

# *After Summer*

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AFTER SUMMER

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For my wife's sixteen-year-old self.

### Five years ago...

The old shed shook with every crash of thunder and every flash of lightning. Riley huddled so close against me, I thought she was going to crawl into my skin. I pulled her tighter against me and stroked her hair, telling her it was going to be okay. For me, this storm was nothing to be worried about. They came and went so quickly up here in the tropics, I was used to them. Riley only came up here for a few weeks in the summer, so she wasn't used to them being so ferocious.

The sky lit up, and a flash of lightning boomed somewhere close, shaking the ground and the shed with it. Riley whimpered and curled up tighter. I wrapped my arms around her and rested my chin on the top of her head. "It's okay, Rols. It'll be over soon, I promise."

Another boom of thunder. Riley shuddered.

"Brooks?" she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"If I die--"

I almost laughed. "You're not going to die, Roly," I said.

She picked at the friendship bracelet on my wrist. We'd given them to each other last summer. "If I die," Riley said, "you need to know something."

"What?"

Riley looked up at me and I could see the terror in her eyes. Our faces were so close, I could feel her breath on my skin. She whispered, "I love you, Brooks."

## One

### Riley

If you don't count Mum's funeral four months ago, today is the first time I've seen my dad in over five years. After my parents split up when I was three, he'd fly me up to Roper's Beach after Christmas every year for his access visits. When I was eleven, he started to get really busy with his company and got remarried, and I guess after the first year he cancelled, it was easier to just not come up anymore.

By the time I fly into the airport in Townsville, it's seven at night. I had a six hour delay in Brisbane thanks to storms rolling through up here in the north, and even though this last flight was only two hours, I'm so tired, I can't even really feign the excitement I should probably show when I see Dad standing at the arrivals gate. He looks as dishevelled as I feel. When I was a kid he used to pick me up in board shorts and thongs. Now he's standing in front of me in a crumpled business shirt and dark jeans. He rushes over to grab my bags from me and gives me an awkward hug.

"Sorry the flights were a pain," he says. "Storm season's started early up here." I shrug in response. He hoists a bag over each shoulder, and as he leads me out of the terminal he says, "Trip home'll take longer than usual. Julie called and said there are some trees down on the road in. Should be cleared by time we hit the turn off though."

We get to Dad's car, (a convertible of some sort, which is a huge upgrade from the surfie van he used to drive), and my legs are starting to feel like lead. I can feel my body fighting off sleep. Dad throws my bags in the boot and when he goes to take my backpack, I pull it away from him. "I'll hold onto it," I say. He doesn't question me, and as I sit in the passenger seat he says, "Put your seat back and have a sleep. I'll wake you up when we get there."

I tuck my pillow between my head and the window and as we head out of the car park, I close my eyes and drift off.

Dad woke me as we got to the turn-off, just like he used to if I'd fallen asleep in the car on the way in, but all he's said to me since then is, "I hope you like the new place. It's a lot bigger than the old shack." I think I grunted in reply. I liked the old house Dad used to live in up here, but I guess when you have a new wife and a step-son, you need something bigger than a two-bedroom shack to live in.

It's around ten by the time we turn onto the esplanade at Roper's Beach. It's also raining, which means I don't get to see the water as we drive along the foreshore. When I used to come here, if I got in at night, the moon would reflect off the water like a spotlight and I'd be able to see the silhouette of the island, but tonight it's dark and miserable.

I look past Dad and out his window at the houses as we drive along. The speed limit on the esplanade has always been slow, so I get a chance to take in what I can see through the rain and the orange street lights. There are big new double-story houses that look like fortresses behind their tall fences in amongst some older weatherboard ones. It's funny how the old places never seem to have fences but the new ones do. Dad probably built the newer ones. We drive past the little shopping strip that's been here since before I was born and I'm happy to see that the Burger Hut is still there. It looks like it's expanded on the side, but apart from that, the sign with the hot dog eating a burger from one hand and holding a milkshake in the other still stands proudly on the roof. I'm not sure why, but seeing that hot dog man makes me feel a little better about being up here.

"Gloria and Stav still own it," Dad says as we cruise past. "They just got some new pizza ovens, so that'll be a nice change. We won't have to go into town to grab a pizza anymore."

I don't say anything in reply, but continue watching as we drive along the road. We drive past a couple of vacant blocks of land and then the caravan park comes into view. The few times Mum came up with me for holidays, we'd stay there instead of at Dad's. The wooden palm tree with the missing branch that Brooks Doherty and I broke when we tried to climb up the side of it is still out the front, lit up by a spotlight. There's a sign tacked onto it that says 'Bait sold here' but the one that catches my attention is the one that says in bright red letters on a white background 'Under New Management'. That one throws me a little because it used to be run by Brooks' Uncle Pete and if Pete's not here anymore, then there's a good chance Brooks will be gone too. She always said she'd be getting out first chance she got.

"Isn't Pete here anymore?" I ask.

Dad looks a little surprised by my question, but that's probably because I've hardly spoken to him the whole trip. "He's on holidays," he replies. "Sold his share back to the other owner and they got a semi-retired couple in for a couple of months until they can find someone more permanent."

"Oh," I say and turn back around in my seat to look out at the blackness that would normally be the beach.

Dad slows down and turns into a long driveway. "Here we are," he says. We pull up in front of a double-bay garage and wait for the automatic door to open.

We park beside Dad's work trailer, 'Scott Fisher - Builder' emblazoned on the side. It doesn't look like it's been moved in a while, judging by the deflated tyres. There are surf boards and mountain bikes stored above it on the ceiling and the whole place is so neat and tidy, I have to wonder whether Dad is even a builder anymore. Maybe being married again makes him more organised. Or maybe Julie's the neat one?

Dad carries my bags for me, and I follow him around the back of the house where he leads me past the pool down to what looks like a tiny house. "I've put you in the guest house. Thought you might like your own space," Dad says, sliding open the glass door and turning on the inside light. "It's all fully self-contained, so you've got your own shower and everything. Kitchen too, if you want to do your own cooking."

He looks proud of himself, so I fake a smile. I can't believe he doesn't want me in the main house but I'm too tired to argue right now. He drops my bags in the middle of the floor and after digging around in his pockets, produces some keys. He hands them to me. "These are your set for here and the house. You can come and go as you want over the holidays and after you're settled in we'll discuss house rules. Did you want to come up and have something to eat?"

I shake my head. "I'm good. I think I'll just have a shower and go to bed."

Dad nods. "Okay then." He takes a step back towards the door and then stops and says, "Oh, before I forget. I called the moving company today, and they should have your boxes and things up here some time over the weekend. So, anything you need, just ask."

"Thanks," I reply.

"Tomorrow morning, just come up when you're ready and Julie will get you some breakfast. Or whatever," he says. "And um." He waves in the general direction of the guest house. "Just make yourself at home."

"Okay."

He taps his hand on the door, gives me a quick smile and says, "I'll see you tomorrow then. Goodnight, Riles."

"Night, Dad."

I take a moment to check out the guest house. It's basically one big L-shaped room, with a bed in one part, a small lounge under a window in front of the bed, and where I'm standing near the door, a kitchen sink and a round wooden table with four chairs. There's a door off to the side of where the bed is which I assume is the bathroom. At least I won't have to share a bathroom with my step-brother, Jason.

I put my backpack onto the table, open it up and take out Mum's wooden ashes box. After the long day I've had, it feels heavy in my hands. I trace the laser-cut rose on the top of it

with my fingers, the design she picked out herself, and sigh. If she'd been able to hold on for just one more year, I wouldn't have had to come back up here. I shake my head to get rid of that thought, because of course Mum had no say in when she died. I look around for somewhere to put the box and settle on the bench by the window, which has a view of the pool outside. Mum always said she wanted a room with a view.

I stand for a moment and look out the window where the rain has finally stopped and the yard is lit up by the blue lights from the pool. I wish I didn't have to be here, but there's nowhere else I can go. I touch Mum's ashes box one more time and head over to my suitcase to find my pajamas. I don't want to think about the fact that the rest of my so-called new family is in the other house right now. I just need some sleep.



## Two

### Brooks

I eye the yellow envelope sitting on the kitchen bench. So far, I've resisted opening it. Yesterday, it was sitting on the table in the hall where we put all the mail but Ben must have gotten tired of me ignoring it and put it where I have to look at it. It's addressed to my parents' house, so either Mum or Dad would've dropped it off here, and I can tell by the way the flap on the back is all mangled that someone, most probably my mother, has already opened it. That would explain why she wants to talk to me again all of a sudden. There's a weight of expectation inside that envelope and I'm not sure I'm ready to see whether it's good or bad just yet. Ben appears in the kitchen, a towel around his waist, his hair still dripping wet after his shower. "I wish you wouldn't eat those," he says, referring to my late night snack of Coco Pops. He opens a cupboard and pulls out his shake mix.

"Like you can talk," I reply, tipping up the bowl to get the last of the chocolate milk from the bottom.

"This is much healthier than some of the stuff you put in your mouth," he says, measuring out the powder into his shaker.

"At least mine's made from real food and not in some lab."

He snorts.

"What?" I ask.

"That is not real food. And it's not good for you." Ben shakes his dinner and then pops open the lid on the bottle and takes a long drink.

"Says the chef who works the fryers at a burger place."

"I may make that crap, but I don't eat it," he says, draining his shake and rinsing the bottle under the tap.

"And don't get me started on your smoking," I say.

Ben rolls his eyes. "It's a stress thing, Brooks. I smoke for the same reason you run."

"Running isn't bad for you."

"It is if you get hit by a cat."

"That totally wasn't my fault. And it was a nudge. I didn't even get a bruise."

He laughs and leans back against the bench. He spies the envelope. "Read it yet?" he asks.

I shake my head.

“You saw who it’s from, right?”

I nod.

“And you don’t want to know either way?”

I shrug.

Ben walks over and stands beside me. “It’s not going to bite you, Brooks,” he says.

“You don’t know that.”

Ben nudges my shoulder with his. “Do you want me to look?”

I let out a breath. “I don’t know.”

“Someone’s got to look,” Ben says.

“Someone already has,” I reply, flipping the envelope over.

“Oh,” Ben says. “That would explain the answering machine messages then.”

“Yep.” I walk around to the other side of the bench and rinse my bowl in the sink. I don’t want to think about that envelope anymore. “What time do you start tomorrow?” I ask.

Ben lets me get away with the change of subject. He replies, “Not until eleven. Stavros gave Matt and I the morning off so we can work late for the community meeting tomorrow night.”

“I don’t know why they’re bothering with it,” I say. “Aren’t they starting work on the site next week?”

“Yeah, but I guess they just want to let people know what’s going on. There’ll be a lot of construction going on for the next few weeks.”

“If the tourists weren’t staying away before, they’ll be staying away now,” I reply.

“Now, now,” Ben says. “You fought it, and you lost. Be a good loser instead of a bad sport.”

“Whatever,” I say. Ben’s right, of course, but it still annoys me that he never really picked a side when we were protesting. He said he could see both sides of the argument for Scott Fisher’s stupid camping development on the island and didn’t really have an opinion either way. Probably because he wasn’t born here. He doesn’t have ‘skin in the game’ as my father would put it.

“Hey. Are you coming to the bonfire tomorrow night?” Ben asks, in an obvious attempt to change the subject.

I shrug. “I have to see if Rosie needs me to help out with the turtles.”

“Yeah but that’s not til late, right? You can come to the bonfire and then go across to help Rosie out.”

“I’ll see how I feel.”

Ben leans in and says, “Jo asked if you were going.” He winks at me.

“Ew, don’t do that. It’s gross,” I reply.

Ben laughs. “Seriously though, Brooks. Jo’s been talking about you non-stop. She’s a nice girl. Though I have no idea what she sees in you, and I have no idea why you broke up with her.”

“That ship has sailed,” I reply. “Anyway, at least I’m not like you, getting all mushy over Nicki when she comes in to the shop and not doing anything about it. Why don’t you just ask her out?”

“Because,” Ben says, turning away from me and rewashing his shaker bottle. If he’s trying to hide his reddening face, he’s failing miserably. “She’s so out of my league it’s not even funny.” He turns back to me. “Besides, she’s heading back to Uni after summer, so what’s the point?”

“You know what your dad would say?”

Ben rolls his eyes and puts on a mock-Uncle Pete voice, low and deep but a little more whiny than Uncle Pete would sound like and says, “Don’t die wondering, son. Life’s for living, not lazing.”

“Since when does Uncle Pete have an American accent?”

Ben pulls a face and I laugh. “I need to get going. Some of us need to work on our figures,” I say and shove Ben as I walk past.

“I’ll see you in the morning,” Ben calls as I head out the front door.

I’m lacing up my joggers when my parents’ car pulls into the driveway. I’m relieved to see it’s just my dad. I don’t think I can handle another argument with my mother.

“I was hoping you were home,” he says. He pulls himself out of the drivers seat using the door as a brace and hobbles around the front and leans on the bonnet. He really should get his knee looked at.

“I’m heading out for a run.”

“It’s going to rain again.”

I shrug. “I won’t melt.”

Dad sighs. I can feel him watching me. He says, “Can we just talk for a minute, Brooks?”

“I’m not coming home,” I say.

“I’m not here for that.”

There’s a first. “Then why are you here?”

“It’s nice to see you too,” Dad says.

“Sorry.” I have to keep reminding myself that Dad’s not the problem.

“Haven’t you gotten any of your mum’s messages? She’s called at least a dozen times.”

“I haven’t really been here much,” I lie. Dad crosses his arms and I say, “I’ve been taking extra shifts at the Hut to help out. I’ve been busy.”

“Well, look. Your mother wants to see you so—”

“She sent you here?”

“No, she didn’t. She doesn’t know I’m here. She thinks I got called into a meeting at the bowls club.” When I don’t say anything he says, “I’m trying to be the peacemaker, Brooks. You know I hate it when you two fight.”

“She shouldn’t start them then.” I put my earbuds into my ears and walk away. “I have to go.”

“Brooks, wait.” Dad grabs my arm. “Are you going to the community meeting tomorrow night?”

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Your mother and I will be there.”

Of course she will. The development’s as much her baby as it is Scott Fisher’s. “And?”

Dad scratches his head and says, “Can you not make a scene?”

I rip my earbuds out of my ears. “Are you kidding me?” Mum’s the one who gets hysterical, not me. It’d be easier if I avoid her completely but it seems like Dad just wants us to play happy families. I don’t want to say something I regret to Dad, because he’s not the bad guy, so I just shake my head and turn to leave.

“Brooks, please. Just, at least acknowledge her tomorrow night, will you? It’d be embarrassing for her if you don’t even say hello to your own mother in front of everyone. You know what this town’s like.”

And there it is. “See, that’s the problem, isn’t it? It’s always about her. Never about anyone else.”

“Brooks—”

“No, Dad. Just...” I sigh. “Look, if you and Mum come up tomorrow night, I’m not going to ignore you. And I will try my best to not argue with her. But I’m not going to pretend everything’s fine because it’s not.”

Dad nods. “Fair enough.”

“And for the record, she was the one who told me to go. I didn’t just leave, so...”

“I know,” Dad says. He pats me awkwardly on the shoulder, which never used to be

weird because up until the trouble between Mum and I over the development, we used to be a family of huggers. As I turn to head off, Dad says, “Enjoy your run.”

“You better get to the bowls club, just in case she sends someone to check up on you,” I call back, and break into a jog.

## Three

### Riley

When I get out of bed the next morning, the sun is shining through the window above the sink, and it's starting to feel muggy already. I kick off the sheet, sit up and stretch. When I check the time and discover that it's after nine, I realise that I've probably missed seeing Dad this morning. I remember he said something in the car last night about some big job he's got on but I didn't pay too much attention. I'm not betting on getting to see him much at all while I'm here, since him being busy with his business is the reason I stopped coming to visit him in the first place.

My stomach grumbles, and I decide to head up to the house to get some breakfast. As I open the door to the guest house, I touch the top of Mum's ashes box and think about what she said before she died. "Promise you'll try with your dad," she'd said, and I promised because you have to when someone asks you to when they're dying. Although I have no idea if I can actually keep my promise, I decide that since it's only really for a year until I finish high school, I'll try to get along with him.

The main house is quiet and as I close the glass sliding door behind me, I feel like I'm intruding. The room I've come into is massive. It's all big white tiles and white walls. There's a black lounge and wooden dining table to my left and a blue-topped pool table on my right. The kitchen is directly in front of me, a long bright white breakfast bar separating it from the rest of the room. It feels like those designer show houses Mum and I used to look at on weekends - all shiny and new and no hint that someone actually lives in them. As I make my way across to the kitchen, hoping someone has left me a note to tell me where to find things so I don't have to feel like I'm robbing the place, Julie appears from out of a side room.

"Oh," she says and smiles. "I thought I heard the door, but I just assumed it was Jason." She breezes over to me, her light dressing gown flowing out around her, and wraps me in a hug. Instead of being awkward, it actually feels good, so I hug her back. She pulls back and holds me at arms length. "You've gotten so big!" she says, shaking her head. I must cringe because she drops her hands from my shoulders, screws up her nose and says, "Sorry. You're probably going to get that a lot over the next few weeks when you run into people around here. Do you want something to eat? You must be starving."

She turns and heads back around the bench and starts rattling off my breakfast choices

as she packs the dishwasher. “There’s cereal in the cupboard. There’s muesli if you’re into healthy stuff. Jason eats all the stuff that’s full of sugar, bloody boys, and you’re Dad just normally has toast and coffee.” She looks up suddenly. “Do you drink coffee?”

I nod in reply and Julie must approve of this (unlike Mum, just saying) because she smiles broadly and says, “Great. I thought we could have a girls’ day today since your father will be busy getting ready for the community meeting tonight and with everything else he has on his plate this week, I doubt we’ll see him much at all today, although he did say he’d try to meet us for lunch.” She stops and takes a breath. “Did he tell you about that?”

I’m unsure whether she’s talking about lunch or the community meeting, but he never mentioned either of them so I shake my head in reply. I’d forgotten how much and how fast Julie talks. I always thought it would annoy me, but today, when I don’t feel like talking anyway, I’m kind of glad she won’t let me get a word in. “Men,” Julie says, swatting her hand in the air at nothing in particular. “Never tell you the important stuff. Anyway, we can talk about that over coffee at the cafe when we do some shopping after breakfast.” She stops and smiles at me and I can’t help but smile back. “Breakfast,” she says, like the idea has just occurred to her. “What did you say you wanted?”

“Toast is fine,” I reply.

“Great,” Julie says. “Bread is in the pantry,” (she points to the room where she emerged from before), “as are the Vegemite, honey and peanut butter. Butter and jams are in the fridge. We’ve got orange juice and breakfast juice as well.”

She pulls out a drawer on her side of the breakfast bar and says, “Cutlery is here.” She opens a cupboard under the bench and says, “Plates and cups in here. Just trawl through the cupboards until you find what you need.”

“Thanks,” I finally manage to say.

“Oh, and toaster and kettle are in the stowaway cupboard beside the stove.” She lifts the little roller door on the opposite bench and then turns back to me and smiles. “Once you have some breakfast, I’ll give you a tour of the house, so you know your way around and then we can both get ready to go out. Okay?”

“Okay,” I nod.

“Good,” Julie smiles. “I’ll leave you to it and go have a shower.” As she walks off toward the hallway she calls back, “Make yourself at home.”

“Thanks,” I call back. I wait until she’s out of sight and then I duck around to the other side of the bench and head to the pantry. It’s the size of my study at my old house and I feel a little overwhelmed at the amount of food in there. I reach for a loaf of bread but my eye is

drawn to the box of Fruitloops sitting beside the Coco Pops and Weetbix. Fruitloops were my favourite when I was a kid, and I haven't had them for ages. Not since Mum got cancer and made us both stop eating so much processed food. I used to feel bad for lying to her about the fast food I'd get on my way home from school but I think I would've died if all I'd eaten over the last two years was lentil soup and chickpea burgers with home-made hummus. I put the bread back and grab the box of cereal and head back to the bench to find a bowl.

The sugar hit on my first bite is amazing. It reminds me of when Brooks and I used to have big bowls of cereal for dinner when we were little. Only Brooks would add a big spoonful of Quik to hers for extra flavour. No wonder we used to have so much energy when we were kids. I close my eyes and savour the taste of fake flavouring. It's so bad it's good and I almost groan out loud.

I'm so glad I don't though because as I take my next big spoonful, the sliding door opens and in walks Jason. I mean, I'm assuming it's Jason. I haven't seen him since the last time I was here because he didn't come to the funeral, and back then he was just a scrawny kid with too-long brown hair. He hasn't changed too much from the way I remember him. He's taller but he's filled out more, and his hair's still long, scruffier though and hanging down in wet ringlets around his shoulders. He's wearing a black wet suit, the top of it pulled down and hanging off his waist. He wears the surfer look pretty well. I can't believe he's almost the same age as me. "Hey," he says, like it's not strange me sitting in his kitchen. "Mum here?"

"Shower," I say around a mouthful of cereal.

He nods in reply. "Can you tell her I'm heading into town with Damo, and I'll be back after lunch?"

I nod.

"Thanks. Catchya," he says and slips back out the door. As I watch him disappear around the corner of the house, it occurs to me how everyone is acting so normal about me being here, almost like I've always been here. I'm not entirely sure why that bothers me, but it does.

When Julie said she was taking me to the new shopping centre, I imagined it being a lot bigger than it actually is. A cafe, a surf shop, a chemist, a small grocery shop and an Indian takeaway would not be classified as a shopping centre where I come from. Julie and I skirt around the cafe seating on the footpath, avoiding a waitress who's trying to clear a table, and spot the surf shop on the corner. Julie stops to check out the messy specials table out the front.



It's mostly singlets and board shorts, so I wander further inside to scout out the togs, which are closer to the back of the shop. As I head past a rack of flouro coloured clothes, I hear a familiar laugh that I wasn't expecting. I scoot around the back of the rack and peer around it to see where the laugh came from. There, serving at the counter, is Brooks Doherty.

I duck back behind the clothes rack and try to decide what to do next. She would have finished school this year because she's a year older than I am, and I thought for sure she'd be long gone by now. My mouth has gone dry at the thought of talking to her. I mean, she probably doesn't even know who I am now anyway. It's been five years and a lot has changed.

I look back over the rack and watch as Brooks rings up a sale. She's taller than I remember, obviously, but she's still sporty and broad-shouldered. I wonder if she still has her home-made weights? And oh my God, she got her eyebrow pierced, just like she said she would. I wonder what her mum said when she came home with it? She tucks a stray hair underneath her cap and laughs at something the girl says. Wait a minute, is she flirting with her?

Oh my God. Get it together, Riley. It's just Brooks. I take a deep breath and stand up.

"Riley?" Julie appears from behind me. "Everything okay?"

"Oh, sure. Yeah, I was just..." I turn back to the rack I'm standing beside and pretend I'm interested in the clothes. "I was just checking these out."

"The boys' shorts?"

"Yeah. For Jason." Good recovery.

Julie smiles, takes a pair of shorts off the rack and says, "These would look good on him, don't you think?" She holds them up and turns them around. "And he does need some new ones. I don't know what he does in his clothes, but nothing of his ever lasts long at all."

"Hi," comes a voice from beside me. I turn to see a guy dressed in fluro yellow board shorts and a singlet, a straw fedora on his head. "Can I help you?"

"Oh. Yeah. I actually need some new togs."

"No problem," he says. "They're right over here." I leave Julie at the rack and as I follow the sales guy, I risk a look back toward the counter, but Brooks is gone.

"What are you looking for?" the guy asks.

"Huh?"

"Togs," he says. "What sort of togs are you looking for?"

"Oh, I'm not sure." I follow him over to the wall of togs and listen as he explains the virtues of each brand, and I'm glad for the distraction from my thoughts about Brooks.

## Four

### Brooks

I can't believe that Roly Fisher is standing in my surf shop. Well, not mine exactly, but the one I work at. For years all I could think about was Roly and that day in the storm when she was huddled against me, scared out of her mind. I mean, yeah we were only kids, and I had no idea about the feelings I was having back then, but I can remember how good it felt to have her around. Summers were so much more fun when she was in town.

Every year, a week or so after Christmas, Roly would arrive in town to see her dad. I used to go wait on the corner of the esplanade on my bike and when I'd see Scott Fisher's panel van cruise around the corner, I'd race them back to the house, me riding on the bike path, weaving in and out of tourists and Riley hanging out the window of the car egging me on. Sometimes Roly's mum would come up with her and they'd stay at Uncle Pete's caravan park.

As soon as they were unpacked, Roly and me would head straight down to the Burger Hut and get chocolate milkshakes and a serve of hot chips with chicken salt and sit on the beach and catch up. Over the next couple of weeks, Roly would help me clean the cabins and the camp grounds at the caravan park, and I'd take her swimming and fishing and pumping for yabbies. We'd spend most nights playing cards in the rumpus room at the back of Uncle Pete's house and sometimes we'd help clear the tables at the Burger Hut for Gloria when she was run off her feet. Afterwards, we'd lie on our backs on the picnic table out the back of the Hut and look at the stars and stuff ourselves full of whatever was left in the hotbox.

And then one year, it all changed. The summer after the last big storm, Roly didn't turn up. When I asked Uncle Pete if he'd heard anything, he said something vague about Riley's parents fighting, which as far as I was concerned, wasn't a reason for Roly to not come back. So I snuck into the caravan park office late one night to get Roly's address from an old booking ledger and wrote to her, asking what had happened. She didn't write back. I wrote to her every month for two years with no response. I got to the stage where I wondered if I'd made her up. If she was just a figment of my overactive twelve-year-old imagination. And now here she is, standing at a rack in the back of the shop looking at board shorts.

I mean, Uncle Pete told me about her mum dying. Heck, the whole of Roper's Beach knows about it. And it totally makes sense that she'd come back to live with her dad. I just wasn't prepared to see her so soon. I don't think she's seen me yet so I take the chance to watch

her some more. I know that sounds stalkerish but I haven't seen her in so long, I just want to make sure it's her and not some mirage I'm seeing from the heat. She's hardly changed at all, apart from not being so squishy with puppy fat. Now she looks long and lean, her denim shorts just reaching the bottom of her butt. Not that I'm checking her out or anything. I guess I should stop calling her Roly though. Her hair's still the same strawberry blonde it was back then, but instead of the pigtails she wore all the time, she's got it pulled back in a messy sort of pony tail that's just long enough to tickle her neck.

She pulls a couple of hangers off a rack, holds them up in front of her and then puts them back. I'm trying to decide whether to just walk over to her and see if she wants a hand with anything, which I should probably do because it is my job, but I wouldn't know the first thing to say to her. I mean, what do you say to someone whose mum died? Besides, I don't even know whether she remembers who I am. Before I can make up my mind, Reece jabs me in the ribs.

"Stop ogling the customers," he says, clearly ogling Roly himself.

"I'm not," I reply, but I know he knows I'm lying.

Reece leans in closer and says, "The chicks are the only reason I work here you know?"

As if I didn't. Reece has this stupid thing about scoring the girls who come in to the shop. If they're under a five, he won't serve them. What he fails to realise though is that anyone over a three is way out of his league.

"If you don't want her, I'll take her," he says. "She's got to be at least a seven."

I want to hit him for devaluing Roly like that but I bite my tongue.

"You can go sort out the specials table," he says when I don't answer him. I'd usually argue with him, on account of me being fifty bucks behind him on sales this month, but I just don't think I'm ready to talk to Roly just yet.

"Whatever," I shrug, and head out to the front of the shop to refold the clothes on the table that the Kennedy's messed up earlier.

## Five

### Riley

“I’m sorry Scott was too busy to have lunch with us,” Julie says. She stabs at her salad with a fork a few times before she finally gets a couple of leaves and a tomato on it. She crunches into it, and when she’s finished she says, “He’s been so busy getting everything right for the final reveal for tonight.”

“What’s he revealing?” I ask. I lift the top of my burger, pick off the lettuce and drop it on my plate. There’s no nutritional value in it so I really have no idea why they still insist on putting it on anything, let alone a burger.

“The final plans for his camping development on the island.”

I drop the bun back onto my burger and look up. “He’s developing the island?”

“He hasn’t told you?”

I shake my head. The island had always been this wild, untamed place that Brooks and I would paddle across to on kayaks and explore. From what I remember, it was owned by some old family who don’t live in the area anymore and the only thing on it was an old tin shed that a birdwatching group from Townsville used to use.

Julie puts down her fork. “Oh,” she says. “Your dad’s building an upmarket camping ground over there. Trying to bring in a higher level of tourists.”

“Don’t people camp at the caravan park?”

Julie shrugs. “Not much anymore. It’s a bit run down since Pete left.” She sips on her water.

“So, why is Dad building a camp ground on the island then? If no-one’s camping here much anymore, I mean.”

Julie puts down her fork, takes a deep breath and says, “Well”, and as soon as she says ‘well’ I know I’m in for a long-winded explanation. I’m not disappointed. “I don’t know if you know this, but Roper’s has been getting fewer and fewer tourists every year. The council has always had this thing about wanting to keep it as pristine as possible, right?” She pauses and I feel like she thinks I know what she’s talking about so I nod as I take a bite of my burger. Apparently satisfied with my response, Julie continues. “Which meant that your father couldn’t build anything over two stories high and no units on the beach front and a whole heap of other rules.” She shakes her head. “So anyway, they did that big upgrade of the highway a few years

ago, which diverted a lot of the traffic away from here, so people just don't come here on the way through to Townsville anymore. The council let some other developer build this new shopping centre here last year to try to get more people to come. I can't repeat what your father said about that. He's been trying to do something like that for years. Anyway, the council thought providing more shopping facilities would attract more people but it didn't really work. I mean, you don't come to Roper's for shopping, do you?" Julie laughs and waves her hand like she's swatting away that thought. "So your dad had this great idea about promoting eco-tourism."

"Eco-tourism?" I ask. "Like, getting back to nature type stuff?"

"You've heard of it?" Julie asks.

"Yeah. Mum was into it."

"Right," Julie says. "So anyway, the council loved the idea, and the first thing they did was turn the old Mackenzie farm into a conservation park and..." I start to switch off as she's telling me about revegetation and the bush walks and the nature trails and then starts on the council politics of it all. By the time Julie gets back around to Dad's idea, I've finished my burger and I'm swishing my straw around in the bubbles at the bottom of my milkshake.

"So," Julie says, "Scott got this great idea to cater for more expensive tastes, rather than budget campers and the council loved it. He managed to talk the Fiorelli's into selling him the island, because you know they were never going to do anything with it and well, now he's developing it into an exclusive luxury campground." She picks up her fork and stabs at her salad, which I hope is a sign that she's finished talking.

Firstly, I can't believe my dad owns an island, and secondly, luxury and campground are two words that don't usually go together. Although I don't fully understand how it'll work, I don't want to risk another long-winded explanation from Julie. Instead I ask, "How's he going to get people to come here?"

"He has his ways," Julie says, mysteriously. She leans in and whispers, "He has connections in the industry who know a few famous people, so he's going to see if he can get someone on board to help sell the place. He's got a huge tourism campaign in the works." She nods. "Just wait and see. No matter what anyone says, your dad will be the one who saves Roper's."

Dad saving anyone from anything would be a first, considering he couldn't even save his first marriage.

## Six

### Brooks

Saturdays at The Burger Hut aren't as busy as they used to be because of the drop in tourists, but today's a lot busier than usual thanks to the extra people in town for the community meeting tonight. Apparently, half the district wants to see the final plans for Scott Fisher's camping development and they've come out to Roper's early. The meeting doesn't start until six tonight, and there are already so many people at the Hut that they're overflowing onto the grass beside the shop where the Smith house used to be. I clear a couple of the outside tables as I pass and head around the back and into the kitchen. Ben's at the fryer, juggling baskets, dumping cooked chips into a bowl and then refilling the basket with more. I give him a bump on my way past to catch his attention. "Hey, Brooks." He wipes his forehead with the back of his arm, lifts a basket from the fryer, gives it a shake and then drops it down into the oil again.

"Hey," I reply. "Need a hand?"

"This is the busiest we've been in ages. We're getting slammed." Ben nods at the bowl of fresh chips. "Can you take those out and toss them in the hot box for me and see what needs a top up?"

"Sure." I shake some salt over the hot chips, toss them around in the bowl and take them out to the front counter. Gloria nods at me when she sees me. She's got a full house, so I dump the chips in the hot box and check the bain trays.

When I get back out to the kitchen, I tell Ben he needs to do more potato scallops and fish bites and hand him back the empty chip bowl. I take two clean trays from the stack on the bench and put them beside the fryers.

"Thanks," Ben says. "Can you get me the potato scallops from the cold room? Man, I hope Stavros hurries up."

"Where is he?" I ask as I disappear into the cold room and retrieve the bag of potato scallops.

Ben empties the bag of scallops onto a tray, tosses some into an empty basket and dumps it into the deep fryer. He turns his head away from the steam and says, "He had to go get something from the hardware store for the pizza ovens. He shouldn't be too far away, I hope. It's just me and Matt at the moment and," he lowers his voice, "Matt's freaking out with the burgers. It's his first time on his own."

“I can work the fryers if you want to help him with the burgers,” I say.

“Nah. Matt needs the practice. He’ll be right. And Jo’s in soon to help Gloria and Sophie out, so we’ll be good.”

I look over to where Matt’s flipping patties and checking on steaks and eggs. He seems to be in a pretty good rhythm so I decide against saying hi. I head back into the cold room to get the fish bites and as I come back out, Stavros rushes into the kitchen. He grabs his apron from the hook and pulls his cap down on his head. “Sorry,” he says, tying his apron around his waist. “Got stuck with Mac talking about the cricket. God that man can talk.” He chuckles to himself as he steps in beside Ben. “Hey, Brooks. You helping out tonight?”

“If you need me, sure.”

“We’ll need all hands on deck,” Stavros says. “Ben and Matt are going to do all the prep, but I’ll need you to help Gloria take the orders once we kick off.”

“No problem. If I’m working, it means I don’t have to talk to my mother.”

Stavros narrows his eyes but doesn’t get up me for dissing Mum. He knows the story. The whole town does. Instead he says, “Can you get here early and help Gloria set up?”

“Sure. I’ll come back around five.”

“Great,” Stavros says. He pats Ben on the back, points to the fryers and says, “Get that lot out and go have your break. Don’t be too long though.” He pulls order tickets out of the machine, puts them onto the docket rail and heads over to the grill. “Looks like there’s not going to be a let up any time soon.”

I follow Ben outside and around to the back of the shop. We sit down on the bench in the shade. It’s only just gone three and the air is hot and sticky. The breeze should start picking up soon to cool it down. Ben tosses me a bottle of water and stretches out beside me. “How was work?” he asks, taking out a cigarette and lighting it. He takes a long drag, blows out the smoke and leans back against the wall.

“Same as always,” I reply. “Reece is still kicking my arse in sales.”

“Is that why you worked late?”

“Brit was late in and Reece took off early.”

“Does he even work there anymore?” Ben asks, sucking in another lung full of smoke and blowing it out high into the air.

“Being best mates with the boss has its perks I guess.”

Ben nods. “Your mum called again this morning,” he says. He runs his hands through his hair and the way he looks at me, I know what’s coming next. “You really need to talk to her, Brooks.”

“No,” I say. “I don’t.”

“I can’t keep covering for you.”

“I know.”

Ben shoves me with his shoulder. “Maybe she’s waving the white flag.”

“I doubt it. And unless she gets off my back, I don’t want to talk to her.” I take a long drink of water. “Have you heard from Uncle Pete?”

“He’s in Alice Springs at the moment. Bloody hot out there.” Ben finishes off his cigarette and stubs it out in the pot near his feet.

Gloria sticks her head around the corner and says, “Stavros told me you were out here.”

Ben stands up and stretches and says, “I better get back in there. I’ll catch you back here later.” He taps the top of my cap and goes back inside.

“Everything okay?” I ask. “I can stay and help if you like.”

Gloria fobs me off with a wave of her hand. “Jo’s just got here. We’ll be fine once the early crowd leaves.” She sits down beside me and smiles. “You’ll never guess who I saw today.”

“Probably not,” I reply.

“Riley Fisher,” Gloria says, like it’s the name of someone famous.

I pretend I don’t know who she’s talking about and she shakes her head at me and says, “Don’t tell me you don’t remember little Riley Fisher. God, you two used to be joined at the hip.”

“I remember Riley,” I reply. And she’s not so little anymore, I think.

“Well,” Gloria says, “I heard she wasn’t meant to be up here until just before Christmas but Scott flew her up early.”

The whole town knew Riley was coming. The news of Riley’s mum’s death went through Roper’s like wildfire, and of course every man and his dog were speculating what would happen with Riley.

“You should go up and see if she wants to catch up,” Gloria says, not waiting for me to reply.

“I might do that if I get time,” I say. “Although under the current circumstances, her dad might not let me in the yard.”

Gloria shakes her head. “Who cares what Scott thinks? Riley’d probably like to see you, especially after everything that happened with her mum.”

Before Gloria can plan the rest of my summer around Riley Fisher, Stavros sticks his head around the door and says, “Jo needs you out front, Glo.”

Gloria pats my leg and as she heads back inside she says, “I’ll see you later.”



“Yeah,” I reply. “I should get home anyway. I’ll see you tonight.”

Gloria waves me off and I throw my backpack over my shoulder and head home.

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