in the center, and a solitary, resilient lemon tree anchoring the back corner.

Seeking security and a sense of completion, Josh and his dad spent a weekend building a sturdy double gate across the wide side of the house to meet the boundary line, mirroring it with a short paling fence on the opposite side. With the latches clicked shut, the backyard felt like a sanctuary. Directly over the rear fence sat a local council park, its brightly painted swings and playground equipment visible through the timber slats.

The first few months unreeled in a blur of warm excitement. The house became a revolving door for friends and family dropping by to inspect the purchase, drink tea out of unpacked mugs, and offer congratulations. Gathering in the half-furnished living room, their peer group would compare notes on mortgage rates, suburbs, and career trajectories. In the optimistic haze of the era, it truly felt as though they were all successfully ‘living the dream.’

One crisp weekend, Todd dropped in after visiting his parents. Sitting on a packing crate with a cold beer, Todd shared his own professional victories. He, too, was now actively scanning the real estate pages, eager to find a patch of earth to call his own.

The domestic rhythm soon shifted permanently when Jeannie discovered she was pregnant. Blessed with good health and a fierce work ethic, she pushed through the fatigue, working right up until a month before her due date. Together, they converted the spare bedroom into a nursery, a rite of passage for young couples of the time. Jeannie chose a palette of soft, neutral creams and beige. Her logic was practical and time-honoured: if the baby was a girl, she could easily layer in pink accents; if it was a boy, blue accents would do the trick.

Fortune favoured their budget when Jeannie’s older cousin offered up a suite of second-hand nursery furniture at a fraction of retail price. It was solid, beautifully preserved

timber that saved them from buying new while still looking immaculate under the soft nursery light.

The big day arrived with a sudden, chaotic shift in weather. It was a frantic, nerve-wracking dawn marked by sharp twinges of pain and the heavy weight of the unknown. There were anxious, hurried calls to the maternity ward, with midwives offering calm, clinical explanations of what to expect next. A frustrating false start to the contractions kept them pacing the hallway, but after a second frantic phone call, the hospital gave the green light.

Josh bundled Jeannie into the car just as a torrential downpour unleashed against the windscreen. What followed was a grueling, exhausting twelve-hour labour at the hospital. Josh paced the linoleum floors of the waiting room, channeling his nervous energy into the hospital payphone, excitedly dialing grandparents and close friends with erratic updates. Finally, the rain outside gave way to the sharp, clear cry of new life. Rowena Jane Banks was born.

It was a monumental day, etched deeply into their memories. Later, in the quiet sanctuary of the recovery room, the storm outside had passed. Josh stood by the bedside, looking down lovingly at Jeannie's exhausted, smiling face and the tiny, swaddled bundle cradled against her chest. A wave of profound responsibility and warmth washed over him. He smiled quietly to himself, a single, comforting thought echoing in his mind: *There's a glimmer of hope yet.*

Chapter Six

The first week of motherhood descended on the household in a blur of flannel wrapped pressure and broken sleep. Jeannie's mother moved into the spare room immediately, establishing a quiet, efficient command centre in the kitchen. For Josh, her presence was a lifeline. Exhausted by the unfamiliar, high-pitched rhythm of newborn cries, he was profoundly grateful for the hours of uninterrupted sleep her vigil permitted.

By week two, the dynamic shifted into a delicate, tactical dance. Jeannie's mother transitioned to visiting every second day, a routine that inevitably collided with visits from Josh's mother. The small house became a stage for mid-century maternal diplomacy. Both

grandmothers patrolled the living room with an anxious desire to help, while actively trying not to cross paths, overlap chores, or offer conflicting advice.

Jeannie, however, was determined to do things by the book, specifically, *Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care*. As a self-styled modern mother of 1973, she clung to its pages like a manual for survival. This created a subtle but constant friction between her progressive, literature-backed methods and the instinctual, old-school traditions of the older generation. Every routine, from feeding intervals to swaddling techniques, became a quiet negotiation between past and present. Yet, against the odds, the shared trial of the newborn phase forged an unexpected alliance. Jeannie and Josh emerged from the initial fog not just as exhausted parents, but with a deeper, more resilient friendship than they had ever shared before.

By late 1973, at twenty-seven, Jeannie found herself fully initiated into the ranks of the stay-at-home mothers. In this era, society dictated a clear cultural blueprint: a mother surrendered her career to dedicate the formative years, often up to seven years, until the child was well into primary school. Initially, a wave of profound relief washed over her. She was glad to leave the daily grind of her workplace behind.

But the romanticised vision of the modern housewife soon dissolved against the harsh geometry of a single-income ledger. The reality of depleted savings hit the household with sudden force. Monthly bills that had once been paid effortlessly on a dual income now required stressful mathematical juggling. The house itself seemed to grow colder as the margins tightened; the uninsulated walls offered no protection against the bone-deep chill of a Victorian winter, leaving Jeannie to huddle in a faded cardigan that never quite held the heat. It was one thing to philosophise about staying at home while working a typewriter in an office; it was another thing entirely to live the stark financial contraction of it, where every meal carried the thin, metallic taste of generic tinned soup and cheap, filler-heavy sausages.

Jeannie vividly recalled lunchtime chats with her former female colleagues. They had spoken of leaving work to raise children in glowing, cinematic terms: the modern mother elegantly pushing a pram through shopping arcades, dropping a well-dressed toddler off at kindergarten, and enjoying a golden afternoon of personal freedom.

They failed to mention the baseline requirement for that fantasy: a high, bulletproof single income. For the average suburban family, the reality was vastly different. It was during this era that the Australian idiom 'Struggle Street' truly cemented itself in the cultural vocabulary. The image of the blissfully happy mother swanning about her pristine suburban

neighborhood was, Jeannie realised with growing cynicism, nothing more than pure marketing hype. In the afternoons, the house fell into an oppressive and static silence, broken only by the hum of an aging refrigerator and the rhythmic ticking of a clock that seemed to mock the hours she spent in solitude.

The daily mechanics of infant care, the infinite loop of playing, cleaning, dressing, nap times, and feeding schedules, began to feel less like building a life and more like managing a factory line. Moments of sharp dismay and irrational annoyance began to puncture Jeannie's days. By 4:00 PM, she would find herself watching the clock, waiting desperately for Josh's boots to hit the front porch. When he arrived, she would hand over the baby and retreat to a chair, sitting in absolute, motionless silence just to feel the absence of demand.

She felt a deep, unspoken gratitude for Josh's immediate compliance. He seemed to intuitively understand her depletion. She suspected that his time in rehabilitation had given him a firsthand understanding of psychological burnout and the vital necessity of a structured break. Though they never explicitly discussed it, he automatically stepped into the primary parent role the moment he walked through the door, letting her drift into the background.

But when the weather turned dour, trapping her inside beneath grey, low-hanging skies, Jeannie would sink into a heavy melancholy. The quiet house allowed her mind to wander backward into old pockets of inadequacy. Somatic reminders of her struggle manifested as a persistent tightness in her chest, a physical knot of anxiety that flared whenever the mailman's whistle signaled the arrival of more white envelopes. Banal daily routines gave way to sharp flashbacks of her school days, particularly her struggles with mathematics. She could still see the chalkboard, still feel the frustration of a teacher trying their best to explain concepts that simply looked like a jumbled mess to her.

The most painful memory always surfaced with a specific, burning shame. She had been away from school with a severe cold for a week. On her first day back, she walked straight into a complex classroom discussion on social ethics. 'So Jeannie,' the teacher had asked, turning to her in front of thirty peers, 'what do you know about euthanasia?' Jeannie, entirely unfamiliar with the word and guessing wildly based on phonetics, replied earnestly, 'I guess the youth in Asia might not have some of the sorts of things that we have...'

The classroom then erupted into cruel, breathless teenage laughter. The teacher's stern directive to 'See me at the end of this class!' had felt like a death sentence. Even though their subsequent chat on the way to the next class cleared up the misunderstanding, with the

teacher apologising for the ambush, the damage to her self-esteem was permanent. Now, years later, these old memories would arrive uninvited at the most inopportune times, eroding her confidence. If she passed a group of teenage girls giggling outside a local cinema, a cold spike of anxiety would hit her chest, convincing her that she was the target of their mockery. It was rarely true, but her psyche wrote the script anyway.

Pushing the heavy pram down the sometimes cracked suburban footpaths toward the local shopping strip to pay the gas bill, Jeannie felt the physical weight of her new life. Every step carried a heavy sense of fatigue, an amplified gravity that pulled at her shoulders. On one of these local trips, her mother dropped by unannounced, instantly noticing Jeannie's hollow eyes and dishevelled clothing. Without a word of judgment, her mother bundled her into the car and drove her to the local salon for a haircut and a 'freshen up.'

Her mother's generation lived by a strict, unyielding mantra: a woman must always remain 'clean, neat, and tidy' to maintain her dignity. Jeannie did her best to comply, trying to project the image of a fashionable, modern woman, but the effort was exhausting. It became increasingly clear that the 'modern lifestyle' sold in women's weekly magazines was an expensive illusion.

Recognising the toll it was taking, Josh would occasionally slide a few extra dollars from his weekly pay packet across the kitchen table, telling her to use it to 'top up her looks.' While Jeannie appreciated the kindness of the gesture, it carried a bitter aftertaste. A quiet, defensive voice in her head wondered if he had noticed that her youth and vibrancy were fading before her own self-awareness could catch up. When meeting her friends for a rare cup of tea, she found herself seeking validation, asking with tentative vulnerability, 'Do I look okay?'

This insecurity fed into a toxic cycle of domestic guilt. Because Josh was out earning the bread, she felt an immense pressure to be the perfect homemaker. If her mood dipped into that dark, captive space she associated with a black dog tied up on a heavy chain, her limbs would grow leaden, turning the simple act of standing into a monumental effort. Folding the endless mountains of white terry-towelling nappies and hanging the washing became dragging tasks that left her fingers numb from the biting coastal air.

She would fall into a paralyzed state of mind: *I should do this, but I won't right now... not that I can't... but I'll just sit for a bit.* This procrastination inevitably resulted in a frantic,

high-anxiety rush at 4:30 PM, running through the house to make everything *look* as though she had been productive all day before Josh pulled into the driveway.

On rare, unpredictable mornings, the chemistry in her brain would shift. She would wake at dawn with a clear mind and a surge of energy. Before Josh had even finished his breakfast, she would have a load of washing spinning in the machine, the ironing board set up in the lounge room, and the breakfast dishes soaking in hot suds. By lunchtime, the house would be immaculate, floors vacuumed, lines of washing baking in the sun, and the kitchen gleaming. But because these high-efficiency days were few and far between, they ultimately fed back into her guilt, serving as a frustrating reminder of the standard she felt she failed to meet on the ordinary, heavy days.

By 1974, domestic negotiations turned toward practical assets. Josh's sedan was pushing eight years old. It was a reliable machine that had served them well through their youth, but with a pram, a bassinet, and baby gear, its limitations were becoming obvious. Josh began talking enthusiastically about buying something larger to accommodate their growing family. Jeannie listened to his grand plans with a knot of anxiety in her stomach. From her vantage point at the kitchen ledger, she knew Josh often struggled to grasp the difference between their actual bank balance and his optimistic financial projections.

To compromise and eliminate the mounting costs of registration and insurance, they made a radical decision: they traded in both of their individual vehicles to become a single-car household. They soon drove home in a brand-new, white Toyota Corolla. It was compact but efficiently designed, and the salesman assured them it was 'bulletproof'—a utilitarian vehicle for a new era of budgeting.

At the exact same time, the Australian financial landscape shifted beneath their feet with the launch of BankCard in 1974. Suddenly, credit was no longer a formal loan negotiated in a bank manager's office; it arrived directly in the mail. For young couples on 'Struggle Street,' the temptation was immense.

Jeannie watched with concern as the bank automatically increased their credit limit every few months without asking. The system seemed designed to reward spending with more debt, creating a high-interest trap that could snap shut in the blink of an eye.

Finances quickly became the primary friction point in their marriage. Their arguments exposed a deep philosophical divide: Josh viewed money through the lens of wants, future

potential, and immediate lifestyle upgrades, while Jeannie, managed by the daily reality of the grocery bill, viewed it through the lens of survival and immediate household needs.

Yet, their arguments followed a familiar, predictable path. For Josh, the heat of a financial disagreement was always the prelude to a specific kind of domestic resolution. He looked forward to the emotional vulnerability of the makeup, the whispered apologies, the shedding of defensive walls, and the intense, quiet intimacy in the dark warmth of their bedroom afterward. And every time, just as the tension fully melted away, Jeannie would shift her head against the pillow, look toward the nursery door, and whisper the final, definitive rule of their modern lives:

'Shoosh, Josh! You'll wake the baby.'

Chapter Seven

It was 1975 Josh is now 29. The arrival of Chris changed the geometry of the house. With a toddler and a newborn, the small rooms felt narrower, thick with the smell of drying cloth nappies, baby powder, and old floor wax. The family of four was officially complete, a milestone that brought a brief flash of pride, quickly swallowed by the sheer logistics of survival. If money had been tight before, it now felt like a physical constriction, a cold dread of unpaid bills that sat like a stone in the pit of Jeannie's stomach every time the sun began to set.

Then came the little piece of plastic in the mail: Jeannie's first Bankcard. It arrived like an unexpected guest, slick and shiny, bearing a modest line of credit that felt, initially, like an inheritance. In the first few weeks, the convenience was intoxicating. She could glide through the supermarket checkout without that familiar, cold knot of dread in her stomach, no longer forced to mentally add up the pennies before reaching the cashier. But a few months later, the first real winter wind blew through the letterbox. Unfolding the statement under the dim light of the kitchen hum, Jeannie stared at the figures. There it was, spelled out in sterile blue ink: the interest charge. It wasn't just a fee; it was a penalty for breathing room she hadn't actually earned.

A quiet panic set in. Jeannie made a solemn, private vow to pay the balance down to zero and banish the card to the dark recesses of her vinyl handbag, reserved strictly for 'emergencies.' Yet, the definition of an emergency began to shift and warp in her mind. *Was a leaking hot water service an emergency? Obviously. What about a pair of school shoes for the eldest with soles worn down to the cardboard? Probably. What about a roast piece of meat to keep up appearances when her parents visited?* The boundaries blurred. To protect the fragile ecosystem of their marriage, she kept the Bankcard well away from Josh's sight, sliding the monthly statements beneath the floral lining of the dresser drawer like contraband.

The domestic landscape fractured further when the axe fell at the rail yard. Staffing cutbacks, the bureaucrats called it. For Josh, it was a sudden, jarring expulsion from the rhythm of the tracks. He returned home with a redundancy payout, a lump sum that looked impressive on paper but carried a terrifying finality. For six months, they lived off those fading savings. Jeannie, operating with the sharp calculation of a wartime treasurer, seized the opportunity. Rather than just offering the minimum monthly remittance, she aggressively funneled bits of the payout into the Bankcard account, quietly forcing the debt down to a manageable whisper.

She took a grim satisfaction in controlling the purse strings. Because she wasn't working a formal job, the burden of managing the domestic economy naturally fell to her. It was far easier to shield Josh from the ugly mechanics of the bills. For Josh, the system was simple and blissfully abstract: he knew there were funds because the lights stayed on. When his wallet grew light, he merely had to ask, and Jeannie would seamlessly slip off to the bank, returning to top up the growing void in his leather wallet with crisp notes. She was the magician; he was the audience.

Initially, having Josh around the house during the week was an unexpected novelty. He was helpful, taking over the heavy chore of pushing the petrol mower through the thick grass on Tuesday mornings instead of weekends. Jeannie occasionally worried he might notice the repetitive, invisible nature of her days, the endless wiping of benches and folding of small clothes, and conclude she didn't do much at all. But Josh's mind was elsewhere. The novelty quickly decayed into lethargy. Soon, he was sleeping past dawn, his heavy snoring echoing down the hallway of the uninsulated house while Jeannie was already up with the sunrise, her breath visible in the frigid kitchen air as she tended to the baby, washing bottles in water that never seemed hot enough to cut the grease.

After a few months of this forced 'holiday,' the walls began to close in on Josh. The realisation that he needed to find work didn't hit him like a lightning bolt, but rather like a slow, damp chill. He had always assumed employment was a revolving door. All his mates seemed to flit from one job to another with casual ease, changing shirts and joining new crews without an ounce of sweat. Surely it would be the same for him. But the landscape of 1975 was shifting. Prospective employers looked at the six-month crater in his work history with immediate suspicion. To them, a gap in a man's resume wasn't a misfortune; it was a character flaw, regardless of redundancy letters.

The logistics of his job hunt triggered a cold war over their single vehicle. The morning walk to the train station became a strategic negotiation. If Josh took the car, Jeannie and two infant children were marooned in the suburbs. The arguments were sharp, repetitive, and masked as practical concerns.

'What if the kids get sick, Josh? What if I need to get to the clinic?'

'Well, what if a company calls me for an interview across town? Am I supposed to walk there?'

Jeannie always won. She had a precise, devastating negotiation tactic: a subtle tilt of her head to the left, paired with a sudden softening of her gaze. It caught Josh off guard every time. It was the silent herald of the freeze. If he pushed past that head tilt, he knew he would be met with a dense, impenetrable wall of silence that could last for days. Josh loathed the silence; it made him feel invisible in his own home. Whenever he tried to call her on it, Jeannie would smoothly deny it, offering a cool, logical defense: 'I'm not giving you the silent treatment, Josh. I simply have nothing to say, and I am incredibly busy with the children.' But Josh knew the truth. The silence was a ledger, and he was always in the red.

Deprived of the car, Josh's train trips took on a heavy, distinct banality. He wasn't commuting to a purpose anymore; he was chasing a ghost. The local Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) office was located a couple of suburbs away in Werribee, requiring a mid-morning journey that lacked the frantic energy of the early rush hour. As his internal discontent hardened, the Victorian weather seemed to mimic his mood. The sky turned the color of wet slate, dropping low, doom-ridden clouds over the flat plains of the western suburbs.

The off-peak train carriages were mostly empty, populated only by elderly women with vinyl shopping jeeps or people traveling to dental appointments. The short line of stations toward Werribee provided a dull, rhythmic punctuation to his anxiety. Inside the welfare office, the environment was suffocating, smelling of wet wool and floor disinfectant. The large job boards, usually pinned with index cards detailing vacancies, were starkly bare. The queue of applicants moved with a listless, heavy-footed shuffle. With each passing week, the people in line seemed to grow more dishevelled, their collars fraying, their eyes losing focus in a static cloud of hopelessness.

One afternoon, the oppressive quiet was broken by a young girl at the front of the queue. Her voice cracked with a mixture of rage and helplessness as she confronted the clerk behind the counter. 'I haven't got a car!' she yelled, slamming a green slip of paper on the wood. 'No bike, either. And there isn't a bus within three miles of that factory! Did you honestly think it was alright to give me this referral?'

The clerk didn't look up, his fingers already reaching for the next file. The girl stormed out, the glass doors rattling behind her. A collective, uneasy shuffle went through the queue as the room adjusted to her departure.

'Next,' the clerk droned. The line dragged itself forward one pace. Josh stepped up, his throat dry.

He survived on scraps. Occasionally, short-term labor would emerge, a couple of days helping a shopkeeper assemble shelving for a new storefront, or a three-week stint in a drafty warehouse handling the chaotic inventory of the upcoming Christmas rush. Josh became the 'go-to guy' for these fleeting, casual gigs. He was highly adaptable and never complained, provided the work didn't involve heavy lifting that risked his back, or the high-volume stress of a production line. He was reliable, but he was temporary.

Eventually, even the scraps dried up. The tired woman behind the Werribee counter looked at his sporadic record and gave him a blunt piece of advice: 'It's time to go on the dole, love.'

The words felt like a physical blow. Applying for unemployment benefits, the dole, was a threshold Josh had sworn he would never cross. It carried a deep, mid-seventies stigma of failure, a public admission that he could not sustain his own household. But desperation has a

way of eroding pride. He reluctantly signed the paperwork, his hand trembling slightly against the counter.

In these dark hours, Josh's mind did exactly what Jeannie's did during her worst moments: it dug up the graves of past humiliations. Sitting on the train home, the rhythmic clack of the tracks became a background track to his oldest failures. He remembered the schoolyard bullies who had cornered him behind the bicycle sheds; the agonising burning in his cheeks when a primary school teacher caught him out for not understanding a long-division lesson; the sharp, dismissive whistles of the junior football coaches when he dropped an easy mark. He remembered how his weekend mates would make him the butt of their jokes at the milk bar, and how, on the rare occasions he tried to turn the joke around and mock someone else for being stupid, it would backfire instantly, resulting in a shove into the dirt or a hard punch to the shoulder. He had always been the one who took the hits. Now, the system was hitting him, too.

To celebrate his thirtieth birthday, they escaped the house. It was a military operation of sorts, bundling two children, a wicker basket of tomato-and-onion sandwiches, a tartan rug, and folding chairs into the Corolla, heading down toward the coast. For once, the erratic Victorian weather relented. The day was calm, bathed in a soft, golden warmth without the blistering heat that usually turned the beach into an oven. Josh stood near the tideline, watching the small waves lap at his toes. He remembered too many childhood trips here that had been ruined by howling southerly winds, sand stinging his legs and invading the buttered bread. Today was just kind.

His parents joined them, their arrival marked by his father's loud, booming hello that carried across the foreshore. They bought ice creams from the weatherboard milk bar across the road, and for an hour or two, the air was full of easy laughter about old family misadventures while the children dug holes in the damp sand.

But the reprieve was brief. As the afternoon cooled, his father leaned back in his canvas chair. 'So, Josh,' he asked, his eyes scanning the horizon. 'Any decent prospects on the horizon? Anything solid?'

'Nope,' Josh said, his voice flat. He kept his eyes on his son's plastic bucket.

His mother shook her head, her brow furrowing with genuine, uncomprehending frustration. In her world, a man who wanted to work simply walked into a factory and started

the next shift. 'I just don't understand it, Joshua,' she said, smoothing her skirt. 'Everyone else's boys seem to find work with no trouble at all. Are you sure you aren't being a bit too particular about what you'll take?' She turned her gaze to Jeannie, her voice dropping to a sympathetic, probing pitch. 'And how are you holding up with all this, dear?'

Jeannie adjusted her sunglasses, her face hardening into a flawless, polite mask. 'We're managing okay, thank you.' They all played their parts, maintaining the fragile facade of a family having a lovely day out. After all, a man only turns thirty once. You don't ruin the cake with the truth.

But behind the sunglasses, Jeannie's thoughts were curdling. Looking at Josh as he struggled to fly a cheap plastic kite for the children, a cold, systemic realization settled deep into her bones: *She had married her father.*

The structural similarities were undeniable. Josh possessed the exact same stubborn pride, the same absolute certainty that his worldview was correct, the same knack for missing golden opportunities, and the same frustrating habit of making foolish, preventable blunders. Her father was the kind of man who would measure twice, cut once, and still manage to drill a hole two inches out of alignment during a home renovation, leaving a permanent scar in the timber. Josh, it seemed, was cut from the very same cloth. The only difference was that fortune had favored her father a little more regularly.

Later that afternoon, while the men were packing the boot of the car, Jeannie confessed this revelation to Vera as they folded the damp towels. She didn't even look up from her neat creases. 'I saw that from the moment he walked into our lounge room, dear,' she said, her voice dry as tinder. 'Just like your father. Still... I married your father, and despite everything, it's been a good life. We still have our love.'

Her father, a man of slight frame but immense quiet authority, walked over and caught the end of the conversation. He placed a small, calloused hand on Jeannie's shoulder. 'Josh extended his hand to you in marriage, Jeannie,' he said softly, his voice carrying the old-fashioned weight of his generation. 'You accepted it. Now you have your lot.'

Your lot. The phrase tasted like ash. Jeannie realized then that the romantic myths of her girlhood, the beautiful, seamless domesticity she had seen in women's magazines, were nothing but a cruel trick. The reality of marriage and motherhood wasn't an elevation; it was a

slow, grinding wearing-down of a person's spirit. It was a tax you paid in daily increments of survival.

Vera nodded in grim solidarity. 'It's your destiny, love. Whatever dreams you had when you were twenty, they're different now. Welcome to change, and let me tell you, it isn't always a pretty thing to look at. Some people are handed an easy life on a silver platter, and others have to scratch it out of the dirt. This one is yours.'

Josh walked up behind them then, his arms full of folding chairs. He stopped a few paces away, his boots sinking into the dry grass, his presence unnoticed as his mother delivered her final verdict to Jeannie.

'He's a perfect mirror to your father, you know,' she whispered, her voice carrying clearly on the cool evening breeze. 'Tarred with the exact same repulsive brush. Every single breath seems to be a struggle for him, and there isn't one blessed thing you can do to alter his nature. It's an absolute mercy I was able to retain my own job all these years, Jeannie, otherwise things in our house would have been very difficult indeed.'

The words went through Josh like a shard of glass. His chest tightened, a profound, suffocating heartbreak blooming behind his ribs. But he didn't drop the chairs, and he didn't stir the pot. He stood there, frozen, hiding his sullenness and the sudden, hot sting of tears behind a stoic, unmoving expression. He refused to let them see him as weak. He refused to confirm their low opinion of him. More than anything, he wanted to break out of this cage. He wanted to live a bigger, grander life, free from the heavy shackles of generational discontent that these women seemed so eager to drape over his shoulders. He wanted his wife and his children to look at him and see a provider, strong, competent, and unassailable. But as he watched Jeannie turn her head away, reality seemed to look back at him with a smug, knowing grin.

The rescue arrived from an unexpected quarter. In early September, a mate from his old cricket club put him in touch with Tim, a local domestic electrician who needed an extra pair of hands. At first, the arrangement was frustratingly sporadic, a day here, a half-day there, depending on how many foundations were being poured in the rapid housing developments expanding across the outer suburbs. But as spring took hold, the building boom accelerated, and the work solidified into a reliable, full-time routine.

The logistics were mercifully simple. Tim lived only a few blocks over, driving a battered commercial van smelling of copper wire, old tobacco, and meat pies. Every morning at 6:30 AM sharp, the horn would honk outside, and Josh would step out into the crisp air, lunchbox in hand. Tim always picked him up, saving their family car for Jeannie and the kids. Only on rare occasions, when Tim had to run early quotes on the other side of the city, did Josh have to drive himself.

The labor itself was uncomplicated, lacking the heavy psychological pressure of the rail yard or the bureaucratic misery of the Werribee queue. They worked mostly in new timber-framed houses, the skeleton structures of the suburban dream rising out of the clay plots. Josh's job was straightforward: he walked through the frame with a pouch of insulated staples and a hammer, running thick gray cables through the drilled holes in the pine studs. Once the plasterboards went up, he would follow behind, performing the basic fit-outs, stripping the plastic casing with his pliers and screwing the white plastic switches and powerpoints into the wall mounts.

Tim handled all the technical elements, the switchboards, the live connections, and the actual testing of the circuits. For Josh, it was just a rhythm. He liked the smell of the fresh pine shavings underfoot, the steady *tap-tap* of his hammer, and the simple satisfaction of a wire pulled straight and true. For the first time in over a year, his hands were busy, his wallet had a steady pulse, and when he returned home in the evening, the silence in the kitchen wasn't quite as loud.

The transition to kindergarten felt like a sharp dividing line in the house, it was now 1977. Josh's mother, watching the chaotic morning routine, remarked dryly that she wasn't entirely sure who was more thrilled about day one, Jeannie or five-year-old Rowena.

'Jeannie is counting down the minutes for a sliver of peace,' his mother chuckled, adjusting Rowena's oversized uniform. 'Even with little Chris to contend with.'

But they all knew Chris was a different breed of child. At two years old, he was the placid anchor of the household. He was perfectly content spending hours on a rug by the crackling fire, methodically stacking blocks or driving toy cars across the hearth. Rowena, however, had spent her toddlerhood operating like an escape artist. She was a tiny storm of curiosity, opening high cupboards, testing door handles, and heading straight down the

driveway toward the big, wide, wonderful world the second anyone left the front latch loose. Kindergarten was not just school; it was a broader canvas for her restless energy.

The quiet in the house shifted when Josh finally secured full-time hours with the local electrician. The steady work felt like a lifeline after months of scraping by. Coming home on his first full-salaried Friday, Josh dropped his tool bag by the door, walked into the kitchen, and slid a week's worth of cash onto the laminate table.

He looked at Jeannie, a tired but genuine smile cracking his worn face. 'There you go, kid,' he said softly, wrapping his arms around her waist from behind. 'That's a glimmer of hope. They don't happen often around here, but there you go... hold onto it.'

The hope, however, was expensive. It cost Josh his health.

By the time October came around, the relentless physical labour and the suffocating weight of lingering but often minor debts caught up to him. Jeannie watched him deteriorate. He woke up exhausted, his eyes bloodshot from lack of sleep. His doctor warned him about dangerously high blood pressure, and a sharp, chronic pain in his lower back made even climbing out of the van a slow, agonizing process. The physical ailments were compounded by a heavy, invisible fog of financial anxiety that made his chest tight.

By mid-month, his body broke down. Not by choice, Josh had to swallow his pride and cut his hours back to part-time, working just three days a week. The sudden drop in income brought the familiar, suffocating stress right back into the kitchen.

One unseasonably warm Saturday afternoon, the weight of his stalled professional career seemed to crush Josh entirely. The kids were outside, their distant laughter echoing from the back lawn. Inside, the house was intensely quiet. Josh and Jeannie sat face-to-face at the small dining table. In front of him sat a condensation-beaded bottle of beer; in front of her, a mug of black tea that had gone lukewarm.

Josh stared into his drink, his voice dropping into a flat, painful register. He looked up, meeting Jeannie's eyes. 'I still think about what mother said,' he whispered, the words tasting like poison. 'About you marrying your father. About being tarred with the same repulsive brush.'

An uncomfortably sharp, awkward silence blanketed the room. The grandfather clock ticked in the hallway, suddenly deafening. Jeannie squirmed in her vinyl chair, shifting her weight, looking down at her hands to avoid the raw vulnerability in his face.

Before she could pull away entirely, Josh reached across the table. He took both of her hands in a firm, warm, and fiercely loving hold, forcing her to stay anchored to him.

'I love you, Jeannie,' he said, his voice trembling but resolute. 'I don't want to do anything, *anything*, to make our lives a misery. I really don't. I just want you and me to be the best we can be, given the circumstances. I want our love to be strong. Promise me you want the same?'

Jeannie looked up. Her eyes were glistening with unshed tears, her lower lip quivering as she tried to swallow the lump in her throat. She couldn't find the words.

Just then, the flyscreen door banged open. Rowena burst inside, her knees grass-stained, bringing the bright scent of the outdoors with her. Sensing the heavy gravity in the room, the little girl paused. Without a word, Josh and Jeannie opened their arms wide, pulling Rowena into the space between them and wrapping her into a tight, three-way embrace.

Jeannie buried her face in her daughter's dusty hair, her voice thick and low. 'Hey, lovely girl... come and get a hug.'

They held the embrace for a long time, the three of them swaying slightly. A few tears finally escaped Jeannie's eyes, wetting Rowena's shoulder.

Rowena pulled back slightly, looking up with wide, innocent eyes. 'What sort of tears are those, Mummy?'

Jeannie wiped her cheek with the back of her hand, forcing a watery, tender smile. 'Happy tears, Rowie. Just happy tears.'

Despite the tighter budget, Jeannie secretly relished the days Josh was home on his part-time schedule. He took over the kindergarten run, gladly dropping Rowena off and picking her up in the afternoons, giving Jeannie a true respite.

Because the truth was, Jeannie was drowning in a deep, bone-weary fatigue that frightened her.

It started with small slip-ups. One rainy Tuesday, Josh was at work, and Jeannie sat down on the sofa while Chris played quietly on the floor. She drifted off. She woke up with a jolt to the sharp, piercing ring of the telephone.

She snatched the receiver. 'Hello?'

'Hi, Jeannie, it's the kindergarten,' the polite voice on the other end said, trying to sound casual. 'Just a quick reminder, Rowena is still here in the foyer.'

Panic, hot and sharp, flooded Jeannie's veins. 'Oh my goodness, I am so sorry! I'm on my way!'

She threw her coat on, grabbed Chris, and endured a mad, humiliating rush across town to retrieve her daughter. When she arrived, breathless and apologetic, she noticed with a small sigh of relief that she wasn't the only mother there with a child 'left behind.' A few other flustered parents were offering the same desperate excuses to the staff.

It happened more than once. Jeannie never told Josh about the missed pickups; the shame of it was a private wake-up call. She loved her children fiercely, but the physical and mental exhaustion of their life was catching up to her.

She began to rely on naps. Sometimes they were short, ten-minute 'nanna naps' that barely cleared the cobwebs. Other times, they turned into deep, heavy, two-hour slumbers that felt utterly delicious but left her disoriented when she woke up.

Every time she overslept, she would panic and look for the baby. But she would always find Chris in the exact same spot, blissfully parked in front of the TV, bathed in the glowing orange light of the heater. He hadn't moved an inch, entirely content with his toys, completely unaware of the quiet storms passing over his family.

Chapter Eight

It's 1978 Josh is now 32, The transition from weekly rent receipts to a monthly mortgage booklet felt less like a milestone and more like a closing trap. On paper, the

numbers matched. In reality, the financial margins of their lives vanished overnight. The bank demanded its pound of flesh on the first of the month, unyielding and indifferent to the rhythm of their paychecks. The house itself began to feel like a living debt; the drafty windows rattled in the wind, a constant reminder of the insulation they couldn't afford, letting the damp Melbourne air settle into their very bones.

Then came the white envelopes from the local council and the water board. Having never owned property, the quarterly rates hit them like a hidden tax on existence. Every drop of water through the tap and every bin cleared from the kerb now carried a specific, compounding cost. Jeannie stared at the bills on the kitchen table, her small savings cushion evaporating under the weight of municipal demands they had never factored into their dreams of ownership.

Physical reality caught up with Josh that winter. The dull ache in his lower back, a long-standing souvenir of heavy lifting, culminated in a sharp, blinding snap while shifting a concrete wash-trough. The diagnosis was vague but debilitating: a chronic disc injury that meant the end of manual labour. He was fitted with a heavy, canvas back brace with steel stays that laced tight around his torso like a corset. It kept him upright but turned his movements stiff and robotic.

Through an acquaintance, he managed to secure a role inside the cavernous, drafty depot of a major electrical service firm. He was moved away from the tools and placed behind a laminate desk in the appliance repair division. His days were now consumed by the relentless ringing of telephones, the metallic tang of lukewarm office tea, and the constant shuffling of carbon-copy repair dockets. The static nature of desk work bred its own stiffness, a physical manifestation of his shrinking world. Physiotherapy offered the only real relief, but at several pounds a session, the treatments were treated as an occasional luxury they could rarely afford, leaving him to manage the constant, throbbing pulse of pain in silence.

The emotional toll of his injury surfaced at the local park. Sitting on a weathered timber bench, encased in his brace, Josh watched other fathers hoist their children onto their shoulders or chase soccer balls across the grass. The inability to roughhouse with Chris and Rowena left a bitter taste in his mouth.

He was so consumed by his own physical limitations that he failed to notice Jeannie's emotional absence. She didn't play with the children either; she merely co-ordinated them. While Josh brooded on the bench, Chris played quietly in the dirt, but Rowena ran wild. She

gravitated toward the ancient, gnarled sugar gums lining the park boundary. Rowena was fearless, scaling branches that made other parents gasp. She possessed a fierce, restless energy and an adventurous streak that her older brother entirely lacked.

Now well into 1979 Josh is 33, the year dissolved into a frantic choreography of school gates. Chris started kindergarten, which should have granted Jeannie a reprieve, but the staggered hours created a logistical nightmare. Her days were fractured into two-hour blocks, spent walking back and forth between the primary school and the kindergarten centre.

Any moment she carved out to sit down and 'take a breather' felt illusory. The kitchen clock became a tyrant. By the time the kettle boiled, it was already time to lace up shoes and head back out into the weather. One breath started precisely as another ended, an endless, exhausting loop of domestic maintenance that offered no time for her own thoughts to settle.

Rowena's entry into primary school exposed the first real fractures between the family's insular world and the broader community. The playground was a harsh ecosystem. Rowena returned home with confusing reports of social dynamics she couldn't master. She complained that the boys were feral, spending their recesses pushing, shoving, and striking each other with heavy sticks.

Her classroom environment offered little comfort. Her teacher, Miss Vicki, was an old-school disciplinarian who barked commands with military precision. Rowena, who operated on her own internal timeline, found the sharp directives terrifying and difficult to process, often freezing under the teacher's gaze.

The girls were a different kind of cruel. At recess, they gathered in tight circles, trading plastic dolls and branded toys that Rowena had never seen. The family finances meant her own toys were wooden blocks, library books, or second-hand trinkets. When she tried to join the circles, the other girls spoke a social dialect based on consumer items she had no access to. Left on the outer, Rowena spent her lunch breaks sometimes wandering the perimeter fence alone.

For Jeannie, watching Rowena navigate this isolation triggered old, dormant memories of her own childhood, the sharp, distinct sting of being the outcast, of watching the popular children move in effortless synchronisation while she stood apart. Rowena was a beautiful child, always sent to school in clean, meticulously ironed uniforms with her hair neatly braided. She spoke clearly and politely. Yet, there was an intangible barrier, a subtle

difference in her intensity that other children detected immediately and exploited to isolate her.

Grade One brought structured homework, and with it, nightly battles at the kitchen table. Jeannie sat with Rowena, attempting to guide her through simple reading lists and basic arithmetic sheets. The sessions were fraught with tension. Jeannie, knowing the answers instantly, could not fathom the cognitive leap her daughter was failing to make. Prodding turned to impatience, and impatience turned to mutual frustration.

The underlying tension exploded on a Tuesday afternoon with a phone call from the school administration. Rowena had scaled a large tree in the main courtyard during lunch and had allegedly pushed a classmate from the upper branches. The child had fallen several feet, escaping fractures but suffering severe shock and abrasions.

Jeannie walked into the Principal's office to find Rowena sitting stubbornly on a vinyl chair, her chin set high. When asked for her account, Rowena simply shrugged. 'The kid had no idea how to climb a tree,' she stated flatly. 'They slipped. I didn't push them.' However, a third-party student witness insisted it was a deliberate shove.

Jeannie, feeling cornered and defensive, shifted the focus to institutional accountability. 'Where exactly was the teacher on yard duty when this happened?' she demanded.

The Principal bristled. 'With two hundred children on the oval, our staff cannot be everywhere at once. The location of the yard duty teacher at that precise second is irrelevant.'

'I think it is relevant,' Jeannie countered, her voice hardening. 'Is it actually safe or permissible for students to climb that specific tree?'

'No, it is strictly against school policy.'

'Is there a sign posted? Have the children been explicitly told this?'

'No,' the Principal admitted, his face reddening. 'But it is common sense.'

Jeannie let the silence stretch across the office, ensuring her point hit home. 'Well, I figure they must have been up in those branches for a considerable time to get high up. A proper yard duty patrol should have spotted them and ordered them down long before anyone fell. I know supervision is a very tricky thing, but the gaps are showing.'

She was referencing a public incident from the previous week where another student had been hospitalised after a playground collision, a scandal currently dominating the school's parents' association.

Turning her back on the administrator, Jeannie looked directly at her daughter. 'Okay, Rowie. You are not allowed to climb that tree in the yard anymore. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Mum,' Rowena muttered.

Jeannie turned back, shook the Principal's limp hand with a firm, final grip, and said, 'Bye now,' exiting the office before he could formulate a response.

The economic pressures of the era began to warp their world view. One afternoon, while assisting his supervisor on an external maintenance call at a wealthy suburban property, Josh heard the older man mockingly quote Scripture regarding the economic climate: '*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit little.*' It was a cynical, working-class subversion of the Beatitudes, but it stuck fast in Josh's mind.

A few weeks later, during the annual parish fair at the local church, Josh found himself sharing a cup of tea with the local minister. Seeking validation, Josh brought up the phrase. The minister gently corrected him, explaining the true text from Matthew: '*Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.*' He explained that meekness was about strength under control, not weakness or poverty.

That evening, over a dinner of cheap sausages and potatoes, Josh and Jeannie discussed the interaction. They explicitly rejected the minister's correction. To them, the churchman's view was an institutional fairytale; their cynical version felt like an accurate description of their lives.

'The meek are smart, Jeannie,' Josh said, leaning back in his chair, his back brace creaking. 'They know they don't need much. You see, even us, we have too much. We aren't meek.'

Jeannie looked around her kitchen, at the peeling linoleum, the dripping tap, the refrigerator that now hummed like a jet engine. 'I wish we had more, Josh,' she thought, keeping the words behind her teeth. 'Everything we seem to have is either broken or a hand-me-down. All we seem to do these days is struggle.'

With both children finally away at school for full days, the silence of the house became a physical weight. The rooms were cold, the winter sun failing to penetrate the cheap window panes. Sitting alone at the laminex table after the morning school run, Jeannie found herself weeping without cause. The tears came easily, a silent, grey tide that washed over her, sometimes for hours.

A visiting locum doctor, called during a particularly severe episode of anxiety, spent ten minutes in their lounge room before pulling out a prescription pad. He wrote a script for Valium, five repeat courses of the powerful sedative. Jeannie filled the prescription at the chemist, but when she returned home, she stared at the amber bottle with deep suspicion. She had recently read an article in *The Australian Women's Weekly* detailing the horrific dependencies of housewives hooked on 'Mother's Little Helper.' Fearful of losing what little control she had left, she hid the sealed bottle on the top shelf of the bathroom cabinet, choosing instead to sit in her familiar, grey misery.

Her days developed a manic, fractured pattern:

She would return from the school drop-off determined to conquer the housework, her mind racing with checklists. But the moment the front door clicked shut behind her, an internal switch flipped. The momentum vanished instantly. She would reach the kitchen kettle, turn it on, and then sometimes, simply sit in the dark lounge room, staring at the wall until it was time to collect the children.

The crisis broke on a Thursday in late autumn. Josh was dismissed early from the warehouse due to a power outage at the depot. Arriving home at two in the afternoon, he walked into a silent house. He found Jeannie in the bedroom, still in her dressing gown, her hair uncombed, staring blankly out the window. She looked hollow, a ghost occupying her own skin.

His heart broke at the sight. Caught without her usual mask of domestic competence, Jeannie collapsed into his chest. 'I'm lost, Josh,' she whispered into his flannel shirt. 'I just can't seem to keep things together like I used to.' Through her sobs, she confessed to seeing the doctor and mentioned the Valium.

Josh searched the bathroom cabinet and found the small plastic bottle hidden on the top shelf. His mind didn't register that the safety seal was entirely intact; the mere presence of psychotropic medication in his home terrified him.

Panicked and out of his depth, he bundled her into their car and drove directly to their regular family practitioner, demanding to be seen. He felt a profound sense of shame and disorientation. In his social circle, men didn't accompany their wives to doctor appointments unless someone was physically bleeding. He viewed Jeannie as the foundation of their family; seeing her broken altered his entire understanding of their world.

The family doctor, an older man who knew their history, pulled Jeannie's thick, handwritten medical folder from the steel filing cabinets. He turned back through years of sparse notes, tracing his finger down a card from Chris's infancy.

'The maternal health nurse noted signs of this way back when,' the doctor said softly, looking over his spectacles. 'It's a protracted post-natal depression, It has likely been simmering beneath the surface for years, exacerbated by recent stresses.'

He then looked at the notation from the locum's report regarding the Valium prescription with its extensive repeats. Jeannie didn't defend herself; she simply wept into a handkerchief, the sound small and rhythmic in the quiet office.

Sitting in the adjacent chair, Josh felt a cold finality settle over him. His internal monologue was a cascade of guilt and defeat: *This is your lot in life. This is somehow your fault. You wanted the house, you wanted the kids, you pushed for the things that broke her. This is your fault, and there goes any glimmer of hope.*

The doctor asked him how he was managing. Josh looked down at his rough hands, unable to meet the physician's eyes.

'I just didn't know what to do,' Josh said, his voice thick and slow. 'Normally it's me here for some medical thing... my back, my injuries. Jeannie is my rock, Doc. I don't know... all of this feels bad, awkward, difficult. I get an early afternoon off work, not because I'm sick, and I arrive home to find my wife in pieces. I'm somehow torn.'

The Doctor advised giving his wife a break somehow, cheering her up, asking for support, perhaps from a local church support group. Josh listened but didn't know how to do any of that, he was not at all sure how he felt asking for what he saw as charity, especially from a church group he was not part of.

That night he held Jeannie in his arms and danced slowly, the kids in the lounge, the dinner dishes washed up. He and Jeannie in the small dining room tears streaming down their faces, he leaned in and said 'I love you Jeannie Banks, I truly love you.' She sobbed.

Jeannie then utters that, 'It's all falling to pieces, my dreams, whatever became of my dreams, they have faded, gone, I can't see or feel them anymore. Josh reassured her, saying, 'Maybe that's for now, maybe things will change, maybe we will wake up one morning and see just sunshine and happiness! Perhaps you can go off the valium, slowly reduce your dose...' - 'Josh, I have never taken the valium, I got it but the bottle has never been opened and I never will open it, there are too many side effects.'

Jeannie then utters, 'That seems like a lot of maybes Josh, a LOT of maybes...' With that she breaks their embrace and shuffles the children off to bed. Josh reads them a story. The rest of the evening is in stark silence watching late night TV. The Done Lane show. Jeannie says nothing as the TV images, laughter and mirth all flicker into the stark room, Josh is lost in his thoughts, not sure what to make of things. 'A glimmer of hope, now that would be nice.' He says in his mind as the light from the TV flickers across their faces.

Chapter Nine

1982, the transition to primary school at age five felt less like an educational milestone for Chris and more like an exercise in geographic disorientation. The prep classroom smelled perpetually of powdered milk, cedar pencil shavings, and damp woollen coats in the winter. For Chris, the primary challenge of 1982 wasn't the separation from home, but the physical orientation of Miss Sandy.

Miss Sandy was a woman of rigid routines who spoke almost exclusively to the blackboard. She would write out words, *cat*, *mat*, *sat*, with her back squarely to the twenty six children scraped together in rows behind her. Her voice, flat and unmodulated, absorbed directly into the dark slate.

'You aren't listening,' she would snap, turning around to find half the room staring blankly at her cardigan.

Chris wasn't the only one lost in the acoustic dead zone. During recess, huddled near the gray cyclone fencing that bordered the oval, other boys muttered about the same thing. 'She talks to the wall,' one said. But Miss Sandy interpreted the collective hesitation not as a

structural failure of her acoustics, but as willful defiance. The friction grew daily; she grew sharper, the kids grew quieter, and Chris learned the uneasy art of watching his peers' hands to see which page he was supposed to turn.

The lunchtime football match in mid-May was a chaotic scramble on a hard, frost-baked oval. Chris went down beneath a kid from grade three who had two stones of weight on him. The sound was like a dry branch snapping underfoot. It wasn't a clean fracture; the radius and ulna had splintered near the growth plate, an ugly, compound-adjacent mess that required an immediate admission to the Royal Children's Hospital.

The medical emergency coincided with the total collapse of the family's car. The water pump had seized, stripping the timing gear, and the local mechanic was waiting on parts coming down from Melbourne on the back of a slow freight truck.

The logistics of care became a grueling relay race: Day One (Jeannie): Walked to the station, took the train into Spencer Street, caught the number 55 tram up Flemington Road, and arrived at the ward with her coat soaked through with sweat and winter rain. Day Two (Josh): It was his rostered day off. He took the same grim transit line, his knuckles dark with grease from trying to do some work on the car beforehand.

Chris spent nearly three weeks in a ward that smelled of ether and boiled cabbage, his arm pinned and hoisted in traction.

When he finally returned to school in late June, his left arm in plaster and a sling, the classroom had moved on without him. The alphabet had vanished from the top of the board, replaced by cursive joins and simple addition columns. Miss Sandy did not offer remedial briefings. She simply handed him a stencil sheet and turned back to her board. Chris sat at his small timber desk, his fingers stiff, looking at symbols that felt completely foreign.

'Oh well, here we go again,' Josh muttered into his tea the night the mechanic called to say the freight delivery was delayed another week. 'Another fecking setback. We're standard equipment for trouble, aren't we?'

Jeannie didn't argue. She just let out a long, slow sigh that seemed to deflate her whole frame, her eyes fixing on the chipped linoleum near the stove. The kitchen grew cold quickly once the sun went down. Neighbors from two doors up dropped by with a loaf of bread and

some old magazines, their manner bright but cautious. They liked Jeannie, but her heavy, anxious approach was hard to sit with for long.

'You've got to look for the silver lining, Jean,' her mother told her over the phone. 'The boy's arm will mend. It could have been his neck.'

'The car's a heap of scrap, the boy's six weeks behind, and Josh is doing just three days a week,' Jeannie said, her voice dropping into that familiar, flat register. 'Where's the silver lining in that, Mum? Point it out to me, because I'm bloody blind to it.'

Across the hallway, Rowena's experience of 1982 was taking place in a different climate entirely. Grade two was under the stewardship of Mrs Callaghan, a woman with large, colorful brooches and an absolute refusal to let her room freeze. The school's central boiler was notoriously erratic, so Mrs Callaghan brought in two small, fan heaters from home. She arrived at 7:30 AM every morning to turn them on, ensuring that when the children filed in, the room felt more like a bakery rather than a bunker.

Mrs Callaghan's pedagogy was disguise; she would have them play shop with cardboard coins and plastic fruit, then smoothly transition the game into formal column subtraction before they realized they were working.

Rowena excelled at a specific type of survival under Mrs Callaghan's care. She discovered that if you remained perfectly still, kept your voice down, and never raised your hand to boast or complain, the world left you alone. The louder kids, the ones who threw erasers or wept over misspelled words, drew all the fire. By staying entirely neutral, Rowena never faced the sharp tongues of the playground bullies. She moved through grade two like a shadow across the carpet, functional, safe, and entirely under the radar.

Larry arrived in August. He was a four-month-old golden retriever pup whose limbs were growing faster than his brain. One of Josh's coworkers at the appliance store had been stuck with the last of a litter; the dog was past the 'cute' window where people paid full price, and the bloke was desperate to get him off his feed bill. Josh bought him for twenty dollars and a six-pack of Carlton Draught.

The kids erupted when Josh carried the giant, floppy creature through the back door. Jeannie stayed by the sink, arms crossed.

'He's going to eat us out of house and home, Josh,' she said. 'And who's going to clean up after him when you're at the shop?'

She wasn't wrong. Within three weeks, Larry had systematically demolished: The wicker laundry basket in the hall, the heels of Jeannie's only pair of good shoes, and the bottom of the back veranda's weatherboards.

Josh tried to implement training tips he'd scribbled on the back of an invoice pad at work, *firm voice, push the rump down, reward with a bit of sausage*. Jeannie would watch through the kitchen window as Josh, standing in his work boots in the damp grass, shouted, 'Sit, Larry! Sit, you bloody idiot!' while the dog simply wagged its entire torso and tried to lick Josh's chin. Despite her gloom, the absurdity of it would occasionally catch her off guard, a sharp, genuine giggle breaking through her anxiety before she could stop it.

Walking him was a chore she resented but performed out of necessity. Larry didn't walk; he launched himself forward, his thick neck straining against the leather collar, pulling Jeannie down the footpath until her shoulders ached.

One Tuesday afternoon, a grey, drizzling winter day, she opened the back laundry door to call him in from the rain. Larry was sitting dead in the middle of the lawn, his golden coat plastered dark and heavy against his ribs. He didn't move. He just sat there, water dripping from his muzzle, staring at her with mild, stubborn interest.

'Larry, come inside,' she called. Nothing. 'Larry!'

It took five full minutes of her standing in the doorway, the cold damp air blowing past her, before the dog leisurely stood up and trotted into the laundry. The moment the door shut, he delivered a massive, full-body shake that coated the washing machine, the walls, and Jeannie's skirt in a fine mist of mud--scented water. She spent the next half-hour on her knees with two old bath towels, vigorously rubbing him dry.

As the months crawled on, the dog became her silent partner. On the days when the house felt too small and her thoughts too circular, she would put the kettle on, sit in the vinyl armchair with a mug of tea, and Larry would drop his heavy, warm chin onto her slipper. The steady, rhythmic thud of his tail against the floorboards was the only sound in the room. In the late afternoons, she would take him around to the park at the back of their place. If the area was clear of other dogs, she'd unclip the lead. Watching him transform into a golden

streak across the park, completely indifferent to bills, broken cars, or bad legs, it gave her a strange, fleeting sense of space.

In July, Jeannie took a job. It was six months of part-time clerical and cleaning work for a small transport agency located just fifty yards from the railway station. One day a week, eight hours.

'It's a glimmer, Jean,' Josh said, handing her a cup of tea on her first morning. 'A little glimmer of hope. It gets you out of the house.'

The work was basic, typing up freight manifests on an old Remington typewriter, filing invoices, and scrubbing the grease off the small staff tea room, but the years of domestic isolation had made her self-conscious. She was thirty-four now, her hands rougher than they used to be, but the independent income, however small, belonged entirely to her.

Christmas, however, stripped away whatever confidence the job had provided.

The car had dropped its differential three days before the holidays, rendering the family entirely stationary. The rest of the extended family was in Melbourne or up the coast, unable or unwilling to make the trek out to them. The Christmas table was sparse: a single loaf of white bread, some boiled potatoes, and a tin of ham that Jeannie had bought on sale.

At 1:15 PM, there was a knock at the front door. A man and a woman from the local St. Vincent de Paul society stood on the porch, holding a cardboard box. Inside were two small, slightly charred barbecue chickens from the local takeaway, a box of Cadbury Favorites, and two wrapped parcels from the discount department store.

'Sorry guys,' the man said with a tired, cheerful wink. 'Santa got delayed at the traffic lights.'

Jeannie took the box, her face turning crimson before it crumpled. She retreated to the kitchen, leaving Josh to thank them. She sat at the table and wept into her apron, not from gratitude, but from the raw, burning humiliation of needing charity to feed her children on Christmas Day.

'How the bloody hell did they know?' Josh muttered later, carving into the small chickens. 'Who's been talking?'

Rowena watched her mother's wet face from across the table. At seven, she couldn't distinguish between tears of relief and tears of shame; she only knew that tears meant the foundation of the house was shaky. She kept her mouth shut, but her mind drifted back to a conversation she'd had over the side fence three days earlier with Mrs. Gable, the elderly neighbor who grew hydrangeas. Mrs. Gable had asked what Santa was bringing, and Rowena, with her usual flat pragmatism, had said, 'Probably nothing this year because the car's broken and Mum's sad.'

Chris, now six and a half, sat chewing a chicken wing, looking out the front window. From their lounge room, he could see the corner of the main road. Nick and Laura, the couple from down the road, were pulling out of their driveway in a shiny Ford Falcon, dressed in their Sunday best, heading down to the RSL for the three-course Christmas buffet. Chris looked down at his plate, the tinned beans and the small piece of greasy takeaway chicken, and then back at the road. For the first time, he realized that everyone wasn't living the same way they were.

By March 1983, the part-time office work had concluded, but Jeannie's need for income hadn't. She managed to secure two mornings a week at the Safeway supermarket one train stop down the line. Her job was night-fill in the daytime, dragging heavy wooden pallets of tinned fruit and bags of flour down the narrow aisles before the midday rush, lifting the stock onto the lower shelves until her back twitched.

The hours were short, from 8:30 AM to 11:30 AM, which allowed her to catch the midday train back in time to walk to the primary school gate before the 3:30 PM bell. She was thirty-five now, her hair showing its first threads of silver at the temples, but she was grateful for the noise of the supermarket; it drowned out the silence of the house.

Rowena moved into grade three, her desk now situated in a drafty timber portable at the back of the schoolyard. It was the year of her parents' twelfth wedding anniversary, a milestone that passed with a single bottle of sparkling wine and Josh giving her a small, silver-plated compact from the chemist. There was no dinner out; the car was running, but only under protest and a strict speed limit.

Josh's hours at the appliance center improved slightly as the winter retail season began. He was upped to four days a week, plus the second Saturday morning of every month to handle the rush on electric heaters and washing machines.

The job was a steady grind of complaints and ledger entries, but Josh survived it by looking for the absurdities. He came home one Tuesday evening, his coat smelling of rain and tobacco, with a grin that split his thin face.

'Had Mr. Wong on the blower today,' he said, pouring a splash of beer into a glass. 'The old bloke from the noodle shop down by the creek. Kept asking about a replacement element for his kettle. But the line was terrible, pure static. I could barely understand a word. When he finally hung up, the boss asked who it was. I told him, 'It was Mr. Wong, and he was bloody terrified he'd wing the wong number!'"

He laughed loudly at his own joke, a barking sound that made Larry bark too. Jeannie managed a small, tired smile from the stove, but the humor felt thin against the weight of the unrelenting winter bills.

When the kids were at school and Josh was at the shop, the house belonged to the local community radio station, 3MR, which broadcasted from a tin shed behind the showgrounds. The announcers were retired fellas who played whatever vinyl they had brought from home, which meant the airwaves were often dominated by the heavy, melodramatic hits of the late sixties and early seventies.

Jeannie found herself trapped in the gravity of three specific songs:

Gilbert O'Sullivan's 'Alone Again (Naturally)' was a permanent fixture, a long, slow wail about being left at the altar and parents dying. Then came Bobby Goldsboro's 'Honey,' with its tragic, fragile wife who wrecked the car, cried over a silly puppy, and then inexplicably died in the final verse before the angels came.

Jeannie would stand at the ironing board, the steam rising around her face, listening to the acoustic guitar cords of 'Ode to Billy Joe,' thinking about the casual, cruel way the family in the song passed the black-eyed peas while talking about a boy killing himself. She became convinced that these records were a blueprint; that some people were simply written into sad songs, and that her life would follow the same downward arc toward an early, quiet disappearance.

Larry, however, had no time for Bobby Goldsboro.

The dog could read the drop in her shoulders from across the room. The moment the music started to get to her, his large black nose would wedge itself under her hand, forcing her fingers up until they rested on his skull. If she didn't move, he would press his entire head between her knees, leaning his tall slender bulk against her shins until she had no choice but to sit down on the floor with him.

On fine afternoons, if she stayed in the chair too long, Larry would trot to the back door, grip his leather lead in his jaws, and drop it into her lap with a wet *thud*. He would stand there, his tail giving a single, authoritative thump against the rug, his brown eyes fixed on hers.

'Alright, you old bastard,' she'd mutter, reaching for her cardigan. The moment they hit the pavement, the cold air clearing the smell of ironed starch from her lungs, then the weight of the radio songs would then begin to slip away.

Chris entered grade two under Miss Golding. She was a younger woman who wore corduroy trousers and drove an orange Morris Minor. She had a reputation among the staff for being 'modern,' which mostly meant she didn't use the cane and let the boys run a small cricket match against the water tanks during recess.

Chris liked her, but the work was becoming an obstacle. While his reading was passable, he liked the books about trucks and Antarctic explorers, the numbers however wouldn't settle.

Miss Golding would write out columns of double-digit addition on the board:

Chris would look at the numbers, his mind stalling on how to carry the one over to the next column. The concept felt like a trick, a rule that everyone else had agreed upon while he was away in the hospital the year before. He would sit with his pencil lead pressed against the paper until it snapped, his page a mess of grey smudge marks from the pink eraser.

Miss Golding would walk past, pat him on his good shoulder, and say, 'Keep at it, Christopher, it'll click.' But it just didn't seem to click. He would look across at the girls' row, where three of them were already finished and coloring in the margins of their books, and feel that same cold distance that had started in Miss Sandy's room the year before.

Chapter Ten

The backyard of the family home had always been a patchy stretch of kikuyu grass, but by the autumn of 1984, it held the promise of something bigger. Josh and Jeannie had scrimped for months, stashing away every spare dollar from the main paycheques until they finally had enough to pour a concrete slab and erect a double garage. For Jeannie, it was a chance to finally conquer the clutter in the house. For Josh, it was the birthplace of a dream: a small side hustle crafting handmade wooden toys, rocking horses, block sets, and pull-along ducks, to sell at the bustling local Sunday Market.

The local council, however, operated on a glacial timeline. Weeks of bureaucratic silence turned into months. When the stamped approval finally arrived, it brought a fresh wave of chaos. A yellow mini-excavator arrived to dig the deep trench required to run power from the main house to the new build. The machine tore through the yard, leaving deep, muddy scars, displacing rose bushes, and turning their peaceful garden into a miniature construction site.

When the metal roller doors were finally fitted, Josh stepped into the echoing, concrete-scented space, ready to claim his sanctuary. He scoured the local classifieds for a heavy-duty timber workbench and steel shelving. But the ink was barely dry on his receipts before the territory wars began. Jeannie, desperate for storage, started migrating cardboard boxes of old clothes, winter blankets, and forgotten kitchen appliances into the far corner. Within weeks, the 'junk' began to sprout legs, creeping outward and encroaching on his workspace. Every misplaced box felt like a personal insult to his vision, sparking sharp, tense arguments over where the household ended and his workshop began.

Meanwhile, Josh's first foray into toy-making hit a wall of cold reality. Crafting a single wooden car from scratch, sanding the chassis, drilling axle holes, shaping wheels, took hours of painstaking labor. At this rate, he'd have to charge a fortune just to break even. Standing over a pile of sawdust, his hands calloused and aching, Josh realised the romantic notion of the solo craftsman wasn't viable. If this side hustle was going to survive, he had to stop thinking like a hobbyist and start thinking like a manufacturer, figuring out how to jig his tools to produce identical, multiples out of pre-cut timber.

Inside the house, nine-year-old Chris was navigating his own major transition. Entering grade three meant entering the classroom of Mr Newsome, the very first male teacher Chris

had ever had. Initially, Chris was fiercely skeptical, missing the familiar, motherly comfort of his previous teachers. But by the winter holidays, Mr Newsome had completely won him over. He didn't just teach; he commanded the room with an easy, calm authority. He had a rare knack for breaking down complex long division processes into simple, digestible steps. More importantly, while other teachers often focused on the high achievers, Mr Newsome spent his extra minutes hovering by the desks of the kids who were quietly struggling, making sure no one was left behind. For Chris, school went from a chore to the best part of his week.

By mid-1985, a new culinary craze was sweeping the suburbs: Sizzler. With its glowing neon sign, bottomless salad bar, and legendary cheesy toast, it felt like the height of modern luxury. To celebrate Jeannie's 39th birthday, Josh treated the family to a slap-up feed there. The kids went wild over the soft-serve machine, and for a couple of hours, surrounded by the hum of a busy restaurant, the family felt prosperous and normal. Rowena, now a self-conscious high school student, navigating a sea of oversized uniforms and new peer pressures, even managed a genuine smile.

But the Sizzler dinner was a temporary band-aid on a fracturing reality. Behind closed doors, the pressure cooker of life was reaching a critical limit. Josh's toy business was stalling, bills were mounting, and the daily grind felt less like a routine and more like a prison sentence. Every attempt to 'rattle the cage' to change their financial habits, to communicate better, to force things to work, seemed to blow up in their faces. A heavy, suffocating blanket of desperation and despair settled over the household. They were running on fumes, emotionally bankrupt, just waiting for the next blow to fall.

It fell on a deceptively beautiful, sunny Saturday afternoon.

The weather was perfect, the kind of day that coaxed everyone outdoors. Inside, the kids were momentarily quiet, playing in the living room. Outside, the backyard gate hadn't quite latched properly, perhaps a careless slam from one of the kids, or a latch caught on a stray twig. Larry, their beloved, boisterous Golden Retriever, noticed the gap. Driven by curiosity, he quietly slipped through the opening and wandered out into the neighborhood.

For twenty minutes, nobody noticed the silence. Then, the solemn afternoon split wide open.

From the intersection up at the corner near their neighbor Nick's place, a horrific sound echoed down the street: a sharp, metallic **BANG**, followed by a solitary, agonizing canine yelp. Then, a faint, breathless whimpering that faded into terrifying silence.

In the kitchen, Josh paused. The noise registered, but his brain refused to connect the dots. A few minutes later, a frantic, heavy pounding rattled the front door. Josh opened it to find a neighbor from down the street, pale and breathless.

'Mate,' the neighbor panted, eyes wide. 'A dog just got hit by a car up on the corner. A bad one. You guys have a golden retriever, yeah?'

'Yeah, but it's not him,' Josh said immediately, his voice flat with instant, protective denial. 'Larry's out the back.'

The neighbor swallowed hard, looking at the floor. 'Josh... the name on the collar says Larry.'

The world tilted. From the hallway, Jeannie heard the exchange and bolted past them into the backyard. A second later, a blood-curdling scream pierced the air.

'Oh feck! JOSH! The gate's OPEN!'

The kids poured out of the house, drawn by the terror in their mother's voice. They found Jeannie standing by the empty, swinging gate, her hands over her mouth. Josh rushed to her side, his face contorted in a mix of rage and panic, swearing profusely under his breath. The sheer unfairness of it hit him like a physical blow. 'How could this happen?' Josh choked out, his voice cracking. 'Feck! Another thing... just another freakin' mad disappointment!'

Arnie, their next-door neighbor, had been working in his garden when the shouting started. Hearing the raw distress, he popped his head over the paling fence. 'Josh? Jeannie? What's going on?'

Learning the news, Arnie didn't hesitate. He hopped the fence, hurried to the front yard, and fell into step beside Josh as they began the long, agonizing walk up the footpath, toward the intersection.

Behind them, Jeannie stood on the nature strip, gathering Chris and Rowena into her arms, clutching them so tightly it hurt.

Chris looked up, his eyes swimming with tears. 'Is Larry okay, mum?'

Jeannie's throat tightened. She couldn't look him in the eye. In a low, hollow mumble, she whispered, 'Darlin', I don't know. I really don't know.' Rowena didn't ask questions; she just squeezed her mother tighter, burying her face in Jeannie's shirt, trembling.

Up at the intersection, time seemed to stretch into eternity. When Josh and Arnie finally arrived, a small, grim crowd had begun to form. A neighbor who lived on the immediate corner walked over to them, shaking his head in disgust. 'The bastard just took off. Didn't even brake. The poor dog didn't stand a chance.'

The sight of his dog broke Josh entirely. He dropped to his knees, the tears coming hot and fast, his shoulders shaking violently. Arnie stepped in closer, gripping Josh's shoulder, offering his own stoic frame as a physical anchor for his friend to lean on. 'Mate,' Arnie said softly, his voice steady but heavy with emotion. 'Mate, we have to do something. We can't leave him in the middle of the road. It's clear Larry is badly damaged... mate, we need to move him.'

Josh wiped his face with a trembling hand, forcing himself to look closely at his dog. The sensory dissonance was sickening; the day was beautiful, a cruel, mocking golden afternoon, yet the air was thick with the metallic, sharp scent of blood cooking on hot bitumen. Larry lay in a twisted, unnatural position, his powerful frame broken beyond recognition. The vibrant gold of his fur was matted and stained, a stark, agonizing contrast against the dark, sticky pool spreading across the road. His hind legs were splayed at a sickening angle, and his front left limb was visibly crushed beneath his weight, while another pointed wildly toward the sky, useless and skeletal.

The corner neighbor was busy directing traffic away from the scene, waving his arms at incoming vehicles and gently but firmly warning a group of neighborhood kids who had gathered on bikes: 'Don't look, boys. Walk away. It's not a nice scene.'

Nick, who lived right by the corner, walked over, his face grim as he surveyed the wreckage of the family pet. He looked at Arnie, completely bypassing the shattered Josh. 'Maybe we should get a tarp,' Nick suggested quietly. 'Put it over him, then we can carry him back to Josh's place?'

Arnie nodded slowly, his hand never leaving Josh's shoulder. He bent down, his voice dropping to a gentle whisper as he relayed the plan to Josh, shielding him from the clinical reality of the situation.

As they prepared to lift the dog, another neighbour approached from across the street, her face twisted in shock. 'That car just sped right up the road, didn't even look back! Oh mate, I'm so sorry this happened,' she said, looking at Josh's tear-streaked face. 'Oh feck... that is just bloody heartbreaking.'

The blue plastic tarp was stiff, smelling of dust and old petrol from Nick's shed. Between the four of them, Josh, Nick, Arnie, and the neighbour from down the road, folded it twice to double its strength. Larry's coat was hot and matted under Josh's palms as they lifted. The dog didn't growl; he whimpered, a thin, whistling sound that rattled in his throat.

The walk down the street was endless. The midday sun baked the tar, releasing a sharp, chemical stink that mixed with the metallic smell of blood. Every uneven stride made the blue plastic stretch, shifting Larry's broken frame. Josh looked up, squinting through a haze of sweat. In the distance, near their gate, the small silhouettes of his children hovered. Jeannie was there too, her hand shielding her eyes.

'Jeannie!' Josh's voice cracked, cutting through the quiet suburban street. 'Take the kids inside! It's not good! Get 'em inside now!'

He saw Jeannie stiffen. She gathered the kids by their shoulders, her movements frantic, herding them toward the shadow of the veranda.

They carried Larry down the driveway, and laid the tarp out on the dry patchy grass in the backyard. Larry lay on his side, his ribcage heaving in short, erratic jerks. Pink, frothy blood bubbled at the corner of his black lips with every shallow breath.

Arnie knelt down, his old joints popping. He gently touched Larry's flank, feeling the unnatural sag in the dog's spine. He looked up at Josh, his eyes heavy with the grim pragmatism of an old country bloke.

'Josh,' Arnie said softly, wiping his hands on his trousers. 'The dog's in a bad way. Look at him. Even if you could get him to an emergency vet, it'd cost a blooming fortune. That's if there's any hope at all, which I doubt. His back's gone, mate.'

The other neighbour nodding agreement in silence, looking at the ground. Nick stood a few feet back, his arms crossed tight over his chest, his eyes fixed on the fast, shallow panting of the dog.

Josh's chest tightened until he could barely breathe. He looked from Larry to the empty clothesline, then back again. 'Well, what the feck do I do now!' His desperation boiling over into solid annoyance.

'The vet would just put him to sleep anyway, Josh,' Arnie said.

'That'll cost too feckin' much!' Josh shouted, his voice echoing off the corrugated iron fence. He gripped his own hair, pacing a small circle on the grass, his mind a chaotic vortex of shame. This wasn't just about the money; it was a soul-crushing realization that he had failed at his most basic duty. He was the provider, the protector, yet here he was, unable to offer even a shred of professional mercy to the creature that loved him most. The humiliation burned in his throat—the raw, naked indignity of being 'too poor' for a vet, forced to ask his neighbor for a rifle to end a life because he couldn't afford the price of compassion. 'I don't have shit these days... FECK! I haven't got the coin for a vet bill, Arnie!'

Arnie stood up slowly, watching his neighbour unravel. He hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. 'Look... I've got the twenty-two rifle under the bed. I've had it for years. I could bring it over. Help end his misery, if that's what you want.'

Josh stopped pacing. He slowly looked up, his face drained of all colour, white as a ghost against the glare of the afternoon sun. For a long moment, the only sound was Larry's wet, rhythmic wheezing.

'Gees mate,' Josh whispered, his voice trembling. 'What can I say? Can we? Shit... I guess there's no other way... FECK.' He swallowed hard, the reality settling into his gut like lead. 'Yeah. Yeah, grab ya twenty-two and let's finish this off. The poor feckin' dog, he's suffering something shocking.'

Arnie gave a single, solemn nod and walked briskly toward the side gate, heading back to his house.

The other neighbour reached out, patting Josh heavily on the shoulder. 'You're doing the right thing, Josh. It's the kindest way when they're like this.'

The words broke the last of Josh's resolve. He burst into tears, his shoulders shaking as he turned his face away. Seeing the raw grief, the neighbour murmured a quiet goodbye and left through the side gate, leaving Josh alone with Nick. Nick just stood there. His face was

entirely blank, eyes wide and unblinking. He looked at his boots, then at the sky, his mouth opening slightly, but no words of consolation came to mind. He was anchored by his own awkwardness.

Laura came down the driveway, passing the departing neighbour with a muted, questioning glance. She was wearing a faded cotton apron, the kind with the floral pockets that women used to wear back in the sixties. She stepped onto the grass and stood beside Nick, instantly sensing the heavy silence. She placed a comforting hand on Nick's stiff shoulder, then reached her other hand out across the short distance to Josh.

'Oh, Josh,' Laura said, her voice thick with immediate sympathy. 'It's terrible. It's so sad... Will the dog be okay?'

Josh stepped over, his boots dragging in the dirt. He took her small hand, burying it between both of his rough, trembling palms. He held onto it like a lifeline.

'Nah, Laura love,' he said softly, staring down at their joined hands. 'It's not good. Arnie's gone next door to get his rifle. Larry's too badly banged up to be saved... and there's no money for the vet anyways.'

Laura's eyes filled with tears. She pressed her lips together and nodded, looking down at the blue tarp.

A metallic scrape drew their attention. Jeannie had appeared at the back flywire door. She didn't come out onto the veranda; she just pressed her face against the mesh, her eyes scanning the yard until they found the lump of blue plastic.

'Josh,' she called out, her voice a soft, frightened reed. 'How bad is it, Josh?'

Josh looked up, his face lined with grease and tears. 'No, love. The dog's stuffed. Too many injuries, okay? Just keep the kids inside. Just keep 'em back.' He wiped his nose with the back of his hand. 'Arnie's bringing over his rifle. It'll... it'll save on vet fees.'

Jeannie didn't argue. Her silhouette shrank back from the screen as she retreated into the dim light of the kitchen. She gathered Chris and Rowena into a desperate, frantic bundle, backing them against the kitchen wall and holding them with a physical intensity that bordered on painful, her knuckles white as she crushed them to her chest. Then it came—the first sharp *pop*. The children flinched, their sobs catching in their throats. In the wake of the second shot,

a suffocating, heavy silence descended upon the room. It wasn't just quiet; it was a physical weight that pressed against the walls, thick and stagnant, making the familiar kitchen feel like a cold, airless tomb. The world had shifted, and the house felt suddenly, irrevocably empty.

Arnie returned through the side gate. He walked with a heavy, deliberate pace, holding an old bolt-action .22 rifle down along his leg. In his shirt pocket, two cartridges clinked against each other.

Seeing the firearm, Laura took her hand back from Josh. She gave a small, sad nod, turned, and walked back up the driveway toward her house. Nick didn't move; he remained rooted to the spot, his face still locked in that same blank, stunned expression.

Arnie knelt by the edge of the tarp. With practiced, steady fingers, he pulled back the bolt, the mechanical *clack-clack* loud in the quiet yard. He took a single cartridge from his pocket and slid it into the breech.

Josh watched the cartridge disappear into the chamber of the gun. A sudden, fierce instinct took over his chest. He looked at Arnie and gestured with an open hand, his voice dropping into a hard, low register.

'Mate, I can't expect others to do this,' Josh said, stepping forward. 'Pass it to me.'

Arnie looked up, searched Josh's face for a second, and didn't argue. He stood, turned the safety on, and handed the solid timber stock over to his neighbour.

Josh took the weight of the rifle. It felt light, almost like a toy, but it felt incredibly heavy in his hands. He stepped up to the edge of the tarp. Larry's eyes were cloudy, rolling back slightly, his tongue lolling out of the side of his mouth. Josh didn't hesitate. He took aim at the base of the skull, turned the safety off, and pulled the trigger.

Pop.

Josh thought the sound was surprisingly small in the open air, a sharp crack that echoed off the brick walls of the house. The dog's body convulsed once, a violent reflex, then went loose. But the shallow panting didn't completely stop; a muscular twitch remained. Josh's hands were shaking now, but his face was set. He worked the bolt, spitting the empty smoking shell onto the grass. He loaded the second shot, aimed at the chest to ensure it was done well, and fired again.

Pop.

This time, the stillness was absolute.

Josh stood there for a moment, the barrel smoking slightly in the breeze. He turned and handed the rifle back to Arnie, his throat tight, his chest heaving as he fought back a fresh wall of tears.

Inside the house, huddled in the dim light of the kitchen, Jeannie and the kids heard those two distinct *pops*. It wasn't loud, but it changed the air in the room. To Chris and Rowena, it was the sound of a door slamming shut on a piece of their childhood. The reality of the world hit them all at once, the hard, unyielding rule that things live and things die. Tears flowed all round. Their eyes glistened, heavy with the weight of that sharp, adult pain. They grabbed onto one another, hugging harder than they ever had before, until the quiet crying turned into a torrent of tears. Blindly, they retreated from the kitchen, moving as one unit into the safety of the lounge room couch.

Out by the shed, a wave of cold calm suddenly washed over Josh. The noise in his head stopped. He looked at Nick, his voice steady. 'When I'm finished with the tarp, I'll bring it over, okay? Thanks for helping out. You too, Arnie. I really appreciate it, fellas.'

Arnie tucked the rifle under his arm and began to walk off with Nick. As they reached the side gate, Arnie paused, looking back over his shoulder. 'If you need a hand with anything else, Josh... just say so, mate.'

'Thanks, Arnie.'

When the gate clicked shut, the silence of the yard returned, heavier now. Josh looked down at the blue tarp. The urgency was gone, replaced by a dull, aching chore. He had to bury Larry.

He walked over to the lean-to beside the shed, his boots dragging in the dry dirt, and grabbed his long-handled shovel. The steel blade was rusted and nicked from years of edging the garden beds. He picked a spot near the back fence, beneath the shade of the lemon tree where Larry used to lie when the days got too hot.

He shoved the blade into the earth. The ground was baked hard, a stubborn crust of clay and grey loam that fought back against the metal. On his third strike, the vibration shuddered

right up his arms, jarring his shoulders. Josh stopped. He leaned his forehead against the smooth timber of the shovel handle. The tears came back, hot and fast, streaming down his dust-streaked face. His heart was pumping hard against his ribs, not just from the sudden physical work, but from the hollow ache in his gut. He took a ragged breath and forced the shovel back into the dirt, clearing a small, jagged square of topsoil.

He was only three inches down when he heard the heavy vehicle door slam out the front. Then another.

Two police officers walked carefully around the side of the house, their utility belts clicking with handcuffs and torches. They kept their hands loose near their holsters, their eyes scanning the windows, the shed, and the corners of the yard, uncertain of what they were walking into. Behind them came Nick. He had intercepted them on the street, and he walked down the driveway alongside them, his hands in his pockets, quietly explaining what had happened to the dog.

The officers relaxed their posture when they saw Josh standing over the shallow patch of dirt with a shovel. The older cop, a fellow with a grey moustache and a tired face, stepped forward.

'G'day, Josh,' he said, keeping his voice low and respectful. 'Look, we're sorry to hear about your dog. Truly we are, mate. Nick told us what happened on the road. But you can't be discharging a firearm within town limits, okay? Someone called it in.'

Josh dropped the shovel. It clattered against the hard ground. He wiped his sweaty brow with a dirty forearm, his face turning red as the frustration flared back up.

'I had no choice, boys!' Josh said, his voice rising, fighting through the tears that threatened to choke him again. 'Money's tight. Times are hard out here. So what the feck, boys? What would you do, huh? If you were looking at your kids' dog with its back broken?' He looked at his boots, his shoulders sagging. 'Look, I'm sorry. I am. But I've gotta get this hole dug for the poor thing, and then I've gotta go inside and try to explain this whole feckin' mess to my kids.'

The two officers looked at each other. They'd seen enough domestic grief to know when a man was at the end of his tether. The younger cop looked at the hard clay, then at Josh, who

was wheezing heavily now, his breath coming in ragged, shallow gasps from the exertion and the panic.

Without a word, the older officer stepped forward and took the handle of the long shovel from Josh's hands. 'Sit down for a sec, mate. Take a breath.'

The younger cop stood by, watching the perimeter but keeping his tone soft. 'Look, Josh, we have to tell you, you shouldn't have discharged that firearm in the backyard. It's a serious matter. And, look... where did you get the gun anyway?'

Josh threw his hands up, his palms facing the sky in a desperate, submissive gesture. 'For God's sake, guys! My dog was right here, whimpering. A broken leg, a twisted back... I had to drag the poor thing off the street out front. I had to do something! Perhaps next time I'll just call you blokes up, and you can pull a pistol out of your holsters and *BANG*, you can sort it out for us... Yeah, right. Feck, life's hard, guys...'

The older officer didn't answer, he just drove the shovel deep into the clay with the heel of his boot, turning over a heavy clod of earth. 'We're giving you a caution, Josh,' he said between strokes. 'Just don't do it next time. Call a vet, or call us. Don't take it into your own hands.'

Josh didn't argue anymore. He just stood there, his arms limp at his sides, watching the two policemen dig his dog's grave.

Up at the back window, the cream roller blind shifted. Two small pairs of eyes appeared at the half-mast opening. Chris and Rowena watched silently as Larry's blue-shrouded shape was lowered into the earth. The younger policeman took over the shovel, throwing the dry clods back into the hole, while Josh grabbed a small garden trowel, throwing in an occasional scoop of dirt himself. He wanted to look like he was helping. He wanted to feel like he'd at least done something right for the dog at the very end.

The back door clicked. Josh walked into the laundry, the cool linoleum floor a relief under his boots. He stood at the concrete laundry sink, turned the cold tap on, and let the water run over his dirty hands. He didn't wash them; he just let the water pool in his palms. Then, the weight of the last two hours crashed through him. He leaned his weight against the tub and began to sob uncontrollably, his shoulders heaving, his face buried in his wet hands.

The door from the kitchen opened softly. Jeannie came in. She didn't say anything; she just stepped into the narrow space between the washing machine and the sink and threw her arms around his waist. Josh turned, his hands wringing wet, and held her tight against his chest, dampening her shirt.

A moment later, the door moved again. Chris and Rowena crept into the laundry. Without a word, they joined the circle, their small arms wrapping around their parents' hips. All four of them stood in the small, dim room, clutching each other, their collective sobs filling the space until the air ran thick.

Finally, Josh let out a huge, shuddering sigh that seemed to drain the remaining tension from his frame. He loosened his grip and looked down at his children's tear-stained faces.

'Well, kids,' he said, his voice husky and rough. 'I didn't think I would have to bury a dog so freakin' young. But there we are. Life throws us some shit lessons sometimes, and today was one of them.'

They slowly separated, wiping their eyes with sleeves and tissues. Jeannie looked up at him, her hand resting on his arm. 'Oh feck, Josh,' she whispered. 'You did so well under pressure. Really, you did. And Nick helped out, and Arnie... I was surprised the police came, but I guess they had to, didn't they?'

Josh gave a short, wordless nod. He couldn't stay inside. He turned back toward the door and went outside into the afternoon light. He picked up the blue plastic tarp, dragged it over to the garden hose, and turned on the brass tap. He sprayed the dark stains off the plastic, watching the red-tinted water disappear into the dry grass. As he washed it down, the tears came back again. He shook his head, angry at himself.

So much for a stiff feckin' upper lip, he thought, pulling the sleeve of his shirt across his eyes. *I freakin' go to pieces at the drop of a hat around here.*

He let the tarp dry for a few minutes in the wind, then folded it into a neat rectangle. He carried it up the driveway and walked over to Nick and Laura's back veranda. Nick answered the door, his face finally returning to its normal, relaxed state.

Josh handed the plastic over, his eyes still red-rimmed. 'Apologies for it being a bit wet, mate. Gave it a wash.'

'No probs, Josh,' Nick said, taking the tarp. 'It's all good, mate. Don't worry about it.'

Laura came to the flywire door behind her husband, her apron still on. She looked past Nick with a soft, concerned expression. 'How are the kids doing, Josh?'

Josh cleared his throat, looking out toward the street. 'Oh mate, we're all in a freakin' messed up state. It'll be a while, I think. To be honest, I think Jeannie will miss the dog the most.'

Dinner was a long, drawn-out, tear-ridden affair. The food sat largely untouched on the plates, the salt shakers and bread crusts looking stark under the yellow kitchen light. Every time a fork clinked against porcelain, it seemed too loud.

After the plates were cleared, Chris slipped out the back door without a word. The evening air had turned cooler, the twilight painting the backyard in shades of deep blue and grey. He walked over to the fence and stood at the edge of the fresh mound of earth beneath the lemon tree. He dug his hands deep into his pockets, his chin trembling as he stared at the dirt, trying his best not to sob. But his eyes kept getting wet, the tears spilling over his cheeks and dripping onto his sneakers.

Inside, Rowena was standing by the back window. Looking through the bottom edge of the cream roller blind, she saw her brother's small silhouette standing lonely against the back fence. She watched him for a minute, then quietly turned and let herself out the back door.

Rowena and Chris had the typical sister-brother relationship. Most days, they were at each other's throats, fighting over the television or shouting down the hallway, wanting to strangle the life out of each other over the smallest things. But then there were the other times, the quiet, unexpected moments where they shared a joke, or a memory, or just a bit of fun that belonged only to them.

Rowena sidled up to Chris, her shoes making no sound on the damp grass. She stood beside him for a long time, watching the shadows lengthen over the fresh grave. She reached up and wiped her own wet eyes with the back of her hand.

'Remember when he was a puppy?' she said softly, her voice breaking the twilight quiet. 'When he fell down the veranda stairs because his ears were too big?'

Chris gave a small, jerky nod. 'Yeah,' he choked out. 'And how he used to bump into the coffee table when he was chasing his own tail...' He tried to add something else, but the words got tangled in his throat, coming out as an unintelligible blubbing sound.

Rowena didn't laugh. She moved a step closer, reached her arm out, and pulled him into a firm, one-armed hug across his shoulders. Chris leaned into her, his head dropping against her neck as he let the tears come.

Up at the kitchen window, Jeannie stepped into the dark. She'd come to see where the kids had gotten to, wondering how they would handle the first night without the dog's usual barking at the gate. She stood by the sink, holding back one edge of the cream roller blind with two fingers.

Through the glass, she watched her two children holding onto each other in the dusk, their shapes blurring together against the fence. She stood there for what seemed like the longest time, her own chest aching, watching them bear the weight of it together.

Rowena cried herself to sleep that night, her face buried deep in her pillow to muffle the sound. Come to think of it, as the house went completely dark and the street grew quiet, they all did, one way or another.

The next morning, Josh stared at his phone for a long time before dialing. His chest felt heavy, the silence of the house weighing on him as he finally called his boss. He kept his explanation brief, his voice tight as he explained the sudden loss and requested a few days of compassionate leave. On the other end of the line, his boss sighed heavily, the irritation clear. 'Yeah, well, I guess shit happens,' the boss muttered, offering a blunt, transactional kind of sympathy. Josh swallowed the lump in his throat, agreeing quietly, 'Yeah, I just wish it didn't.'

Recognising that none of them were in any state to face the world, Josh made the executive decision to keep Chris and Rowena home from school. The morning hours stretched out, long and hollow. The children moped around the living room in their pyjamas, moving like ghosts through a house that suddenly felt too big. Every now and then, they would cross paths in the hallway or by the kitchen counter, exchanging a silent, heavy hug or a quiet word of comfort, trying to patch over the sudden crater left in their lives.

Years later, specific fragments of that raw afternoon would remain permanently burned into the children's memories. Chris would always vividly recall looking out the front window,

peering through a tiny, forgotten gap at the bottom of the plastic roller blind. Through that sliver of space, he watched the silhouette of the policeman methodically finishing up the grim paperwork on the driveway. Rowena's memories were anchored in a different kind of pain; she remembered the rare, grounding feeling of her dad holding her tight while she sobbed until her chest ached. Over and over in her mind, she replayed the faint, echoing sound of Larry's final, distant yelp cutting through the air.

As Chris grew older, his view of his father became complicated. He often thought that Josh lacked certain practical life skills and had a frustrating habit of rushing into situations without thinking them through. Yet, despite those flaws, Josh managed to find a rare, profound strength that particular day. Sitting on the living room floor with his grieving children, he became the anchor they desperately needed. He gently guided their tears toward happier memories, reminding them of the good times, like the way Larry would chase his own shadow or wait faithfully by the front gate every afternoon. Looking at his kids, Josh offered a piece of quiet wisdom that stayed with them forever: 'Some things start and then end, far too early.'

Chapter Eleven

The relief was physical, a sudden loosening in Josh's chest the moment the keys left his hand. For years, the relentless static of the telephone had been a slow-draining poison. Customers calling daily, demanding immediate answers, peppering him with too many questions, or venting their venom over things completely out of his control. The stress had clawed at him until he was raw. Walking away was supposed to be the victory. Josh decided to quit, his boss, not thrilled but he understood the harsh grind of annoyed customers would take its toll.

But the victory was short-lived.

The tip-off from his mate in the electrical trade about an opening at a local supply company turned out to be hot air. The opportunity dissolved, leaving Josh stranded in a two-month void of unemployment. The modest cushion of savings they had managed to scrape together began to bleed out, dollar by dollar.

Josh was furious at himself for jumping before he was sure, for not securing the contract before handing over his keys. He masked the anxiety with a practiced indifference. 'Ah well,' he muttered, tossing a glance at the bills on the kitchen table. 'Shit happens.'

Jeannie didn't reply. She sat perfectly still, staring at the worn linoleum, her mother's sharp, historical warning echoing in her mind with the clarity of a bell: *Just like your father.*

The job he finally landed wasn't the one his mate had promised, but a role at a completely different electrical supply outlet down in Werribee.

The morning commute became his new ritual. The train trips down the line felt heavy at first, carrying a grim familiarity. They reminded him of the depressing treks he used to make to the welfare office, surrounded by the frail and the forgotten heading to endless medical appointments. But Josh quickly adjusted to the early shift. At dawn, the carriage was a cavernous, echoing shell—a mostly empty train cutting through the grey Victorian morning toward Werribee. It gave him time to think, even if he didn't always like where his thoughts went.

For a while, the persistent cloud of doom and gloom parted. Things looked up. Josh found a comfortable rhythm with the blokes at the new yard. There was a mutual, unspoken understanding among the four-man team: Josh handled the front counter, managing the invoices and the light trade, while the younger, sturdier blokes took care of the heavy lifting and loading bay duties.

With the boss tucked away in the back office, the days ticked over with an easy efficiency. Floating between the stock shelves and the counter, they traded yarns to pass the time. They shared stories of the good old days, the lean years, and the intricate, messy details of their family lives. Listening to them, Josh felt a quiet, familiar ache. He couldn't help but notice how the other men spoke about their homes with a warmth and positivity that seemed entirely missing from his own house.

Yet, there were bright spots. That spring, Josh took the kids to the Royal Melbourne Show. It had been years since he last braved the crowds. By the end of the day, their legs were throbbing, and his pockets were significantly lighter, but the kids each clutched a couple of prize showbags, their faces split into identical, ear-to-ear grins. Seeing them like that brought a rare, genuine softness to the house. Jeannie watched them untangle their treasures

on the living room floor, her heart lighter than it had been in months, quietly grateful for the brief truce with reality.

Turning forty brought a reflective, sharper edge to Josh. One Sunday afternoon, the autumn sun finally dipped behind the roofline, casting their small front verandah into cool, pleasant shade. Josh sat on the timber boards, looking across the intersection to the corner of Cartledge Street.

There they were again. Nick and Laura.

The couple had dragged two vinyl chairs out from their dining room table straight onto the grassless patch of dirt by their porch, sitting in total, unbothered silence.

'G'day, neighbours!' Josh called out, throwing a mock-grand wave across the bitumen.

Nick and Laura looked up, their faces instantly lighting up with simple, identical smiles as they waved back in unison.

To most of the street, the couple diagonally opposite were widely considered to be 'ten cents short of a dollar.' Nick worked a grueling, invisible shift as a cleaner at a major manufacturing plant. Laura worked a supported kitchen-hand role at the local RSL, her routine dictated by simplicity and patience.

They shared their lives with Vince, a scruffy little terrier mix who possessed an uncanny knack for finding weak spots in Nick's constant, mismatched fence repairs. Vince was street-smart, though. Whenever he escaped, he didn't run for the main road; he trotted straight over to Chris and Rowena's yard, as if executing a familiar safety drill. The kids would routinely scoop him up and walk him back across the asphalt.

Josh watched the couple resume their silent vigil. 'They're not very bright,' he muttered to Jeannie, a smirk playing on his lips. 'Determined, I'll give 'em that. But not bright.'

Jeannie sipped her tea, watching the pair across the road. She didn't see stupidity. She saw plodders, people who possessed the rare, quiet grace to just keep on keeping on, weathering the daily grind without complaint or existential panic. There were days she desperately wished Josh had a bit of the plodder in him. A bit of consistency.

Josh chuckled, shaking his head. 'Look at 'em. Long grass waving in the breeze like a paddock, and they just sit there staring at nothing. Not a book between 'em. Rarely even see a mug of coffee. I bet they're so stupid they can't even read.'

He was always friendly enough when he spoke to them face-to-face, but behind closed doors, his judgment was absolute. He had never crossed their threshold, nor had an invitation ever been extended. Their house was a fortress of privacy. Jeannie, however, found comfort in their presence. To her, they were peaceful, sweet, and entirely harmless. Sure, Nick carried too much weight around his middle, and Laura's hair looked like it hadn't seen a comb since Tuesday, but they were an anchor. A symbol of absolute stability in a neighborhood that was changing too fast. To Josh, they were just a monument to human dullness.

The RSL club took care of their own. Every Christmas and major holiday, the management put on a spread for Nick and Laura. The manager was fiercely protective of them. 'Ten cents short doesn't mean they're not useful,' he'd tell the committee over a cold beer. 'Old Laura there will clean up any mess you leave her, and Nick's a reasonable bloke. Okay, so he might give her a bit of a slap occasionally when they get into it, but hey—that's domestic business. Not mine.'

The club also coordinated welfare teams to assist aging veterans. Every few weeks, the manager would quietly dispatch a bloke with a commercial mower to tidy up Nick and Laura's front lawn and the long nature strip running along the asphalt.

Josh, entirely unaware of this arrangement, took great delight in the patchy results. 'Take a look at that,' he laughed from the window one evening. 'Ol' Nick... he can manage to mow the bloody front, but he leaves the backyard to turn into a jungle. Stupid, that fella. Don't get me wrong, Jeannie, he's nice enough, but that part of his brain is missing.'

Jeannie kept her eyes on her teacup. She had seen the RSL utility truck pull up weeks ago. She knew exactly why the front got done, but she chose the safety of silence. *I wish someone would do that for us occasionally*, she thought bitterly. *We could do with a hand. Especially with Dad's bloody mower in the repair shop again.*

'There, he's done it again,' Josh barked a few days later, leaning against the glass. 'Not mowed the back. Stupid Nick. Ha, what an idiot.'

Jeannie looked up, the steam from her mug dampening her face. 'Well... perhaps he's just worn out from doing the front, Josh. Maybe he'll get around to it tomorrow?'

Josh just shook his head, turning away from the window. 'He's a bloody idiot,' he muttered under his breath. He had no desire to entertain Jeannie's excuses, concrete in his worldview, stubborn to the bone.

Jeannie set her mug down with a deliberate, hollow click. 'I remember the time Larry got hit by the car,' she said, her voice dropping into a quiet, dangerous calm. 'Nick was the first one out there. He didn't even hesitate. He brought out that big heavy tarp so we could carry Larry back into the yard safely. I don't remember thinking he was stupid then. Do you, Josh? Do you think he was being stupid then?'

Josh shifted his weight, his eyes darting to the floorboards.

'And then,' Jeannie pressed on, her eyes locking onto his, 'he stood out the front, calm as you like, and explained the whole thing to the police. Directed the divisional van right down the driveway so they wouldn't block traffic. Chatting away with them. Was he an idiot then? Nah. I don't think so.'

Josh took a deep, defensive breath, expanding his chest. 'Yeah, well... there are exceptions to every rule.'

Jeannie didn't push it further. She finished her tea in the heavy silence that followed, then rose and walked inside to check on the kids, leaving Josh alone with the shadows stretching across the verandah.

1987, Josh is 41, The new year brought a massive shift for the household. Chris started high school. The campus was a sprawling brick complex just a few blocks down the road, but on day one, it felt like an entirely different planet.

Everything was a shock to the system. Chris spent the first week perpetually lost, trying to decipher room codes and navigate the sea of loud, unfamiliar faces. He managed to locate a few boys from his old primary school, and they spent their lunch breaks huddled near the perimeter fence, watching the year twelves dominate the yard. It felt wrong that there was no playground equipment—no swings, no slides, just vast expanses of grey asphalt and red dust.

Chris and his mates muttered about it often; they felt entirely unequipped for this sudden leap into adulthood.

The academic structure was frustrating. In primary school, Mrs. Gallagher had been the sun around which their entire day rotated. Now, every time a bell rang, a new teacher walked through the door with a different set of rules and an entirely different temperament. Chris struggled to keep the names straight.

English class was the worst. The curriculum demanded they read a novel in absolute silence and then analyze it as a group. But Chris's brain didn't work that way. For years, he had processed words by reading them aloud, feeling the shape of the sentences. The suffocating quiet of the high school classroom made his eyes skip across the pages without absorbing a thing.

Recognizing his struggle after he repeatedly disrupted the silence by whispering the text to himself, the teacher began sending Chris out into the corridor. He spent his mornings sitting against the cold lockers, reading out loud to his own shadow. It would be a long, painful time before the habit of silent reading finally took hold.

When class discussions began, Chris was completely at sea. The teacher would ask a question about a character's motives, and Chris would realize with a jolt of panic that the rest of the room was already three pages ahead of him.

'You'll need to catch up at home, Christopher,' the teacher noted, tapping his desk.

Sometimes he did, huddled under his bedsheets with a torch. But just as often, he didn't. He plodded through the curriculum, but it was an awkward, stumbling sort of progress.

Other subjects were manageable. Mathematics, at this junior level, was mostly repetition, which Chris absorbed easily enough. However, the classroom dynamic was flawed. A group of highly advanced students had staked out the desks directly in front of the teacher's blackboard, hogging all the personalized attention and feedback. Down at the back of the room, where Chris sat, the noise level was higher and the guidance was scarce. At twelve years old, it didn't seem to matter much. But Chris had a creeping suspicion that in the higher forms, the neglect would cost him.

Woodwork, however, was a sanctuary. The smell of sawdust, the tactile weight of the pine, and the physical reality of the tools intrigued him. The workshop was a cacophony of banging hammers and screaming drop-saws, but ironically, the external noise allowed Chris to get completely lost in his own thoughts. He would zone out entirely, focusing on smoothing an edge with sandpaper, completely missing the teacher's repeated shouts that it was time to pack up. Nearly every week, Chris was the last one left in the room, frantically sweeping up wood shavings while the bell rang for the next period.

If high school taught Chris anything in those first few months, it wasn't algebra or literature, it was survival.

He developed a keen, sharp eye for the social hierarchy. He learned to spot the senior bullies from a distance, the boys with the undone ties, the scuffed boots, and the cruel, bored eyes. He watched them wander the courtyards during recess like sharks testing a cage, looking for an easy target to humiliate. Chris made it his primary mission to remain invisible, mastering the art of blending into the brickwork, doing everything in his power to never give them a reason to look his way.

The human mind is a strange filter, capturing the exact same childhood and spinning it into two entirely different worlds. For Josh and Jeannie, watching their children grow up was like reading two completely different books written about the same house.

Here is a refined, deeper expansion of those shared memories, contrasting the sharp edges of Rowena's recollection with the bright, kinetic energy of Chris's perspective.

'He had a bit of a sixth sense,' one of his mates would say years later, watching him navigate a crowded room with an eerie, quiet precision. 'You can pick them out easily, Chris. I'm not sure how you do that.'

Chris would just offer a faint, knowing smile. 'You watch them,' he explained softly. 'You look at how they watch other people. How they talk to each other, how they position themselves, how they... oh, there's a whole bunch of things. The main thing is just to stay well clear of them.'

For Chris, the world wasn't a threat; it was a sprawling, living puzzle box. Every day was a whole new adventure packed with hidden mechanics to explore and figure out. While

others saw danger or malice, Chris saw data points, human quirks, and mysteries waiting to be solved. By the time evening arrived, he would practically be bursting at the seams, barely getting his shoes off before flooding his mum and dad with stories of the day's discoveries. He was a boy who naturally filtered out the grey, choosing instead to see the vibrant, golden good in almost everything.

Rowena lived in a different house entirely. When she looked backward, her memory painted a bleak, monochrome existence, an expanse of surviving rather than living. Her entire childhood narrative was punctuated positively by only two isolated islands of joy.

The first was a summer holiday at Echuca, the family crammed into a beaten-up car that smelled of hot vinyl and old oil, chasing the cool relief of the Murray River. The second was a single day at the Royal Melbourne Show, where they trudged through the inevitable rain, mud clinging to their shoes, only to leave with a few modest, cheap showbags to show for their efforts. Jeannie would often try to gently rewrite the margins for her, reminding her of sunny afternoons or small kindnesses. But those memories were like water on hot pavement, they vaporised instantly, leaving no trace in Rowena's mind.

Instead, her mental archive was crowded with the sharp stabs of physical and emotional discomfort: The physical breaks: Falling hard off the splintered back fence, the sickening crack, and the dull ache of a fractured wrist. The playground cruelties: Being shoved from behind at school, landing face-first into a cold mud puddle while the laughter echoed around her. The losses: The panic of losing her school bag and knowing there was no money to easily replace it. The quiet deprivations: Shivering under thin blankets in a freezing bedroom, and endless, empty weekends where absolutely nothing happened because they couldn't afford to do anything.

Their recreation was entirely free: just another slow, quiet walk around the block.

Even dinner offered no comfort. Their mother's cooking was an exercise in pure utility, bland, repetitive meals where nothing ever really stood out, designed to fill stomachs rather than please palates.

Then there were the handouts. When neighbours who managed to cultivate thriving veggie gardens brought over baskets of excess produce, it triggered a fierce, burning humiliation in Rowena. She despised the charity. It felt like a public stamp of their failure. Clutching those moments to her chest like a shield, she made a silent, unbreakable vow to

herself: *When I grow up, I will work so hard that I will never, ever have to accept a handout from anyone again.*

Chris, of course, saw a jackpot.

'Yay! Freebies!' he would cheer, diving into the dirt-flecked bounty as if it were treasure. One perceptive neighbour knew that a basket of silverbeet and bruised tomatoes wasn't exactly the kind of thing that made a kid's eyes light up. To soften the blow of charity, she would secretly tuck a few bars of chocolate beneath the leafy greens. For Chris, it was pure magic; for Rowena, it was just sugar-coated pity.

In the quiet sanctuary of the master bedroom, Josh would lie awake, completely fascinated by the fractured mirror of his children's minds. He loved hearing them talk about the old days, marveling at how a single shared event could be fiercely positive for one and deeply traumatic for the other.

When the house finally fell silent, he and Jeannie would lie side by side in the dark, chatting quietly. These night chats were a ritual, sometimes stretching for hours into the early morning. They would dissect the day, marvel at the vast, unbridgeable differences between their children, and wonder how two seeds planted in the exact same soil could grow into such vastly different entities.

Chapter Twelve

Hoppers Crossing Shopping Centre opens (a major retail hub for the area). A supermarket, a homewares store and a small bunch of specialty shops, butchers and so on. The family went to visit, it was a marvel at the time, but nothing compared to more modern shopping malls yet to come.

Jeannie sits and thinks one day, she misses Larry the dog, how he would nuzzle up to her and provide that calming influence. Jeannie certainly didn't miss the vacuuming to try and get rid of the hair it would shed, that was a never ending thing. School holidays she would get the kids to do the vacuuming and brushing Larry. She could sit for ages with a cup

of tea in hand, in their small dining area, heater on in the winter, staying warm and hoping things would turn out alright.

Days of wondering, thinking, breathing easily as she sat and pondered things. She recalls the dog as a pup out in the backyard laying, running about and doing 'zoomies' around the yard until a few minutes later it would be worn out, then rest and go again. It would cause her to giggle and then get tears in her eyes, the good times mixed with the 'other' times.

Jeannie knew when it was really worn out and would call it to come inside. Larry would lollop in the door panting, with a smile a mile wide and its tail wagging slowly. It would then drop onto the dog bed in the corner and fall asleep quickly.

In the winter Larry would still run outside even if it was cold or raining. Soaked through Jeannie then had to dry it off with a towel, turn the heat up, and see to it that Larry didn't burn its fur by getting too close to the heater.

There were lots of memories that flitted through her head, different things that the dog did, or didn't do that would cause a giggle and a tear.

Lunchtime would come around, all alone in the house waiting for the kids and Josh to come home much later in the day. Most of the time lunch was a simple affair, a sandwich, white bread, ham and cheese. The ham always seemed to be the processed kind, forced into a square log then sliced at the local supermarket. Or lunch could be leftovers, last night's meal and hopefully it's not gone too crazy from being in the fridge.

After lunch Jeannine had a routine, vacuum, mop the floor in the hard floor areas sometimes, two times a week, the house was small so it didn't take long to mop.

On the other days, grocery shopping would happen, sometimes before lunch and other times after. Occasionally the after lunch time would mean she would shop for something to eat at lunch, especially if she was unsure of what she wanted. Rarely she would stop by the fish and chip shop, or go to the milk bar for a pie.

Josh liked to mow the grass and do the ‘outside things’ when he could, so Jeannie would avoid those tasks, occasionally she would mow the grass if Josh got busy with other things and she had time on her hands.

The company Josh works for is taken over and Josh is edged out by a domineering manager who makes life hell. Work pressure, reports due, invoices incorrect. Josh leaves and is unemployed for months, back on the dole, a blight on his ego, but he was free of the harassment of the boss, it turned out the boss had a relative ready to put into the job.

Co-workers apparently made things difficult for the new employee without making things obvious, they liked Josh, he was easy going and knew how to look after customers. A few customers complained that the ‘new guy’ was an idiot.

Josh Starts a new job working in an electrical supply store from August 1988 after a period of four months of unemployment, the new boss knew about the takeover at the previous place and knew that Josh was a good worker, and that his being ‘nudged out,’ was a set up. He also knew that at age forty two, he still had some drive in him yet.

The job progressed well Josh was very happy there and a few of his previous customers came over from the other store when word got out.

The family had a holiday at a friend's farm at Echuca for a week later in the year. They stop at a garage on the way, while a weekend mechanic takes a look at a noise their car is making. They take a break at the cafe next door, fingers crossed that there's not a big expense with the mechanic.

Rowena recounts a few negative memories of family events, Chris listens intently and then adds some fun activities that took place. Like finding a blue tongue lizard in the park, shoulder rides along the beach at Altona, being given small toys from Coles picked up on a whim, things like that. Rowena adds, ‘Yeah but look at the car! It's stuffed! Something always goes wrong! And that time that Larry died, that was horrible.’

Josh looks at Jeannie who has been a bit weary eyed. She responds with, ‘Yeah and the sky is falling, and we'll all die in an accident, yeah and a million other possibilities. Yes,

things happen, both good and bad. Today's car issue might be a big thing, or a small thing... We don't know yet, and Larry dying was very sad, but things move on, no one wanted it to happen, but it did, and we handled it as a family, yeah?'

Rowena nodded, a tear formed in her eyes, she was reminiscing about Larry. Rowena always felt somehow responsible for the dog getting out, she was never sure if the gate being slightly open was something she did or didn't do, the thing was she never told anyone that it may have been her, she just hung onto the guilt that came with her thought.

The mechanic walks in, good news, it's a loose coil that was rattling about and a spark plug lead that had a bad connection, making the car run rough. Josh and Jeannie had a big sigh of relief, the mechanic said it would be \$40. They were very grateful and were soon on their way.

On the way out of the Cafe Jeannie put her arm around Rowena, and quietly said, 'Yep you're right bad things happen, and it's not about how it happened, it's about how we pick ourselves up after it happens, the aim being to get up quickly after the fall and move on. It may not be easy but if you fall and stay down, there's not much fun in that. Get up, move on, have fun.'

Their friend points out after chatting to the pair for a few days, 'Well one thing's for sure, every time you fall down, you seem to get back up again fairly well.' Josh then adds, 'Well yeah I guess so, but Ask 'Rowie' and she'll tell you it's all doom and gloom.'

Rowie looks up at Jeannie who smiles and winks at her. Rowie sits up straight in her chair and says, 'Well falling is one thing, and yes I can be a bit negative at times, but there's always a silver lining, you just have to be able to look for it.'

The week away goes well, the friends have a farm of sorts, some beef cattle off in the distance, the yards were dry but their kids had fun with Rowie and Chris. Come to think of it, they all had fun, chatting, reminiscing and keeping things nice, a couple of day trips here and there.

Rowena starts driving lessons, it's now 1989. Josh shows her the basics and helps her build her skills, Rowena notes that, 'Dad has the patience of a saint.' She is very grateful for his tutoring. Jeannie helps her with the questions for the test, she passed with a small margin of error. Nonetheless, she passed.

On their drives to practice her skills, Josh points out to Rowie that her attitude has altered, she is now a bit positive about things in general and at the moment is putting a lot of effort into her driving practice, seemingly seeing the brighter side of things.

Rowie adds in, 'Well, that time on holidays when the car played up, I thought everything was doom and gloom, like the times you lost your job, but you'd get another one again, eventually. And thinking about what mum said when we were in the cafe, both good and bad things happen.'

Rowena wondered how many other girls knew how to change a tyre and had practised it a few times. How to check the coolant level, brake fluid, and a bunch of other things to do with safety and maintenance of a car. She felt sure that many would know how to wash a car... a simple way to pay back dad for the lessons etc.

Rowie added to the conversation, 'And it's the extra things, you show me about the car and how things work and all that. The other girls don't seem to get that, they just want to drive, not know more. Who knew that I needed to know more, but the more I think about it, it can be useful if things stuff up, at least I'll have SOME clue about where to look.'

Josh sat back, smiled and felt comfortable with the notion that he had passed on something of obvious value. It was a rare moment of quiet satisfaction, but in the winter of 1990, that warmth was quickly snuffed out by a chill that settled deep into his chest.

At forty-four, Josh had always believed he could work his way out of any corner. But the bout of pneumonia that hit him that July didn't just lay him low; it anchored him to the mattress for four grueling weeks. Feverish and gasping, he watched his accumulated sick leave evaporate into nothing. When the worst of the infection finally broke, it left behind a hollowed-out recovery period, an extended rehab where his lungs felt like dry paper.

While he was convalescing, the local economy took a sharp downturn. Electrical contracting work in the Werribee area dried up almost overnight. When Josh finally called the yard to announce he was fit for light duties, the news was delivered with a blunt, apologetic finality: his old job had vanished.

Jeannie tried to hide her anxiety behind the rhythmic clicking of her knitting needles, but her mind raced. She loved Josh, but watching him pace the house, she couldn't help but wonder about the pattern of his employment. Was it something Josh did? Did his bluntness annoy people at work? She opened her mouth to ask, but caught herself. Josh was already raw; a comment like that would trigger an explosion of defensiveness.

Then she looked closer at the reality of the situation. It wasn't his personality; it was his body. The legacy of that severe injury at the end of his apprenticeship had always capped his physical ceiling. But even that logic fell away against the brutal backdrop of the 1990 recession. The company hadn't just let Josh go, it had collapsed entirely. Even if his lungs were clear and his back was strong, the gates would still be locked.

To pass the time and bring in a few dollars, Josh crawled out to his backyard shed, desperate to return to his wooden toys. But the moment the bandsaw bit into the pine, the fine, resinous dust hit his compromised airways. He was seized by a coughing fit so violent it left him leaning against the workbench, gasping for air. The verdict was absolute: he couldn't continue.

It was a bitter pill. His weekend market stalls were just beginning to find some momentum, with local parents recognizing the sturdy, honest craftsmanship of his trucks and other toys. Now, all that momentum threatened to turn to ash. Lying back in bed that afternoon, staring at the ceiling, his anger boiled. Yet, the sheer exhaustion of his illness acted as a strange equalizer. It drained the venom from his frustration. He couldn't fight his own lungs. As Jeannie gently reminded him while setting down a mug of tea, 'Things happen, Josh. We just pivot.'

Fourteen-year-old Chris couldn't replicate his father's intricate joinery, but he possessed his father's stubborn pride. Seeing the half-finished inventory in the shed, the boy stepped into the gap. His initial attempts were basic, simple block letters, crudely sanded spinning tops, and unpainted pull-toys, but his hands grew steadier with every Saturday that passed.

For the next month, Jeannie and Chris managed the Werribee market stall alone. They packed the car the night before, using Josh's remaining high-quality stock as the anchor pieces to draw crowds, while Chris's simpler creations filled out the edges. The regular stallholders, a tight-knit community of knitters, potters, and jam-makers, quickly noticed Josh's absence. When Jeannie explained the pneumonia and the job loss, the community rallied, sending back warm wishes and buying a few extra toys just to help the family through the winter.

By September, Josh's breathing had stabilized enough for him to face the gauntlet of the Job Network provider in Werribee. He prepared himself for the usual soul-crushing wait, but fortune finally swung his way for once. The regular caseworker, a bureaucratic box-ticker who viewed Josh as a relic of the manufacturing era, was away on leave.

Instead, Josh was called into the cubicle of a young woman named Sarah, who was filling in. She didn't just glance at his file; she studied the gaps. She looked at the forty-four-year-old man sitting before her, his shoulders square but his knuckles white as he gripped the arms of the chair. She could hear the quiet desperation vibrating in his throat when he spoke.

She looked up from his resume, tilting her head. 'Josh, I see thirty years of trade work here, but I also see someone who has had to talk his way through market stalls, manage suppliers, and deal with disgruntled site managers. What about customer service? Are you good at that?'

Josh's eyes lit up. 'Oh yeah, I've always been good at that. A positive attitude and carefully listening to what people want is a big part of all that, and yep, I do real good at—'

Before he could launch into a long-winded story about a difficult foreman he had pacified back in '82, Sarah held up her hand in a firm, polite 'stop' gesture.

'Josh, listen to me,' she said, her tone sharp but deeply kind. 'There is a full-time opening at a carpet showroom nearby. The owner is a blunt, no-nonsense bloke who runs on tight schedules. I want to put you forward for that role, AND I want to make a suggestion: when you chat to him in the interview, keep your responses short. If he asks for examples, then you add them on. If you give him too much too soon, it looks like you're trying to cover for something. It has a negative effect.'

Josh blinked, the instinct to argue rising and then immediately dying. The advice was a revelation. He nodded slowly. 'Short. Positive. Got it.'

Sarah smiled, picked up the telephone, and dialed the carpet shop. Ten minutes later, Josh was walking out the door with an interview time locked in for two o'clock that afternoon.

During the short bus ride to the showroom, Josh rehearsed Sarah's advice like a mantra. *Short sentences. Positive angles.*

The owner of 'Werribee Carpets' was a man named Ron, whose face looked like it had been carved out of a rough block of cedar. He didn't offer Josh a seat; they stood by a towering rack of heavy Axminster wool samples.

'Say's here you've done electrical layout,' Ron grunted, tapping Josh's resume. 'Why the change?'

'Looking for a stable environment where I can use my people skills,' Josh replied cleanly, suppressing the urge to mention his pneumonia or his ruined lungs.

Ron raised an eyebrow, waiting for the usual ramble that unemployed blokes gave. When Josh remained silent, looking him dead in the eye with a calm smile, Ron cleared his throat. 'Right. Can you handle installers? They're a rough bunch at times.'

'I've worked on building sites a lot, Ron. I speak their language, and I respect their time.'

The interview lasted less than fifteen minutes. Josh left the shop feeling naked, convinced he hadn't said enough. But at 4:30 PM, the phone rang in the hallway of the family home.

It was Ron. 'I liked your style, Josh. No fluff. No sob stories. Can you start Monday morning, 8:00 AM sharp?'

After hanging up, Josh immediately called Sarah back at the Job Network office. The relief in his voice was palpable. 'He offered it to me,' Josh told her, a grin breaking across his face. 'That advice of yours... It did the trick. Thank you.'

The job paid less than his old trade work, and the environment was average at best, but Josh counted his blessings with a fierce, quiet gratitude. Some work was infinitely better than no work. He had utterly loathed the dole. He hated the dreary, drawn-out train trips to the social security office, the meager payments that made him feel like a beggar in his own town, and the heavy blanket of uselessness that settled over him each morning.

Now, he had a uniform. He had a train to catch with a destination at the end of it. He had a stronger sense of purpose and a renewed drive. The atmosphere at home shifted instantly; Jeannie's shoulders relaxed, and the kids stopped walking on eggshells. Josh simply wasn't much fun when he was idle for too long.

The duties at the carpet shop were straightforward, bordering on mundane, but Josh approached them with the discipline of an apprentice. He was responsible for keeping the vast showroom clean, opening the roller shutters on time, locking up securely, and memorizing the inventory, from cheap nylon twists to high-end woven wools.

Crucially, he became the bridge between the showroom and the contract installers. When the rough-and-ready carpet layers backed their vans up to the roller door at 8:15 AM, Josh had their rolls of broadloom, underlay, and smooth-edge gripper strips prepped and verified. If the yardage was wrong, it cost the installers time and money. Josh made sure it was never wrong.

His day always began in the silence of the early morning, pushing a commercial vacuum cleaner across the vast expanse of the showroom floor. The machine had a frustratingly short extension lead. Josh could only clear about half the space before the cable went taut, forcing him to switch off the motor, walk back, unplug it, and thread it into the next power point across the room.

In those quiet morning hours, before the neon lights were switched on, Josh worked in a state of high awareness. There were no customers early on, but he had to keep his wits about him. The office phone could ring at any moment with an order change, or an installer might drop in unexpectedly for extra supplies.

By 9:30 AM, the bell above the door would jingle, signaling Ron's arrival. Ron would potter about in the back office, managing the ledger, processing invoices, quoting jobs, and placing wholesale orders. If the morning sales went well or the weather looked clear for a

round of golf, Ron would slip out by 3:00 PM, rationalizing his early departure as a fair trade-off for the alternate Saturdays Josh worked alone.

Josh didn't resent Ron's lazy demeanour. In fact, he preferred it. With the boss gone, the showroom became Josh's domain. He discovered that the natural warmth he had used at the weekend markets translated perfectly to the retail floor. He could read people the moment they crossed the threshold, whether it was a young couple looking for cheap carpet for their first fixer-upper, or an elderly widow who needed someone to patiently explain the difference between a loop and a plush pile.

He handled them all with a positive, unhurried attitude. He was no longer a broken tradesman; he was the man who helped people build their homes.

Chapter Thirteen

It's 1991 and Josh is set to turn 45, now as his kids are getting older, there's more happening around the house, for Rowena Banks the transition from school uniform to the corporate world happened fast. It began with an off-the-cuff question over a high school lunch. Maree Tunstall, looking at her classmate, casually asked what kind of work Rowena wanted to pursue. As they chatted, Maree revealed that her father, Mark Tunstall, was looking for a fresh face at his accounting firm in Werribee. Mark had explicitly asked his daughter if she knew anyone at school who presented well, spoke clearly, and possessed an innate eye for detail. To Maree, there was no contest: 'Rowena Banks.'

Rowena let the idea sit overnight, the weight of adulthood suddenly knocking at the door. The next evening, she cautiously asked her parents if a bookkeeping position would suit her. Her mother, Jeannie, encouraged her immediately. The Tunstall firm was small, but it had a rock-solid reputation and did honest, steady business.

The days leading up to the interview became a family crash course in corporate survival. Dinner table conversations morphed into mock interviews. Jeannie and Josh coached her on the invisible rules of the workforce: what to say, what absolutely *not* to say, how to make direct eye contact, and how to anticipate what a business owner was looking for.

When interview day arrived, Rowena found herself walking up a flight of stairs above a ground-floor bookshop. The scent of old paper gave way to the sharp, clean smell of a professional office. The foyer was welcoming, dominated by a large, brightly lit fish tank that hummed quietly in the corner. The layout was functional: a tidy lunchroom, a main reception area, and a long corridor where individual offices branched off. Mark Tunstall's office sat proudly at the front, its wide windows looking directly down onto the steady hum of the street below.

The interview was straightforward. Mark didn't mince words about the realities of a traineeship. 'It's a trainee role and doesn't pay much in the beginning,' he said honestly, resting his hands on his desk. 'But if you want a job, I want to offer it to you.'

He mapped out the path ahead: a mid-January start, hands-on training under his watchful eye, and a short, intensive course at a business college in the Melbourne CBD a few days a week. 'I pay for that,' Mark explained. 'If you pass, and most people do, then the job is yours, permanently providing a successful probation happens.'

Rowie accepted, though she couldn't help but notice how brutally short her final summer break would be. The carefree high school holidays were replaced by the standard Christmas shutdown, a single week and a bit of breathing room in January, and then the daily grind would begin.

The mid-January start was quiet. Before sending her off to the formal city college course, Mark wanted Rowena to learn the trade *his* way. In those early weeks, his effortless mastery of ledger columns seemed lightyears beyond her comprehension. Yet, Rowie was a quick learner. Mark broke down the intimidation factor with old-school industry secrets, including a classic ledger trick: how to run her eyes down a column and add up numbers upside down to double-check calculations without flipping the page.

The firm's dynamic suited Rowena perfectly. The team was tight-knit: two qualified accountants, a full-time receptionist, and a part-time bookkeeper who spent most of her days out on-site visiting clients. Rowena was allocated a bright desk near a window. If she looked past the immediate cluster of suburban Werribee rooftops, she could just make out the silhouette of taller buildings cutting into the distant skyline.

Rowie's natural warmth quickly made her a favorite among the local business clients. She also developed a knack for filling in at the front counter. The other staff members loathed

reception duty, seemingly avoiding the telephone whenever it rang. Rowena, however, kept a sharp ear out. She could easily zip from her desk to catch the phone within three rings, and whenever her own bookkeeping workload dipped, she happily moved her ledger books to the reception desk to keep the front office running smoothly.

Her daily commute was a short train ride down the line to Werribee. Her father, Josh, warned her that the journey could be a bit bleak and industrial, though he didn't make a massive fuss about it. To Josh, train lines represented the dreary, mind-numbing regularity of the working-class grind. But for Rowie, looking out the train window wasn't depressing at all. It was a daily launchpad into a world of independence, a journey of discovering how local commerce functioned and watching how numbers breathed life into different businesses.

Eager to pull her weight now that she was earning a wage, Rowie proudly offered to pay board to her parents. Sticking to traditional family pride, both Josh and Jeannie flatly refused her money. It was a decision Jeannie would deeply look back on with regret.

Almost overnight, the family's fragile stability fractured. Jeannie's single-office administrative job was made redundant. The second income vanished. Money became incredibly tight, and the household entered a period of raw, stressful hardship.

While Jeannie faced the anxiety of sudden unemployment, Josh found himself trapped in his own mental prison at the carpet shop. His boss had become entirely intolerable, trapped in an exhausting loop of repetition, telling the exact same stories and complaints every single day. Josh found himself privately questioning if the man was suffering from the early stages of Alzheimer's or a similar neurological decline. The endless, predictable loops of conversation drove Josh absolutely nuts, wearing down his remaining patience.

One heavy afternoon, the buried pressures of the past spilled over into the living room. Jeannie revealed a secret she had carried alone for years. She recounted the terrifying chapter when Josh had been struck down with a prolonged, agonizing bout of pneumonia, a time when both of them were simultaneously out of work and food was running out. In desperation, Jeannie had quietly swallowed her pride and reached out to a local charity group.

'An anonymous group turned up at the back door,' Jeannie whispered, the memory still sharp. 'They left a box of food on the doorstep. It was basic stuff, Josh. Flour, butter, tea, sugar, some tinned soup, and tinned fruit. No luxuries.'

Josh sat entirely slumped in his dining room chair, completely mortified. The revelation stripped away his illusions of self-reliance. He stuttered, his voice catching in his throat. 'B-but... why didn't you say anything?'

Jeannie looked at him, her eyes tired but fierce. 'I always felt too proud. *You* were proud. I wanted, in fact, no, I *needed* to be strong for you and then the kids. They never knew we got help.'

Josh stared at the table, realizing how completely oblivious he had been. He had been so consumed by the physical misery of his illness and his own pride that he hadn't bothered to think through the domestic details of how their survival had actually been funded.

Rowie, now adept at spotting discrepancies in balance sheets at work, eventually came across the family bank account details at home, a statement in a pile of papers, bills and such. She was deeply shocked by the dangerously low numbers staring back at her. Without a word to anyone, she took matters into her own hands and jotted down the account and bsb numbers.

The local bank branch happened to be situated just a few doors down from Tunstall's accounting office on Watton Street. Every single pay cycle, Rowie would walk down there during her lunch break and 'tip in some rent' directly into her parents' account.

Because Jeannie was avoiding looking too closely at their financial misery, it took a long while for her to notice the discrepancy. When she finally forced herself to audit the last few months of bank statements, there it was, regular as clockwork: consistent cash deposits from Rowie.

Jeannie's initial reaction was a complicated wave of maternal annoyance, upset that her daughter felt the need to rescue them, mixed with an overwhelming sense of profound financial relief. She wrestled with her pride until she finally reached a neutral, realistic peace with it.

That evening, when Rowie walked through the front door after work, Jeannie caught her eye and quietly thanked her for the rent.

Rowie didn't make a scene. She simply smiled, brushed it off, and said, 'Well, if it helps, that's good. Now say nothing more about it!'

Jeannie nodded in silent agreement, a huge, unburdened smile breaking across her face for the first time in months.

The new year rolled in, and Josh remained anchored at the carpet shop. It wasn't a career, but it was a job. He clocked in, put on the mandatory customer-service smile, and got on with the work, suppressing his internal dissatisfaction.

Meanwhile, Chris reached the age for driving lessons, it's 1997, providing Josh with a stark contrast in how his two children approached learning. Rowie had been an analytical student, peppering him with questions about the mechanics, rules, and logic of driving. Chris took a completely different approach; he asked almost nothing.

When it came time to learn maintenance, Josh decided to test his son's quiet confidence. Instead of walking him through how to change a flat tyre, Josh stood back, crossed his arms, and simply told Chris to go ahead while he watched. At the end of the exercise, Josh quizzed him on the safety steps and mechanics of the process. Chris indeed had a solid grasp of how to do it, though he skipped a couple of critical safety details. It became clear to Josh that Chris hadn't just been ignoring past lessons; he had silently paid close attention years earlier when Dad had taught Rowie how to do it.

To Jeannie's quiet heartbreak, Rowena decided to move out of the family home, signing a lease on a flat with a friend in nearby Altona Meadows. Jeannie had always comforted herself with the traditional belief that once her children secured full-time work, they would stay nestled at home for a good while longer to build a nest egg. But Rowie had an independent streak. The moment she had a stable financial foothold, a year and a half after stepping into Tunstall's office, she was out the door. A rental property in Hoppers Crossing in a set of units. She shared with a friend from school, Karen. For both girls it was their first time out of home. They fitted out the unit with some spartan items, enough to get by

Around this time, Rowena met a local guy named Alan Henderson. Their early relationship was a volatile, on-again, off-again affair. Rowie found Alan incredibly challenging at times; he had a strong personality that forced her to stand her ground. Yet, the friction created a genuine spark. The more time they spent navigating each other's quirks, the deeper her connection to him grew. Eventually, the dramatic swings of the early days ironed themselves out, the relationship settled into a deep stability, and the two became almost inseparable.

Alan works as a Prison Officer at the Remand Centre in the city, a solid income with lots of ways to get promoted and be paid more. He would sometimes do overtime and rake in good cash from that. Alan was a stalwart for rehabilitation and years later he would end up being a supervisor at one of the new Prisons closer to Hoppers Crossing. He was doing his best to get ahead in the finance stakes

Back at home, the reality of the empty bedroom took a heavy toll on Jeannie. The physical absence of her daughter amplified her existing struggles with clinical anxiety, leaving the house feeling far too quiet during the long suburban weeks, as well as the slack of her rental input.

To cope, Jeannie anchored her calendar around Rowie's weekly visits. Once a week, Rowena would come back home for dinner, giving Jeannie a welcome excuse to channel her nervous energy into the kitchen, happily cooking up an absolute storm and filling the house with warmth, noise, and the familiar rhythms of family life.

Conversely, Josh's battle with workplace tedium was reaching a boiling point. The mind-numbing repetition of the carpet shop grew so oppressive that he began regularly taking 'mental health' days, utilising his general sick leave and burning through his accrued leave entitlements just to escape the storefront. He spent his days off frantically scouring newspapers and job boards for alternative employment, desperate to find something purposeful. Every inquiry came up blank. The lack of options fed directly into his own growing anxiety issues, leaving him feeling trapped in an endless professional cul-de-sac.

However, the historical landscape of Australian labor shifted in a way that offered Josh a rare sense of security. On 1 July 1992, the Australian Government officially introduced the mandatory Superannuation Guarantee system.

For the first time, employers were legally required to contribute toward their workers' retirement funds. Sensing a monumental shift in how the future would be won, Josh decided to take a gamble. He gathered \$1,500 of their hard-earned, fiercely guarded family savings and tipped it directly into his new superannuation account as a voluntary personal contribution.

Staring at the opening balance statement, Josh allowed himself a rare moment of optimism, hoping for big financial returns over the years to come. Watching that nest egg sit

in an account with his name on it gave him a feeling he hadn't felt in years: for once in his life, he was actually getting ahead.

Chris graduates high school, it's 1994, a milestone that brings both relief and financial anxiety to the household. He enrolls in a university Information Technology course. It is the dawn of the mid-90s tech boom; the world is shifting toward dial-up internet and personal computers. While Chris looks toward a digital future, the cost of textbooks, transport, and tuition places a silent, steady pressure on the family budget. Chris lands a part time job at a local IT store, putting together computer systems in their workshop, one mid day bout of work and Saturday mornings. It helped him immensely and took pressure off the family budget.

Karen moved out of the unit with Rowena, she moved in with her boyfriend to another unit a few streets away. Alan saw an opportunity and waited until Rowi invited him to move in, he feigned disinterest, but that didn't last long, a week later he moved in.

The next year Josh receives a minor inheritance of \$20,000 following the passing of his wealthy Uncle David. It feels like a windfall, but a quiet resentment brews beneath the surface. Unbeknownst to Josh until years later, his brother and several distant relatives received a larger slice of the estate, an extra \$2,500 each. At the time, however, Josh only sees the \$20,000 as a finite sum that will quickly dwindle if left alone. He wants to secure the family's future, and desperation in this case, breeds risk.

He conceives a reckless plan to 'double his money.' He goes to the bank and withdraws a hefty two-thousand-dollar chunk of the inheritance in cold, hard cash, heading straight for the local TAB.

Jeannie is walking home from the local shops, the plastic handles of heavy grocery bags cutting harshly into the palms of her hands. Through the glass facade of the TAB, amidst the stale smell of cigarette smoke and the glare of racing screens, she spots Josh. He is standing in line, clutching a thick envelope of cash, studying the shifting odds on the monitors. A sudden, visceral feeling washes over her, an intuition that everything is completely out of sorts.

She steps into the venue, adjusting the heavy bags, and positions herself directly behind him in the queue. Josh is transfixed by the numbers, desperately searching for the next best

thing to bet on. Jeannie steps closer, the weight of the groceries pulling at her shoulders, and whispers his name.

The cashier stands back silently from the counter, sensing the domestic drama unfolding, and stops serving. Jeannie doesn't yell; she gently talks him down, suggesting they just go home. Caught completely off guard, Josh stammers. This is his first time attempting to gamble on this scale, and the thrill is instantly replaced by exposure. The cashier waits, ready to take the money, after all, that is the job, but Jeannie keeps her voice quiet, steady, and unyielding, absorbing Josh's defensive 'yeah, but' responses.

For every excuse Josh offers, Jeannie counters with a calm 'yeah, but' of her own. In the heat of the moment, her mind flashes back to a story her mother used to tell. Her mother had recounted a nearly identical crisis involving an aunt and uncle years prior. She had delivered the warning with such fierce conviction that the wisdom had remained dormant in Jeannie, waiting for this exact day:

'Do not gamble. Temptation is a wild thing that needs a steady hand to guide it. Sure, you COULD make big money, but the opposite is just as true, and the opposite ruins lives.'

Jeannie senses a shift when Josh begins to shuffle his feet and step out of the queue. She anchors him, following him closely out the door. Just a few steps onto the pavement, Josh freezes.

'You've made it this far,' Jeannie says, her voice a mix of exhaustion and resolve. 'Now keep going. Gambling to try and get ahead is a bad move. You know it, make a good move instead.'

Josh takes a deep, ragged breath. His broad shoulders slump, deflating the manic energy that brought him here. 'Yep. You're right,' he muttered.

The walk home is heavy. The two thousand dollars remains stuffed in Josh's pocket, a volatile presence between them. The silence is thick, broken only by the rustle of Jeannie's grocery bags.

Trying to break the ice, Jeannie says, 'I'm glad I stopped you. Things could have gone very bad, very fast.'

Josh stares straight ahead. 'But the opposite could also be true. Things could have become a lot better, too.'

Jeannie watches him closely. 'Do you remember the number of the horse you wanted to bet on? Perhaps we should go back and check, or buy a paper tomorrow, and see how it did?'

Josh doesn't answer. He just keeps moving, placing one foot steadily in front of the other, terrified of what the answer might do to his resolve. If the horse lost, he'd feel foolish; if it won, he'd never forgive her. Silence carries them all the way to the front door.

Once inside, the cash doesn't return to the safety of the bank account. Instead, Josh watches silently as Jeannie places the stack of notes into an old, faded biscuit tin and hides it deep in the back of the pantry, behind the flour and canned goods. It sits there like a buried secret.

They retreat to the dining room. Jeannie fills the kettle, her hands finally free of the groceries, while Josh cracks a can of beer, the sharp *snap* of the metal ring-pull echoing in the quiet house. They sit at opposite ends of the table, trapped in their own thoughts, until the front door opens a few hours later and Chris walks home from his university lectures, entirely unaware of how close his family's trajectory came to altering.

Jeannie never tells Chris, nor anyone else, about the incident until decades later. However, from that afternoon onward, she watches Josh like a hawk. She knew that if the dragon of gambling had reared its head once, it would eventually wake up again.

A week later, Jeannie is scanning the aisles at the local supermarket. The TAB cashier, out of uniform and doing her own shopping, spots her near the registers. The woman pauses, steps forward, and touches Jeannie gently on the arm.

'I haven't seen a woman talk her husband out of placing a bet like that until that day,' the cashier says softly, her eyes tired. 'I wish more of them did. God bless you, girl. You have the sort of strength I don't see very often. God bless you.'

The tin was an old English Toffee container, its hinged lid rusted at the corners and the painted Buckingham Palace guards faded to a dull, sun-bleached pink. For months after that day, it sat tucked behind the industrial-sized bags of flour and expired cans of creamed corn, a hidden anchor in the dark of the pantry.

Every time Jeannie reached for the sugar, she could feel the weight of it ‘vibrating’ through the wooden shelving. The cash inside didn’t belong in the dark. It belonged back in the savings account, earning its microscopic interest, keeping them safe. But Josh refused to return it. Keeping it in the house was his silent protest, a physical manifestation of the life he had almost claimed.

The walk back from the betting shop had been suffocating. The summer air was thick, heavy with the smell of hot asphalt and impending rain, but neither of them commented on the weather. They just walked. Jeannie kept her purse tucked tightly under her arm, her fingers still tingling from the frantic moment she had grabbed Josh’s forearm right outside the bookie’s door, pulling him back into the crowded pavement.

‘I’m glad I stopped you,’ Jeannie said, her voice cutting through the heavy drone of afternoon traffic. She didn’t look at him, keeping her eyes fixed on the cracked pavement ahead. ‘Things could have gone very bad, very fast.’

Josh didn’t slow his pace. His jaw was set so tight a muscle twitched beneath his stubble. He stared straight ahead, his chest rising and falling in sharp, controlled breaths. ‘But the opposite could also be true,’ he muttered, his tone dangerously flat. ‘Things could have become a lot better too.’

The words hung between them like a challenge. Jeannie felt a flicker of defensive anger, but she swallowed it down, trying a different tactic. She attempted a light, almost teasing tone to break the ice, though it came out brittle.

‘Do you remember the number of the horse you wanted to bet on? Perhaps we should go back and see how it did?’

Josh didn’t answer. He didn’t even blink. He just kept going, steadily placing one foot in front of the other, his heavy work boots striking the concrete with a rhythmic, punishing thud. The silence returned, dense and absolute, stretching across the remaining three blocks to their house.

Inside, the routine of their shared life took over, operating on a bleak autopilot. Without a word, Josh unbuttoned his flannel shirt, pulled the thick stack of hundred-dollar bills from his front pocket, and walked straight to the kitchen. Jeannie watched from the hallway as he

slammed the bills into the toffee tin, pushed it deep into the pantry grid, and shut the wooden door with a sharp *click*.

They moved into the dining room like two ghosts sharing a haunting ground. Jeannie filled the kettle at the sink, the harsh rush of tap water filling the quiet house. She set it on the stove and clicked the burner, focusing entirely on the blue ring of flame. Across the room, the sharp, metallic *crack* of a beer can echoing off the plaster walls told her Josh had bypassed the tea entirely.

He sat at the head of the scarred wooden dining table, staring at the condensation pooling around the base of his can. Jeannie sat opposite him, cradling a mug she didn't really want. Neither looked at the other. The only sound was the slow, rhythmic ticking of the wall clock and the occasional hiss of Josh's beer foam.

It was a standoff without weapons, a mutual 'holding of breath' that lasted for hours, stretching the afternoon into twilight. The silence wasn't peaceful; it was a battlefield. It only finally broke when the front door rattled open, and Chris's loud, heavy footsteps filled the entryway, bringing the careless, noisy reality of the outside world back into a house that had been frozen for an awkward moment in time.

Chapter Fourteen

The year 1996, represents a distinct era in Melbourne's history and the global tech landscape. Dial-up internet is an expensive luxury, Windows 95 is reshaping home computing, and the western suburbs are defined by manufacturing, rail lines, and working-class resilience.

The mid-nineties tech boom was an aggressive, fast-moving landscape, and for a woman trying to break into it, the environment was often chilly. In 1996, the university's Information Technology labs were an overwhelming sea of backwards-facing baseball caps, baggy flannel shirts, and casual sexism. Brianna Jones entered this male-dominated arena with a quiet, razor-sharp focus. She wasn't just smart; she was a brilliant debugger, cutting through chaotic walls of C++ and complex SQL database strings with intuitive ease.

Chris Banks was utterly in awe of her. To him, staring at a screen full of logic errors was a quick way to get a headache, but Brianna handled code like a master musician reading sheet music. What used to be grueling, late-night cram sessions in front of flickering CRT monitors suddenly transformed into the highlight of his week.

Their university timetable quickly bled into their personal lives. Long hours troubleshooting assignments gave way to extended lunches at the campus cafeteria, where over lukewarm hot chips and cans of Passiona, they mapped out the differences and unexpected alignments in their lives.

Their shared passion found a natural outlet at the local IT expos and consumer electronics showcases. These events became their version of a date night. They would navigate crowded aisles flooded with the hum of cooling fans, collecting trial CDs from emerging Internet Service Providers, testing out the latest 3D graphics cards, and analyzing early PC gaming software with genuine critical interest. Slowly, naturally, the academic partnership deepened into a romance. They became a fixture in each other's worlds.

As Chris learned more about Brianna, he discovered her upbringing shared a familiar, hardworking rhythm with the Banks household, though it was shadowed by its own unique strains. Her family knew the reality of financial struggle. Her father was an old-school archetype of stability, having held down a single, unbroken manufacturing job his entire adult life. Her mother, despite taking brief intervals to raise children, was equally steady, dividing her entire working life between just two employers.

The root of the Jones family's financial situation wasn't a lack of income, but how it was managed. Brianna's youngest brother suffered from chronic asthma that required costly private specialist consultations and expensive medical equipment. Yet, counterbalancing this stress was her father's stubborn, post-war philosophy on recreation. *'I earned it, so we're going to spend it,'* was his mantra.

Every few years, the family would almost completely drain their bank accounts, and stretch their early-generation bank credit cards to the absolute limit, to fund family holidays to Europe or the United States. They built spectacular, golden memories overseas, but they sometimes returned home to a cold financial reality. They lived entirely without much of a buffer, meaning a single car breakdown or an unexpected medical invoice would trigger

hushed arguments over the kitchen table. This feast-or-famine cycle gave Brianna an underlying anxiety about money, instilling in her a fierce desire for financial independence.

When the time came for Chris to introduce Brianna to his parents, the meeting was a warm, casual affair. Jeannie Banks, always observant, pulled Josh aside the moment Brianna stepped into the kitchen to help make tea.

'She is so petite,' Jeannie whispered, looking at the slight, smartly dressed young woman.

Josh caught his wife's eye, a knowing smirk playing on his fifty-year-old face. 'That almost sounds like you're jealous.'

Jeannie shot him a playful glare, nudging him with her elbow. 'Smartarse.'

The dynamic between Chris and Brianna worked because their skills were perfectly complementary. While Brianna owned the abstract world of software design, she lacked some of the physical, tactile confidence required for the hardware side of the digital revolution. Chris possessed an innate, fiddly dexterity. Watching him ground himself with an anti-static wrist strap, solder a loose connection on a sound card, or delicately seat a fragile Pentium processor into a motherboard without bending a single pin was Brianna's turn to be in awe.

They spent their weekends hanging out around her part of town. Brianna lived in Westona, a quiet, residential pocket of homes tucked just on the fringe of Laverton. Her family's house sat only a few blocks from the Westona railway station, which suited her perfectly.

While most of her peers viewed getting a driver's licence at eighteen as a mandatory rite of passage, Brianna simply couldn't justify the cost of petrol, registration, and insurance. The suburban trains mostly ran right on schedule, delivering her straight to the university campus or into the city. She didn't see the need for a car; the tracks took her exactly where she needed to go. In her final year at Uni Chris encourages her to get her licence, mentioning that it could be more about having an ID card than anything. She sees his point and lessons begin.

Chris quizzes her on car details, Her father wonders why, Chris told him about what he learnt from driving lessons and how his father added in all the car maintenance and operation bits, not just the driving practice. He suggests that Chris put his thinking where his mouth is and give Bri a hand learning those things. Chris promptly got started and had the bonnet of the car up in no time, pointing out various components and what needed to be checked, topped up etc. Bri's father was most impressed and came out to watch him change a tyre and then get Bri to do it. He was most impressed.

Josh has invested some of his Uncle David's inheritance in a managed fund, the funds returns were up and down, sometimes up but mostly down, the return on what he put in was minimal he figured he would have had less hassles with a bank deposit in an interest bearing account. Easier to deal with and retrieve the cash as well as some fixed return on the cash. Josh figures, 'Well there goes any chance of making a million, no glimmer of hope in all that.'

Josh takes eight thousand out of his account to update the family car, this time he's aiming for a Toyota Camry, even more bullet-proof than the Corolla which had done okay but was now pushing decent miles. For eight grand he can get a hail damaged car, this saved thousands up front.

The hail induced dimples annoy Jeannie and the kids. Josh favoured the price saving over a pristine

Chris and Brianna graduate from university and enter the fast-evolving tech workforce. It's 1998 and big things are happening in the tech world, new models, new software and new companies are all wanting staff to make it all happen.

Chris secures a role with a South Melbourne based IT services firm, they have a contract to keep computers working at two office set ups in Central Melbourne. The buildings were on the same city block, so Chris would wander between the two, keeping things running. He operates as a hardware-focused support technician.

His role involves diagnosing faulty internal circuit boards. He swaps out dead components to restore operations. Tasks frequently involve loose plugs or reseating cables. On more than one occasion a service call came in, he found the power cord had come out of the wall socket. A large portion of days involves fixing jammed printers. He wonders about

his need for an IT Degree, but then looks at his growing pay packet and bank balance and smiles, then watching the world go by from twenty stories up in a skyscraper. The company had a spot where they kept spare parts and a dream view. Break time came with an increased knowledge of birds of prey and weather changes.

Brianna on the other hand took longer to secure a role, it seemed as though the male dominated sector didn't want to hire a female. A breakthrough came when a company posted a job with a piece of code that had a problem in it. She was one of a few who was able to offer a suitable solution. At the interview they gave all the applicants another test of code problem solving and Brianna was the first to complete it accurately.

She was now in a software development company mainly sorting out minor issues at first, but soon proved her worth on a big roll out of commercial software which crashed on multiple occasions within the first day. The team were frantically trying to figure out what went wrong. Finally, in desperation her boss invited her to take a look, half an hour later things were sorted out, the system was up and running with no hiccups. She got a bonus in her next pay. She soon had other staff asking her for solutions to problems they didn't seem to be able to sort out. She liked the attention for a while and it soon wore thin. Her boss took some of her average workload away and appointed her as chief troubleshooter.

Back on the homefront, Rowena finds that Alan is on one knee at a restaurant proposing to her, she said yes and in return received a rather dazzling ring. She didn't say anything to Josh and Jeannie, but instead walked in with Alan for a cuppa the next day. They sat and chatted about the usual array of things, then Rowena put her hand flat on the table, acting totally innocent. Jeannie took a minute or two to realise, then all of a sudden there were squeals of delight. Josh took a while to register and then there were congratulations all round.

The weight of the situation dawns on Josh, thinking he would have to pay for the wedding. A range of thoughts went through his head, how much of his investments would he have to sacrifice, and what if she wants a really expensive wedding. His head went into a spin.

It turned out that both families had differing views on what the wedding should be like, in the end Rowena scaled back some of her ideas and found that Alan's father was quite

willing to tip in some cash to add some niceties. Josh felt his burden fade somewhat, but there was still plenty to consider. The wedding was a long way off just yet. Early 2000.

Alan's father suggests to Rowena that she not let her dad know about him tipping in and perhaps some of the things can look like a discount on a full price or similar. Together they nussed out a few options and came to a mutual agreement about what got paid for.

Chapter Fifteen

It's early 2000, the millennium bug didn't make much of a wave, most people got on with their lives and let the angst ridden build up to the 2000 new years eve, simply fade away. The late March wedding plans were in full swing. Dress selected, fittings organised, venue and catering organised, wedding transport ordered, Thanks to Alan's dad... Wedding Celebrant and marriage in their palatial garden, thanks very much. Oh and the invites, people left on the list, people taken off the list, some put back on, some taken off. All up eighty people.

Mother of the bride's outfit, well that came with tears, odd memories, 'Am I worthy?' and a whole range of guilt, anxiety and excitement. Then the suits, Father of the bride, Chris and so on, the list went on. Things were checked off, the list was massaged and added to, Josh checked what was paid for and what needed a deposit. This was a big deal for the Banks Family. Generally the excitement was positive and tinged with the odd tear here and there.

Josh looked at the list, then commented, 'I don't remember paying for the wedding cars?' Jeannie looked at the list, 'Well they've been ticked off, I'm sure you did if it's ticked off, I remember there was a change at the end, one company couldn't do it, they doubled up on the dates so they had to cancel, then Rowi got another mob who could do it, so I remember all that and it was sorted, Oh and... What do you want for dinner dear?' Josh made a note in his head to ask Rowi, he wasn't sure.

Rowi rang later and discussed a few details with Jeannie, and Josh indicated that he had a question for Rowi, he took the phone and had a quick chat, Rowi had another excuse about the company and how the dates got changed and things were mixed up but they have been paid.' She then did her best to change the subject. Josh got confused, and when he got off the

phone Jeannie made sure she was nowhere about to answer questions that would be fresh in his mind.

Things worked out, Josh was none the wiser in the end until the day of the event, but things were so busy, he soon lost track of who paid for what and when, the girls would have a giggle about it along the way, well out of earshot from Josh, they then made sure they got their stories straight in case more questions arose.

The day went off without a hitch, everything was in place and thank goodness the celebrant's garden had a marquee, there was a slight touch of rain, but thankfully it didn't last long. Proud parents, on both sides, happy friends and family all round come to think of it. Then off to the venue with photos by an eager Cousin who was a photo buff, he and a friend turned up with all sorts of photo gear and were able to present a lovely array of images not long after the event.

The honeymoon was a secretive affair, until the end of the reception when the happy couple shuffled out the door, they were off to Fiji the next day. A week away in tropical paradise was the aim followed by some relaxed downtime at home..

Two months later and it was clear that the pair were getting on well as a married couple. Rowena was pleased to let her mum know she was now pregnant! Baby due in January 2001. It wasn't long before others knew and thankfully all reports from Doctors and specialists were all positive.

Josh, still not sure about the wedding transport, Jeannie joked with him, well maybe you didn't pay them and they thought it was paid, and you my dear got a freebie. Josh hatched a plan and rang the company one day while Jeannie was out shopping. 'Yep that account has been paid, glad to hear that the day went well.' Josh shook his head, maybe older age is making his mind a little fuzzy, but at least his mind and conscience was all clear. His dad always said he was a man of principle.

The rest of the year ticked over without too much trouble.

January 2001 has the impending birth for Rowena and Alan, they are both excited, Rowena exhausted most of the time and 'ready to deliver' the baby. Rowena gives birth to Mia Jane, the Bank's first grandchild on January 15, a hefty labour at fifteen hours, Alan was very excited to call Jeannie and Josh, then his parents.

Chris and Brianna visit at the hospital; he's delighted that he is now 'Uncle Chris.' and has a smile from ear to ear. They get to hold the newborn Mia Jane. Josh and Jeannine arrive not long after and take over visiting duties. There was a delightful positive vibe in the family for a long while. With Rowi and Alan dropping on to visit Granny and Grandpa, and of course Josh and Jeannie were so delighted. A grandchild, how wonderful.

Chris lands a lucrative role at a major enterprise IT firm, a new role with more responsibility, involving set up of new systems in large scale companies, overseeing contractors running cables, delivering goods and coordinating 'junior staff'. His old job was okay, but on a whim he applied for this new role. Things were looking good so he asked his current boss for a raise, the new role was paying more and had more scope. His existing boss said no but was annoyed that he would lose Chris.

The new job started slowly, Chris had a good supervisor who wanted to make sure Chris learnt the ins and outs of the job well before being let loose fully into the role. There was a lot to learn and new protocols, policies and methods to get used to. Things that were slack at the old job were tighter here, and the opposite was also true. When things really got going, Chris found he had to put in a few extra hours here and there. He relished the role and soon made the role his own, the new boss was very pleased.

The September 11 terrorist attacks shake global markets and cause all manner of terrorist war mongering, the USA wants revenge. The world news was struck by the immensity of the planes hitting buildings in New York.

Chris and Bri are getting serious about their relationship and are planning well ahead, Chris very pleased with the way his career was going and how well he was paid. He said to Bri, 'My parents have struggled all the way through life, it's been good in a lot of places, but tough just the same. I don't want to struggle in the same way they did and want to make sure I get ahead, and to do that I want to be building on a strong foundation.' Bri agreed she wanted the same but for different reasons. She didn't want an easy handout, although her parents could readily afford it, she wanted to stand on her own two feet, with ease and could see from various other older adults that the ones who put in a big effort at the start, and worked to a solid system did well.

Chris and Brianna live frugally to build capital. They recognise that to 'get ahead' they need to have a solid bank balance behind them, Brianna's father, a well-connected lawyer, says he will match their home deposit. If it was left to him he would tip in more, but his wife suggested that they needed to figure some things out for themselves. 'A little struggle doesn't hurt sometimes.'

It wasn't long before the pair had looked at the available blocks in the fast growing Point Cook suburb, new estates all over the place and a selection of blocks and house and land packages. They were then drawn readily to display homes and builders promising all manner of 'exciting' add ons.

By the end of the year they put a deposit on a block of land in Melbourne's west. \$80k, the price shocks Josh and Jeannie, to Brianna's parents it's a cheap option in a quickly growing market. Good to his word Brianna's father tips in to match their deposit amount, at this stage they put in \$15 thousand, he puts in his share and they end up owing a balance of \$50k. Chris chats to the bank manager, and on his growing income they readily obtain a loan.

Advice from Bri's father, sorts out timing and financial issues advising them to not run into building, it's very tempting but hang out as long as you can. IF you pay off the land completely, that's a bonus, steady saving and payments are important.

They spend more time looking at display homes and chatting to builders. They finally settle on a design they like. Chris tells Rowi which builder and design they have settled on, then before he knows it, she has told Jeannie. Jeannie and Josh head over to have a look and see what they will end up with, but do so without Chris knowing.

The parents are aghast at what they have chosen and what it will probably cost!, they have a look at the plans of the estate and find the block, at the moment there's nothing there, other than the street, the area is open paddocks.

Josh and Jeannie pivot their daily routines around family life in 2002. Nurturing infant Mia becomes their primary joy, Rowi and Alan drop by regularly with the baby, Josh and Jeannie are amazed and how quickly Mia grows up, recalling their own children's development.

Jeannie heads over to Rowena's for babysitting duties at the 'drop of a hat', Rowi needs more sleep, Jeannie fills in when she can. On weekends Josh comes too, 'You can never have enough kid time.' Says Josh.

Reflecting on how their kids have done these past few years, Josh asked Jeannie, 'What has eaten our cash over the years?' Jeannie let loose with a list of things, 'All the unexpected things, as well as the things we did expect but didn't know when they would need attending too. Hot water heater replacement, washing machine replacements, carpet upgrade in the bedrooms, lawn mower replacement, tyres for the car, upgrade of the couch, remember when Larry made short work of one of the legs out of sheer boredom... Yeah those sorts of things.'

The family celebrated a long-awaited relationship milestone in 2003. Bri and Chris had been going out for a while now, close to seven years. Chris always wanted and suggested to Bri, that they get ahead in the finance stakes before making a marriage or another form of commitment. The pair had taken a holiday to Queensland and on a lazy afternoon having lunch at a nice restaurant, Chris popped the question. Bri said yes, and then asked, 'So where's the ring?' He said he thought it would be wiser to get that after, to ensure she was happy with the look, style etc.' Bri thought, how logical.

On their return, Chris wants to announce his upcoming marriage to Bri, Bri wants to tell her parents first, he could then tell his parents, agreed. The announcement solidifies their partnership started at university and settling into their lifestyles together shows each of them how settled and ready they are to 'tie the knot'.

In a similar fashion to Rowi, Bri doesn't directly show the ring and make an announcement, but puts her hand out on the table while visiting her parents. Her mother took longer than Jeannie did to spot it, something about Bri pointing to it made it more obvious. All the parents were delighted. Details were discussed, venue, type of service, Celebrant or? Okay Celebrant, dates?

Planning starts, who to invite and who to not. Bri's father whispered in Bri's ear, 'Who cares how many, have a fantastic day and make it a big affair, after all, I'm paying.'

The wedding. Planned to happen just before the house should be ready in late November.

The planning phase wasn't just busy; it was a breathless, high-stakes juggling act. Just as the wedding checklist began to peak, the ground broke on their new home, sending the timeline into overdrive. Every week became a blur of picking out bathroom tiles in the morning and tasting cake flavours by afternoon.

Watching the house evolve from a muddy trench into a framed structure added a surreal, fast-forward rhythm to their lives. The air in their temporary living space was thick with a unique mix of stress and pure, electric excitement. They were quite literally building their future foundation while scripting the day that would celebrate it. Fortunately, the construction gods smiled upon them, the slab cured, the frame rose, and the keys arrived exactly on schedule without a single major delay.

While the house went up seamlessly, the bridal boutique became the source of late-night pacing. The wedding dress and bridesmaid gowns seemed cursed by a series of administrative hiccups and mismeasurements.

The initial fittings revealed the fabric wasn't draping correctly, forcing emergency restructuring of the bodices. Late fabric shipments meant the bridesmaid dress alterations were pushed down to the wire, leading to frantic weekend pin-and-tuck sessions. Tiny details, loose beadwork and uneven hems, demanded meticulous, last-minute correction, turning what should have been a magical milestone into a test of patience.

The venue's blank canvas quickly became a battlefield of aesthetics. Bri had a distinct, modern vision mapped out down to the exact shade of the napkins. Her mother, holding fast to traditional elegance, envisioned a completely different atmosphere packed with classic floristry and heavy drapery.

Chris found himself in the classic groom's dilemma. Privately, the exact arrangement of fairy lights mattered very little to him, but diplomatically, he knew his assignment: nod, look supportive, and firmly back Bri whenever a stalemate arose.

Ultimately, compromise won the day. The final design blended Bri's sharp contemporary lines with soft, timeless accents. When the doors finally opened, the tension

melted away, the room looked absolutely radiant, capturing the best of everyone's input under the warm glow of the reception lights.

The venue choice had originally been cemented by a glowing recommendation from their celebrant, whose insider knowledge proved flawless. The moment Bri and Chris stepped onto the property during their first tour, the search was over.

Flanking the main reception center was a massive, pristine expanse of neatly manicured turf, bordered by dense, exploding beds of seasonal, colourful gardens that smelled of fresh earth and jasmine. Beyond the beauty lay the ultimate wedding relief, a massive, hidden parking area. For their 100 guests, there would be no tight parallel parking, no long walks in heels, and no logistical headaches. It was the rare venue that completely satisfied the romantic heart and the practical mind.

In amongst all this, Chris and Bri sign a builder to start their house in the second half of 2003. They opt for a simple layout with basic fittings, based on advice from friends who got caught out paying a premium for high end fittings. They didn't quite clear out the initial bank loan they had for the land, but they gave it a darn good nudge. Josh shakes his head, he can't fully grasp the fact that they have got so far ahead with things.

Josh then reflected on his start in obtaining a house, and how his electrical incident at work stuffed things up so badly. Jeannie points out that, 'Chris did go to university, so he's in a better position to get a good paying job, once upon a time tradies earnt good money, but now it seems things have changed and he's done well, in a good company and all that. Then perhaps he's learnt a thing or two from his parents.'

The wedding was loaded with nerves, a few pre-event tears and a gaggle of guests all eager to outdo each other in the fashion stakes. Their honeymoon was a two week wander about in Queensland, first to the gold coast and then a flight up north to Cairns. Josh shook his head again, 'Fancy that, we went to the Dandongs for our honeymoon! I guess it was all we could afford...'

Now, the next chapter in a lengthy process is finally unfolding. The house construction was officially finished, and the happy couple moved in. Outside, the reality of a new build awaited them: a landscape dominated by thick, muddy yards and the last unsightly remnants of the builders' rubbish. Inside, however, it was a sanctuary. The echoey rooms quickly

transformed as curtains and blinds were installed, blocking out the raw construction site. Delivery trucks arrived in quick succession, dropping off pristine furniture.

The pair were absolutely beside themselves with delight. Everything was new, smelling of fresh paint and polished wood, and every mundane task felt thrillingly exciting.

The chaotic exterior did not stay messy for long. Bri's father, wanting to give them a truly practical start to married life, had a trusted landscaper in mind to, 'look after things' as their wedding present. An initial meeting on the muddy plot was quickly arranged, ideas were thrown around, and formal plans were drawn up. Within days, the project was underway.

Bobcats cleared the debris, the mud and mess were systematically sorted, and vibrant green roll-out grass was laid down like a carpet. Neatly edged garden beds filled with fresh mulch soon framed the property, anchored by a small native feature tree planted squarely in the front yard, a living marker of their new beginning.

Again, Josh marvelled at what was done and how they were so well set up, right from the start. He was in awe. Jeannie just smiled, 'Amazing what a little bit of money from the right sources will do!'

New life brings fresh energy into the family dynamic when Chris and Bri welcome their first child in December 2004, Samuel Thomas Banks. The pair are now reduced to one income, but able to hold steady on all their payments, the pair's early commitment to being frugal clearly paid dividends. Bri's work team were full of congratulations, her boss keen to have her back at work as soon as she could, she would be readily missed.

Bri was keen to continue as well, and after three months of mothering, had the boss install an ADSL dial up service, and a laptop computer. All set with the right gear she was able to do a few hours work from home each day, Mothering came first, but the chance to keep her hand in on everything computer based was a nice touch.

Chris wished he could do the same, however his role was more hands on. His work team noted a smile from ear to ear that lasted for the first few days, then sleep deprivation kicked in, they would chuckle on finding him at his work desk slumped over, catching a few solid chunks of shut eye. His boss knew, his boss also ignored the issue as long as he could, noting to himself that he was in the same position, some years ago.

Again, it was Grannies to the rescue, Bri's mum was there for the first few days, helping out with whatever she could, then Jeannie showed up to 'bridge the gap.' Sam was another placid child, Jeannie said, 'He reminded her of Chris at that age.' Josh said, 'Sam reminded him of a baby!'

There were many milestones, visits and obligatory 'Bay Sitting Duties.' Josh noted that between their two kids they were kept rather busy. On visits to Point Cook with Jeannie, Josh would make himself useful and water their garden, as well as playing with Sam when he got older. Jeannie noted Josh's smiles and general delight and said 'Ah Josh, these kids, they are a glimmer of hope don't you think?' Josh simply smiled and said, Yep.'

Josh also marvelled at the rate of change in their neighbourhood, house being put up faster than he thought humanly possible, powersaw and nailguns noisily punctuating the day. As time went on, they faded into the distance and the building cycle progressed.

Josh's sixtieth birthday milestone arrived in 2006 without fanfare, a quiet marker of six decades spent pushing against the wind. There was no grand party, no hired hall, and no elaborate speeches. Instead, it was an intimate gathering in the backyard, just the family, the smell of sausages spitting on the portable barbecue, and a few cold beers resting in a plastic tub of ice.

Josh sat in his usual vinyl outdoor chair, his joints aching a little more than they used to, watching his grown children laugh about something he couldn't quite hear. Jeannie brought out a simple pavlova she had whipped up herself, decorated with sliced strawberries and passionfruit pulp. As he blew out the candles, the smoke drifted away into the Melbourne dusk, carrying with it the unspoken weight of forty years of hard, grinding labour. He looked at Jeannie, whose hair was now thoroughly silvered, and gave her a small, tight nod. They had made it this far. The budget was as tight as it had ever been, but in that small circle of warmth, it felt like enough.

It was during an evening television broadcast that the announcement flashed across the screen: Part of the old Laverton RAAF airfield was going to be transformed into a massive, modern suburb called Williams Landing. The master-planned community promised a brand-new train station, a bustling town centre, and thousands of new homes.

Josh leaned forward in his armchair, pointing a calloused finger at the screen. 'Look at that, Jeannie,' he said, his voice tinged with a rare flash of excitement. 'That is an amazing

development for the west. For decades, everyone ignored this side of the city. We were just the industrial wasteland, the cheap block at the end of the line. But look at it now. It's changing. It means people might actually want to come here. It means the kids' properties might actually be worth something one day.'

For a brief moment, looking at the slick digital mock-ups of the future suburb, Josh felt a sense of vindication for staying in a region that the rest of Melbourne had so often looked down upon.

At age 63, the cumulative toll of stress and physical exertion finally demanded a reckoning. What started as a series of nagging symptoms turned into weeks of blood tests, scans, and tense waiting rooms. The doctors eventually concluded that a minor surgical operation was required to rectify the underlying issue.

The procedure itself was routine, but the psychological impact on Josh was profound. For a man who had always relied entirely on his physical strength to provide, facing his own bodily vulnerability was a sobering shock. The hospital stay forced a stark shift in priorities.

The recovery period became a time of enforced stillness. Under Jeannie's watchful, uncompromising eye, a greater focus on healthy living took root. The heavy, fried foods were scaled back, salt was strictly rationed, and Josh began taking short, deliberate walks around the neighborhood for recuperation. He hated the feeling of being fragile, but the scare forced him to accept that his body was no longer an infinite resource.

Forty years of marriage in 2011. Four decades of weathering financial storms, raising children, fixing cars, and sharing a bed in a world that rarely handed them an easy win.

There was no expensive restaurant dinner or weekend getaway they couldn't afford. Instead, they celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary at home, surrounded by the true wealth they had managed to accumulate: their grandchildren. The house, usually quiet these days, echoed with the chaotic, beautiful sounds of little feet running down the hallway and high-pitched laughter.

Josh sat on the floor, his bad knees complaining, patiently building block towers only for a toddler to gleefully knock them down. Jeannie watched from the kitchen doorway, wiping her hands on a tea towel, a soft smile softening the lines on her face. Amidst all the scarcity of their lives, these moments with the grandkids were pure abundance.

As retirement loomed, the focus shifted entirely toward survival after work. At age 65, Josh finally became eligible for the age pension. In theory, he was entitled to the full amount; in practice, the bureaucratic machine proved to be a nightmare of epic proportions.

Weeks were spent hunting down old paperwork, bank statements, and employment records. The forms, endless, confusing, and seemingly designed to make them give up. Josh would sit at the kitchen table under the harsh yellow light, rubbing his temples, completely overwhelmed by the fine print.

When the official letter of approval finally arrived in the mailbox, the relief in the house was palpable. 'At last,' Jeannie sighed, sinking into a chair, her voice heavy with the exhaustion of a lifetime of budgeting. 'At last we get some form of a break in life.' Josh looked at the letter, his eyes tracking the official government seal. 'Another glimmer of hope, Jeannie,' he murmured softly. 'Another glimmer.'

The end of his working life came without a gold watch or a corporate gala. Josh had his retirement send-off from the carpet store where he had spent years lifting heavy, awkward rolls of linoleum and wool with a forklift. The boss handed him a few modest parting gifts, a voucher, a handshake, and a bottle of mid-tier spirits. That evening, the family gathered at the local pub for a casual dinner.

There was very little money inside Josh's superannuation account; the system hadn't been around long enough in his youth to build a true safety net. Knowing the risks of leaving it to the whims of management fees, Josh cleared the account out immediately and transferred every cent directly into his everyday bank account. He wanted to see the numbers. He wanted to know it was safe.

His final day of work carried a distinct, melancholy rhythm. Josh noted with a quiet gravity that his very last train trip to work ended exactly like all the thousands before it, with him actually going into the store to finish his shift. The retirement function took place that afternoon, right as the doors locked. When it was over, there was no train ride back. Jeannie was waiting out front in the idling car, ready to bring him home for good.

On day one of retirement, with absolutely not a care in the world, Josh woke up early. The habit of waking at dawn was too deeply ingrained to break. Outside, it was a classic, miserable Melbourne day, wet, grey, and howling with a biting wind. Yet, Josh knew this pilgrimage needed to be done. It wasn't about commuting; it was about closure.

He walked down to the train station, the rain stinging his face. He boarded the train as it rattled away in its usual, familiar, metallic manner. This time, however, he wasn't looking at a newspaper or worrying about being late. He took in every single detail: the tear in the vinyl seats, the condensation on the windows, the graffiti flashing past, the tired faces of the workers heading into the city.

At the other end of his usual route, he stepped off. He didn't exit the turnstiles. Instead, he walked the entire length of the platform, standing at the very edge, watching the rain pool on the tracks. He waited in the cold until the next train back to Laverton arrived.

When he returned to his home station, he stepped off and walked the Laverton platform in slow, heavy, deeply meaningful steps. He knew there would be other train trips in his future, trips into the city for appointments, but this specific ride was the definitive last one that related to work. His invisible chain had been broken.

He took a slow, meditative walk back home through the puddles. When he opened the front door, Jeannie looked up from her cross stitch, wanting to know exactly where he had been. Josh sat down, took off his wet boots, and provided every detail. She listened quietly, understanding that a man needs to say goodbye to his burden in his own way.

Chapter Sixteen

With a portion of his superannuation money, the pair took a fortnight's holiday, a coach tour of New Zealand. It was luxury beyond anything they had ever experienced. For two weeks, they didn't have to cook, clean, or worry about the price of petrol. They sat by the large glass windows of the bus, watching snow-capped mountains and pristine lakes roll past.

They loved every single minute of it. Sitting in a hotel room in Queenstown, looking out at the lake, Josh smiled warmly at his wife. 'How's that, Jeannie? A shimmering, glimmer of hope...'

When they returned across the Tasman, the travel bug remained in a smaller, more modest way. They began taking the occasional weekend away, packing a bag and driving out to explore various coastal and rural parts of Victoria, finding joy in simple motels and pub roasts.

Their financial and domestic situation had rarely been stable. The good times had always been sparse, scattered like small islands in an ocean of challenges. In the quiet of his retirement, Josh found himself reflecting deeply on times past. He would stand by the window, looking out across his small suburban lot in life, and find himself traveling backward in time. He vividly recalled the local community hall dance, the smell of her perfume, the nervousness in his chest, and the exact song that was playing just prior to him asking Jeannie to marry him. Whenever that memory surfaced, a brilliant smile lit up his weathered face.

In his private thoughts, Josh took stock:

- *I've had good times and bad, two great kids, and Jeannie, my absolute moss-covered rock.*
- *Work and my body have let me down over the years; gees, if only we could have gotten ahead just once.*
- *But at least I'm not like Nick on the corner. The bloke can't even mow his grass properly.*
- *Ah, my kids. They seem to be doing well. I really hope they do much better than me.*
- *I wonder sometimes if I have been all the father I can be.*
- *How on earth could I know any better? My folks taught me, and they could only teach me as good as they knew how to teach me.*
- *I still remember hearing how I was tarred with the same repulsive brush as her father. Gees, what a shock that was.*
- *He was alright. Had some similar tough times. Jeannie's mum always had the backup of her rich parents, so they never really wanted for much.*
- *We've planted things in the garden that didn't grow, then things that did.*
- *Then we built some things that looked like they would be good. But that shed... well, at least Chris got to use it.*

He would sit on the porch and think to himself: *At least there have been glimmers of hope along the way. Lots of challenges, damn it, but glimmers of desperate hope.*

The family gathered in the backyard once more to celebrate Josh's seventieth birthday, it was 2016. It was a classic, no-nonsense afternoon filled with a sizzling BBQ, cold drinks, and storytelling.

Josh spent the next few weeks in a deep state of reflection, looking back at the tapestry of his family's history. He observed how his two children had grown into adults with completely opposing worldviews, yet both had provided immense joy alongside intense trauma. He remembered the frantic, adrenaline-fueled trips to the emergency room for kids with broken arms and all the other medically punctuated events that define a parent's life.

As the days passed, a profound change occurred. Josh let his mind settle into a deep, unfamiliar sense of relief. A beautiful, radiating calmness came over him, and the family immediately noticed it. The old, defensive crust had melted away. He became far more observant, quiet, and pensive, offering absolutely little in the way of any resistance during family 'discussions.' Instead, he channeled his remaining energy into awe. He marvelled constantly at the achievements of his grandkids, celebrating every single step, every new sound, and every little thing they did as if it were a miracle.

Three weeks after turning seventy, a tragic turning point arrived. It was right in the middle of what locals call the pollen season, a time when the hot northerly winds carried thick, invisible clouds of allergens across the western plains. Josh suffered from a sudden, serious bout of Asthma. His Ventolin puffer offered some relief, but venturing outside meant his shortness of breath made moving about incredibly difficult.

The next afternoon, Jeannie and the kids had planned an afternoon out together, piling into Rowena's car for a rare trip away from the house. Josh, feeling a heavy tightness in his chest, insisted on staying behind. He was bedridden but completely dismissive of any danger, assuring them he would be completely fine. He placed a long, clear glass of water right and his 'puffer' on the bedside table.

The house was dead quiet, save for the treacherous, wet rattle in Josh's throat. It started as a familiar tightening, a minor irritation he thought he could manage, but the asthma attack mutated with terrifying speed. Within minutes, his airways clamped shut like a closing fist, trapping stale air in his lungs and locking oxygen out. Every agonizing attempt to inhale produced nothing but a thin, useless whistle.

Panic spiked his adrenaline, making his heart hammer violently against his ribs as it starved for oxygen. His chest rose and fell in frantic, violent spasms, his ribs straining against his skin, but his lungs refused to expand. The room began to tilt and dim around the edges, grey shadows bleeding into black. He reached out, his fingers twitching toward the empty

space beside him, but there was nobody there to help. No hand to hold, no voice to ground him, and no one to dial triple-zero. The sheer exhaustion of fighting for his own life finally broke him; his strained heart gave a final, erratic flutter, and his body went entirely slack. He drifted into the dark, dying completely alone on that sweltering afternoon.

Hours later, the front door burst open, shattering the heavy silence. The trio spilled into the entryway, their voices loud and lively, filled with the easy energy of people who had spent the day indulging. The crinkle of plastic bags and the scrape of shoes on the floorboards echoed down the corridor.

Smiling, Jeannie split off from the group, her footsteps light as she walked down the hallway to check on Josh. The air grew progressively colder the closer she got to his room. Stepping through the doorway, her gaze instinctively darted to the nightstand. The glass of water she had left for him sat there, illuminated by the fading evening light. The water line hadn't dropped a millimeter. The dust on the surface was undisturbed; it hadn't been touched a single time.

A cold knot tightened in her stomach as her eyes pulled away from the table and fell upon the bed.

Josh lay twisted in the sheets. His lips were a bruised, terrible shade of indigo, and his skin carried the waxy, greyish-blue pallor of a corpse. His eyes were half-open, staring blankly at nothing. For a fraction of a second, the reality refused to click, and then the horror hit her like a physical blow. Jeannie screamed—a sharp, ragged, piercing sound that ripped through the quiet house and cut the laughter in the hallway dead short. The scream tore her throat raw before collapsing inward, warping into a low, guttural, heart-wrenching sob that dragged the word “no...” from the very bottom of her lungs.

The family was utterly distraught, shattered by the suddenness of the loss. There was no formal funeral service; the harsh reality of their financial life, bit hard one last time. There was simply not enough money in the accounts, barely enough to pay for the basic cost of the cremation. Thankfully, the funeral director was deeply sympathetic, guiding them through the bare-minimum logistics with dignity. In the absence of a grand service, the family rallied tightly around Jeannie, occupying the house to ensure she was rarely alone.

Rowena arrived back at the house a few days later holding a sage smudge stick. A friend's mother had given her the idea as a traditional way to clear heavy grief from a space.

Entering the quiet bedroom where Josh had taken his last breath, Rowena struck a match and lit the tightly bound herbs. She and Chris held their mother tightly, the trio dissolved in tears, as Rowena waved the gently smoking smudge stick through the air. She moved it meticulously about the bedroom space, letting the herbal aroma fill the corners, before guiding the trail of smoke out into the hallway. Together, they walked out the back door into the yard and stood in silence, letting the afternoon wind take the last of the smoke away into the sky.

Once Josh had been cremated, the family held a beautiful, informal memorial service right there at the property. Jeannie felt a profound shift; everything changed after he died, and Rowena's smudge stick cleansing seemed to have worked absolute wonders on the energy of the home.

In the days that followed, the community stepped in. People came from all over to help tend to the property. Friends, nieces, and nephews arrived with tools and gloves. They worked tirelessly in the garden: two beautiful trees were planted and stood tall in the front yard, and a brand-new fence was built, finally replacing the long-rusted-out wrought iron fence that Josh had meant to fix for years.

Chris stood in the yard, looking at the transformed property, and shook his head in amazement. 'I don't know what was in that sage smudge stick,' he said softly, 'but that stuff sure is powerful.'

Hearing his words, Jeannie simply sat in her chair and bawled. She was comforted tightly by her children, who rubbed her shoulders and held her hands. They all recognized these weren't just tears of sorrow, they were cleansing tears, tears of deep thanks for a hard life shared. Josh was gone, but his hard-won memories were going to be with them for a very long time to come.