

## Chapter 1

*Ceann Mara Station - Darling River - mid-September.*

Caitriona O'Byrne woke suddenly.

Her eyes flew open, her heart pounding as she stared at the grey ceiling above. It was still early; the soft, pink light of dawn stole into the darkness through a narrow sliver between the curtains. She lay rigid wondering what had disturbed her sleep. If indeed it could be called sleep, those restless hours where dark memories tormented her each night.

She tried to straighten her legs, but the top sheet was wrapped around her ankles. Her eyes moved swiftly from left to right as she made sure that she was alone in the room. The window was locked shut, and the key was turned in her door.

*Not again, please God, not again.* Her breath caught and her mouth dried as the door handle turned from left to right with a soft clicking sound.

'Cat,' a soft voice whispered. 'Are you awake, sweetie?' The doorknob clicked again. Caitriona's body loosened as relief flooded through her limbs.

'Yes, Mum, I'm awake. What's wrong?' She forced saliva into her mouth and ran her tongue around her dry lips.

'I think your door's locked.'

'Just give me a moment,' she said. She untangled the sheet from around her left leg and slid over the side of the bed. Her heart was gradually returning to a normal pace, but her mouth was still dry, and her head was aching. Pulling her robe over her silk pyjamas, Caitriona turned the bedside lamp on and let the light flood the room before she walked over and unlocked the door.

Her mother stood in the dim hall; her brow wrinkled in a slight frown—creased by the worry that had been there for the last three weeks since Caitriona had come home from university in Sydney.

'I really wish you wouldn't lock the door, sweetie. What if there was a fire?'

'If there was a fire, my smoke alarm would go off, I guess,' she replied, her voice husky.

‘There’s no need to lock your bedroom door. Dad locks the front and back doors last thing every night.’

‘I know. I remember.’ Caitriona forced a smile.

Her mother reached out to touch her shoulder, and she took a quick step back.

‘I’ve only got a minute.’ Mum folded her arms, but Caitriona saw the fleeting hurt on her face. ‘Dad’s gone to the shed. I just wanted to let you know that we’re going to leave for Broken Hill earlier than we planned. I wanted to check that you’ll be all right,’ Mum said.

Caitriona tensed. ‘You’re leaving now?’

‘Yes, a strong westerly is forecast to hit mid-morning, and Dad wants to be on the ground in Broken Hill before it arrives. It’ll be too early for the accountant, but we can have breakfast in town, and knowing your father he’ll have booked the local history room at the library after our appointment with Craig.’ She shook her head and sighed. ‘That damned family history.’

‘He loves it.’

Mum had always hated the time Dad put into his hobby.

‘At least I can do some shopping while he’s talking finance. We’ll be back this afternoon. Or at least I hope we will; it depends on the wind.’

‘Don’t rush home. I’ll be fine, Mum.’ Caitriona pulled her robe tightly around her and looked away as her mother stared at her intently. It was good being home, but it was hard dealing with the constant surveillance and concern.

‘Why don’t you come with us? You and I could go and have coffee while Dad sees the accountant. And we could shop.’

Caitriona bit her lip and shook her head. Her fingers gripped the sleeves of her robe as a tremor ran through her limbs. ‘Don’t worry, please, Mum. I’ll be fine here.’

‘Are you sure?’ Her voice shook. ‘We’re worried about you, sweetheart. I wish you’d tell us what’s wrong. Dad’s awfully worried about you, but he said you’ll tell us what’s wrong when you’re ready.’

She stepped back as her Mum reached for her.

‘Jesus, Mum. Leave it.’

Her mother pulled her hand back and her eyes widened in shock as Caitriona's voice rose.

'How many times have I stayed at the station by myself? I think the first time you and Dad went away for a couple of days, I was fourteen. We were home from boarding school for the holidays and you had to go and see Grandma Daph.'

'I don't remember that.'

'You took Shea and Bridget with you and left Roisin in charge. She would have been sixteen, and Erin was fifteen.'

'Well, there were three of you, and Elise and Tom were still across the river then. Cat, I don't like the idea of you being home by yourself considering...'

Caitriona pulled herself up to her full height, her hands still clutching the silk, making sure it covered her forearms.

'Considering what, Mum? Considering I'm a mental wreck? Considering I've got no confidence? Considering you don't think it's safe to leave me here by myself?' She couldn't hold back the raw anger lacing her words. 'Don't worry, I'm not that inconsiderate. I'm not going to overdose or anything.'

Her mother's eyes widened even more, and she lifted her hands, palms facing forward as she took a step back. 'No, sweetie, that's not what I meant. I just want to make sure that you're okay to stay by yourself because of the slim chance that we may not get back tonight.'

Caitriona tried to move forward, but her feet wouldn't budge. She would have loved to hug her mother and reassure her, but since Sydney, she hadn't been able to bring herself to touch another soul; she was a different person now. 'I'm sorry for snapping, Mum.' She'd been angrier at herself for not being able to get herself out of the state she was in. An emotional state that was spiralling downwards more every day. She'd come home to heal, but it wasn't working. Maybe she did need help.

As they stood there staring at each other, the sound of the aircraft engine starting up drifted across from the large shed where Dad kept their Cessna.

'Go, Mum. You know what Dad's like—if he wants to go, he wants to go *now*. I'll be fine. Honestly.' She forced herself to take a step forward, reach out her hand and

briefly touch her mother's arm before she retreated into her room. 'I'll be fine. I've got a lot to do today.' The lie came easily to her lips.

'Okay, I'll give you a call this afternoon and let you know what time we're flying home, okay?'

'Maybe give me a call when you get there safely?' Caitriona suggested.

Her mother's eyes glinted with moisture. Guilt trickled through Caitriona; it was the first kindness she'd shown to Mum since she'd arrived home. She'd spent most of that time in her room, occasionally surfacing for dinner, but the effort of making civil conversation had been too hard. She'd eaten, taken her plate to the dishwasher and gone back to the sanctuary of her childhood bedroom.

'Thank you. I will. What—'

'Is anyone coming here today?' she interrupted her mother. Even though she'd opened the emotional door a crack, she wasn't ready for any in-depth conversation.

'No, the water truck came yesterday, and the wool manager from Dalgety is coming later in the week, but we're not expecting anyone today. The volunteers left last week. The season's over. Why don't you go outside and get some fresh air? It's mail day; the postal van's dropped back to twice a week now. So, if you fancy a stroll out to the front gate later, take the dogs with you.' Her mother's eyes met hers. 'And if it's windy, jump on the motorbike. But be careful. If the wind gets up as much as the forecast predicts, don't go out. Dad thinks it's going to hit hard and blow, but wear itself out pretty fast.'

'Okay, I'll check the mail. Don't want it blowing away, do we?' Cat forced lightness into her voice even as fear crawled through her at the thought of stepping outside the safety of the house.

'Thanks, love. I'll call you from Broken Hill.'

'Okay.'

'Do you want to come and lock the back door behind me, or are you happy if I lock it from the outside?'

'I'll do it. That way I know it's locked.' Cat turned away, unable to cope with the concern that had been in her mother's eyes ever since she'd arrived home. She'd given

them no notice that she was coming, and barely remembered the twelve-hour trip home; she'd driven it in one leg, stopping only for fuel and water.

Her parents had been shocked when she'd arrived, but Caitriona had shaken her head and refused to tell them why she was home. She'd arrived late at night the day after she'd told Dad she'd be home in a couple of weeks. Now two weeks had gone by, and she didn't want to leave. All she'd managed was to extract a promise that they didn't tell anyone she was here.

'Not even my sisters,' she'd said, her voice cold. 'If you tell anyone, I'll leave and go somewhere else. I don't want to see or talk to anyone.'

When they'd finally agreed to her condition, Caitriona had locked herself in her bedroom and slept for two days straight. She'd heard Mum outside and had answered a couple of times when she'd tapped on the door before she came out on the third day.

Mum's soft voice drew her back to the present. 'I just have to get my handbag from the kitchen and get my cardigan. Dad threw some things in an overnight bag in case we do have to stay overnight, and he's taken it to the plane.'

'Go, Mum.'

With one final glance, her mother hurried down the hall to the kitchen. A couple of minutes later, the back door closed.

Caitriona walked down the hall, the polished bare timber cool under her bare feet. The front door was wide open, and she stepped out onto the screened veranda. Biting her lip, she moved to the top step where the morning sun had already warmed the concrete. She sat down and lifted her gaze. To the east, the sky was a soft, pinkish hue, heralding the imminent rising of the sun above it. Delicate filaments of cirrus clouds were shot with gold high in the pink expanse, foreshadowing the arrival of the wind forecast later in the morning. Dad wouldn't have gone to the weather channels for the weather; he would've simply looked at the sky and known what was coming. Her father was a true bushie from way back. He understood the landscape; it was as much a part of him as he was a part of the bush. He knew more about the seasons and the weather from observing the sky, the birds and the behaviour of the sheep and cattle than any forecast of *El Niño* and *La Niña* on the excitable media.

Cat held the same love of the elements; she could read the clouds as well as Dad. This morning, the air held an expectant quality, and she took a deep breath. She could smell red dust on the slight breeze that was already puffing in from the west, and by the look of the sky and the electric feel of the air, a westerly was on the way. A loose feeling of reconnecting with herself ran through her briefly, and she tried to hold onto it, but it disappeared when the side gate creaked and she jerked with fright.

Mum didn't notice her sitting on the step as she came around from the back of the house, opened the side gate, closed it behind her and headed across the dirt road to the shed. As she passed the dog pens between the house yard and the big shed, the working dogs set up a ruckus.

A lifetime of habit had Caitriona standing to go over to the dog pen, and then she stopped herself and sat down again. She was in her robe and the dogs would settle without her input. It had been so long since she'd last been home, she wasn't even sure which dogs were still there; she hadn't had a conversation with Dad about the station for months. During the last two uni breaks, she'd worked full-time to try to get some money behind her to do her next and final year of study.

*What a waste that had been.* The familiar tightness gripped her chest, and she closed her eyes, willing it to go away.

*She would never go back.*

The erratic gurgle of the Cessna's engine and the metallic clattering of the propellor broke the silence as her father started the engine. Caitriona drew in deep breaths until her heart rate returned to normal and waited for the gurgle to develop into a roar. Soon, she caught a glimpse of the red wing as the small aircraft moved from the shed to the dirt road leading to the small runway adjacent to the river.

Gradually the whole machine came into view as her father taxied across the dirt road to the end of the runway. Without thinking, she pushed herself to her feet, walked down the steps and crossed the lush green lawn that was her mother's pride and joy.

She moved along to the corner of the fence where she and her four sisters had always lined up to watch Dad take off when they were children. From her vantage point, she would be able to see the Cessna when it reached the end of the runway and lifted

into the air. Watching Dad take off, and then later in the day, waiting there for him to come home had formed a regular part of their growing up.

The motor deepened to the roar she'd waited for, and Caitriona climbed onto the bottom rail of the fence. The fresh breeze whipped her red curls into disarray as she rested her arms on the timber and watched as the aircraft soared into the air, then banked to the south. She watched until her parents became a tiny red speck in the sky as the plane followed the river six hundred kilometres to Broken Hill.

Her fingers tightened on the rail as she gradually became aware that she was outside.

*Alone, and away from safety.*

Swiftly turning her head from side to side, she held her breath and scanned her surroundings, but all was quiet. Even the dogs had settled. Familiar and safe. She jumped off the fence rail, and hurried across to the front of the house, before running lightly up the concrete steps to the veranda and into the safety of the homestead.

She secured the front door behind her, both the lock and the deadlock, before systematically making her way through each of the twenty rooms of their sprawling house. She checked every window and door that led out to the veranda surrounding three sides of the building that had been home to the O'Byrne family for almost a hundred and fifty years.

Caitriona and her sisters had grown up knowing they were seventh-generation inhabitants of the homestead that had been built in the 1850s. As kids, that had meant very little to them, no matter how much Dad had tried to get them interested in the family history. They'd been too busy horseriding, fishing in the Darling River and doing their school-of-the-air lessons before they left home for boarding school at twelve to be interested in old photos and older stories.

The year before Caitriona left for university, Mum had discussed creating guest accommodation on two hectares a kilometre from the house, and Dad had started goat farming when the abattoir at Bourke had reopened. When she'd come back in the winter semester break that year, the station had been a different place. Construction was in full swing, concrete trucks and electricians seemed to be there every day, and to top it all off, the paddocks were full of herded wild goats. She hadn't been out in the winter since

the volunteers had started and the tourists arrived; she'd guessed she'd see it operating next year because the longer she stayed, the more certain Caitríona was that she was home for good.

With a sigh, she headed down the hall that ran the length of the house. Once she'd checked all the doors and found only one window open in her parents' room—she still felt guilty going in there because Mum and Dad's room had always been their private place—she hurried back to her room, took her robe off, flung it on the bed, crossed to the chest of drawers and pulled out a pair of shorts and a T-shirt.

Bile rose in her throat and she averted her eyes from her scarred arms and legs as she walked into the bathroom.