

The highway is long and flat and arrow-straight, running into the setting sun, and that is how he gets into difficulty. That, and his too-frequent glances between the rearview mirror and the holdall on the passenger seat. A ghost-limbed tree out of blackened scrub, half a painted truck tyre, and a steer, outlined in gold, standing across the centre white line. These things appear suddenly, as static objects, as if he has blinked too long and leapfrogged a section of road.

He brakes, swerves, slews from this lane across into the other.

A lucky escape, to be told loud and with relief to strangers at the pub, the steer moving only its eyes as he passes. Had it not been for the other car.

Later, in the immediate aftermath of the accident and throughout the years that unfold from it, he continues to think of the treasure as his. The risk is worthwhile. This not entirely honest bounty is the making of him as a man.

Here is a country that is there for the taking, after all.



**SUNDAY**



# 1

## Charlie

### Dickhead Daryl

It's past eight at night when I get near to home, full dark except for a half-arsed moon. My feet hurt from walking and there's a strong euc smell coming off the trees like summer's already here. I take the cut through Shenton Bushland and Karrakatta Cemetery in case he's out in the ute and come after me.

Course he's come after me. Dickhead. Haven't seen him, but.

The track through the cemo is dead straight, dead flat, bare dirt around the graves and gumnuts everywhere, rows of headstones like white teeth. Creepy as fuck. I've got my headphones round my neck, music off – I'm not stupid, Geena – my thongs going *scrape, slap, scrape, slap* on warm bitumen and a bunch of noisy parrots in the trees overhead. Daryl's bit of gold in my

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hand and I feel the weight of it, how it fits exact in my fist when I close my fingers.

My phone vibrates in my shorts pocket. Geen, about her twentieth go at getting a hold of me tonight. This time I look behind to check no one's there, slide the gold into my pocket and pick up. 'I'm not giving it back, so you can get fucked.'

I can see her face, imagine it, trying to smile and keep her shit together. I talk quiet but she talks loud back.

'Howdy, Sis! How's it going with ya?' she says. 'Where are you?'

'Shh, keep it down, can't ya? As if I'm gunna tell you that. Dickhead there with you, is he? Given up 'cause he can't find me?'

'No.'

'Got me on speaker so he can listen in?'

'No, I do not. He's not back yet.'

I rub my neck and check behind again, but there's nothing there, no headlights. Dunno if the gates are shut at the far end and I pick up the pace. I'd hear the ute's engine growl, anyhow.

'You could bring it back while he's still out?' she says.

'No way.'

'Chrissakes, Charlie. It's not yours.'

'Fucksakes, Geen! You're not Mum.'

'And you're not twelve years old no more!'

I roll my eyes at the screen. What does it matter to her, that I took it off him? I only did it to piss him off. My thumb's ready to end the call when she says sorry for yelling.

'Come back here, okay?' she says, softer. 'Get the bus and bring that gold bar back. I'll tell him you didn't mean to take it.'

'I did mean to take it. Shoulda been more careful with it, shouldn't he? Got no cash for the bus, anyhow.'

'Shit.' She takes a drag of her smoke. She thinks I can't tell

*Charlie*

over the phone when she's smoking but I can. 'Payday tomorrow, okay?' she says. 'I can get some dollars to you, for food and stuff.'

I keep walking, cross another path. The birds follow me, dropping euc flowers and gumnuts out the trees like a bunch of kids.

'What's going on, Geen?'

'I'm trying to get you to bring Daryl's—'

'No, I mean, whatcha doing at his place all the time? When are you coming home?'

Another drag of her smoke. 'Soon.'

Takes her too long to say it and my fingers tighten around the phone. I kick at a gumnut and stub my bare toe on the ground. She's been staying over at Daryl's all week, ever since the thing with school.

I stop at the main gates, shut and locked up. I hang back and stick in the shadows. A pool of yellow streetlight out on the footpath and some traffic noise off Thomas Street. No green ute waiting for me out on Smyth Road. He could be anywhere, but.

'I've gotta go, Geen.'

'Where are you?' she says. 'Is that cockatoos?'

'Karrakatta. I'm almost—'

'The cemetery? How many times have I told you not to—'

'Keep yer head on. I'm nearly home, aren't I?'

A car goes past on the street but it's not him.

'Just be careful, okay?' She takes another drag and her voice goes quiet. 'You haven't shown that bar to anyone, have you? Because—'

'Course not.'

'You can't try and sell it or anything.'

'Cause Dickhead Daryl stole it, ya mean? I'm not stupid.'

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How'd he get a hold of it, anyhow? Did he take it from the shop?'

'No! Hell, no. Nothing like that.' I hear it in her voice, but. How big it is, whatever the thing is she's not telling me.

I slide the gold out my pocket and it gleams in the light from the street. Long as my thumb and sits perfect in the palm of my hand. Like an icy-pole with no stick, except smaller. 'You reckon it's fake?' I ask. I like the feel of it, heavier than a rock, flat smooth with some letters and numbers engraved on one side.

'Fake?' Soon as she says it, I know it's not.

'A scam,' I say. 'That'd be more like Daryl.' Except now I'm only saying that. Now I know it's real.

Either way, he's not getting it back off me.

'Do us a favour?' Geen says. 'Can you not wind Daryl up any more than you already have? He's not some Year Eleven kid at school you can punch in the mouth.'

Yep, there it is. Every conversation since Monday.

'Listen, Charlie. If Daryl comes around—'

'If he comes around, I'm not gunna let him in. I'm gunna tell him where to stick his fat head.'

'Just be careful, okay? And don't show it to anyone. I'll see you tomorrow. I'll come around after work.'

She ends the call too quick and I stare at the busted screen of my phone before I ram it back in my pocket.

Fucksakes, what is it she's not telling me? What if she doesn't come home?

I climb out the cemo next to the main gate and cross the street in the shadows. No traffic, no green ute. I stick on the back streets



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until I get onto ours, click my music and pull my headphones back on. 'Reckless', one of Mum's favourites. It's a shit song, but – too slow – so I skip to the next. 'Say Goodbye', Hunters and Collectors.

I get halfway along the street before I see the fat girl outside our place. Stood underneath a streetlight, bent over like she's run a race, leaning on the top of the gate. She's got messy black hair in a plait with half a bottlebrush in it, staring at the busted mailbox, the upside-down number seven. I yank my headphones off when I get up to her. 'Who the fuck are you?'

She jerks upright and spins around. Not much older than me, eighteen tops. She's got a swollen cheek on one side like someone's smacked her in the face and she's puffing from her run, her boobs like a bouncy castle. Her eyes slide up and down me, across the brown lawn I haven't watered, to our front door. Place looks dead with no lights in the windows. 'This . . . number . . . twenty-seven?' she says.

'What if it is?' The big square villas either side are blazing out light like they're trying to make our shit house disappear up its own backside. My face burns the same as when Sass came to pick me up that very first time. 'There's zero stuff in there to take, if you're planning on robbing it.'

Her mouth opens and nothing comes out and she shuts it. She's got these hooded eyes so I can't see her, not properly. She's not white, either – she's Aboriginal, a bit or a lot I can't tell. I wrap my hand around the smoothness of the gold, ram it deeper into my pocket, past my phone.

Don't know her, do I? She could be anyone.

I check the street, both directions. No headlights. She keeps up her puffing, head down like she's gunna spew.

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The music out my headphones sounds tinny and piss-weak and I click it off. 'Not being funny, but I gotta get inside. You asthmatic or some shit? Not gunna die on me, are ya?'

She shakes her head, frowns at my feet in my thongs. She's no better – got no shoes, has she? Designer denim skirt, cream silky top and a new suede jacket, plus half the local bushland in her hair. Scratched up her feet, too – prickles, glass, rocks, the works. She straightens up again, taller than I thought she was. Hitches her bag up her shoulder. One of those messenger bags, suede to match her jacket. 'You do live here?' she says.

'What do you care?'

She frowns like it's a whole big effort. 'Do I know you?'

'No, mate. You don't know me.'

What is she, a few brain cells short the full set? Doesn't look it, but. There's something about her, like a queen, someone flash. So, what's she doing here? Why's she got no shoes?

She limps a step and her eyes slide past me, searching for someone, up and down the street. My neck twitches and I rub the back of it. Take a look behind me. Nothing.

A siren cracks the dark along Railway Road and she jumps so high I do too. She spins her head and follows the sound, her eyes big and round. The siren dies and she stares at our mailbox again. 'I think . . . I need to get inside somewhere.'

'Not here, you don't. Not being funny. Like I said—'

'Seriously,' she says. 'I can't stay out here.' She puts a hand up to her head. There's blood there, a smear like black paint. Another dark patch on the hem of her jacket. Fucksakes, I'm not babysitting a fat injured person.

'You on the run or what?' I say.

*Charlie*

She blinks. 'I can't explain right now.'

I try to get around except she's blocking the gate. I nod my head up the street. 'Hospital's up there. You know the way?'

'No.'

'Yeah you do,' I say. 'Thomas Street. You want me to call someone? I can call someone.'

Her eyes shoot open. 'No! Like, I had an accident. In my car. I need to rest, that's all.' She pulls the twigs and shit out her hair and tries to smooth it down. 'Not the hospital. I'm fine.'

There's a Band-Aid on the side of her hand, blood soaking through that too. She's not fine.

'All I want is a couch. Is that so hard?' She smiles like she's making a real big effort, except it only half works. Talks flash, too, considering what she looks like. I don't trust it.

'What, crash at mine? Why can't ya go home?'

'Too far to walk.' Her eyes skitter away like two bugs.

She's lying, it's written all over. Takes one to know one. 'You need to move,' I say. 'I gotta get inside.'

She steps in front of me, looks at my feet again, over her shoulder at the house. 'I can pay you.'

Like she knows I've got no cash. And she'd be right, 'cause I can't do nothing with Daryl's bit of gold, can I? Not right now. Plus I dunno if Geen'll come tomorrow like she said she would. It takes me about two seconds to decide.

'Orright,' I say. 'Forty bucks for the couch, one night.'

She stares at me hard, presses her lips together. I reckon she'll haggle but she lifts the flap of her bag and rakes around. 'Fine.' She hands over two new twenties, stands back for me to get the gate open.

Shit. Should've asked her for more.

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I push the twenties into my pocket next to my phone. Scrape open the gate and she follows me up the path to the front door.

I go to stick the key in the lock and I stop. ‘How’d ya cut your hand?’

‘I told you. I had a car accident.’

‘Where is it then?’

‘Sorry?’

‘The car you stacked?’ I nod past her at the street. ‘You’re meant to stay with it. Not leave the scene, yeah?’

She blinks in the light from next door. ‘I don’t remember. I might have hit my head.’

Fucksakes, I’m getting this knot in my stomach. ‘If you’re gunna be on my couch I reckon I’ve got the right.’

‘Right?’

‘To the full story.’

She presses her lips together.

‘I do,’ I say. ‘It’s my place and Geen’s, except she’s away. That’s my sister. Don’t wanna be axe-murdered in my bed, do I?’

She holds out a hand. ‘I’m too tired for axe-murdering, but if you want to give me that forty dollars back—’

*Bitch.*

‘Orright.’ I get the door open. I’m not gunna think about where she got the forty bucks, what kind of trouble she’s in. In the morning she’s gunna be gone.

She tells me her name’s Nao, says it like Nay-oh. Doesn’t mean shit, anyhow – it’s probably fake. I give her my real one, don’t even think. She follows me inside and down the passage to the back. I can smell burnt toast from this morning and it makes

*Charlie*

my stomach growl. 'You can take the couch in the sleep-out,' I say. 'Not Geen's room.'

Before we get across the kitchen the light in the sleep-out snaps on and I stop, my eyes out on stalks and my heart going hell for leather.

It's Daryl, the big ugly bastard. 'G'day, Charlize. You took your time. Been out on the town, have we, you thieving little cunt?'

He's sat in Mum's chair like he owns the place. The back door's wide open and whanging the shit outta Geen's wind-chimes, Freo sea breeze blasting through the flyscreen. 'You're breaking and entering, Daryl. You can get outta that chair, too.'

He doesn't shift, course he doesn't. He's got BO and Bundaberg rum coming off him like kerosene, and the lampshade above him is swinging like it knows how mad he makes me, the light reflecting off the top of his shaved fat head. I feel it start in my fingertips, the massive epi tantrum I'm gunna chuck if he doesn't get out.

It's not as if I'm scared of the dickhead. I'm not. Geen pretends like she's not scared of him when she is. 'Where's my sister?' I say. 'When's she coming back home?'

'She'll be making my dinner, making herself fragrant.' He stretches his thick neck like he's been practising at the gym. 'You want my opinion, she won't be back here anytime soon. Where's my piece of gold, Charlize?'

My fingers twitch towards my pocket but I stop them short. 'It's Charlie, you deadshit.' A shift of air behind me. Nao, hanging back in the kitchen. She better stay outta this. 'How'd you get in? Better not have busted that door.' I cross the room and pull it shut, stop the wind-chime noise. The fridge in the kitchen clicks on and starts to rattle.

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He opens one hand to show me the keys dangling there. Geen's keys, the Surfers Paradise keyring I gave her. My hands ball into fists and I have to blink. Can't believe she's sent him round here.

He smiles. 'All I want's the gold and I'll be out your way.'

'Dunno what you're on about.'

'Don't even try, Charlize.'

'Get outta that chair! You know full well that was Mum's.'

He waggles pink fingers. 'You first.'

The gold burns in my pocket. Nao calls from the kitchen. 'Where did you say the couch was? I can just—'

'Hold on,' I say to her. 'I'm sorting it.'

Daryl clocks Nao through the doorway, propped against the kitchen bench like she's gunna fall down. He checks her out like the perv that he is. 'Who's your mate?'

'She's not my mate,' I say. 'She needs somewhere to crash.'

He laughs. 'Must be fucken desperate.' He raises his voice to Nao. 'Can't trust this one as far as you can dropkick her. I'd get out while you can.'

It keeps building, running up my arms and into my shoulders – how bad I want to punch his lights out. 'I'll dropkick you if you don't get out my house.'

'I mean it, you little bitch. Where is it?'

'Musta lost it.'

He stands up and I take two steps back. Across the kitchen, Nao straightens up.

'Don't shit me, Charlize,' he says. 'I hear you got expelled from school for fighting, Monday. Three strikes and you're out. Shame.'

'Shut it, Daryl.'

*Charlie*

I slide my hand in my pocket, real casual. Get my fingers round the gold and push it past my phone, into the bottom corner where that hole's been getting bigger. Push again and feel the drop as it slips into the lining of my shorts. He's not getting it off me. He can piss off home.

'No one likes a fighter,' he says. 'Not in a girl.' He takes one step and another one, backing me into the kitchen. He's head and thick neck taller, like the aggro makes him bigger. The Bundy fumes would flatten a camel. 'I hear your best mate won't talk to you, either. That you punched out her boyfriend. Like her a bit too much, is that it?'

'Shut it!' What's Geen been saying to him? He doesn't know shit. I try to count to ten but my eyes are pricking.

'No wonder your sister's left you—'

'She's not left me!' I fly at him. It's like hitting a Mack truck with BO.

He grabs the collar of my shirt and slams me into the fridge, the back of my head ringing. 'Don't try that shit with me, Charlize!' The fridge magnets scatter and Geen's keys go flying.

'Ow, you dick! Watch my headphones.'

'Give me the gold.' His face red, his hand at my neck, twisting my shirt. His other hand groping me down one side.

Nao's frozen, blinking behind him.

'Daryl, you perv!' I've got my left arm caught behind me and his hand at my neck is like a clamp. Can't pull my right arm back for the punch. I kick his shin but it does fuck-all. I go for his face with my nails.

'Bitch!' He squeals and backhands me. I taste blood, but there's a nice werewolf scratch down his cheek. He pins my right arm up to the fridge with a fat forearm, tightening his

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grip on my shirt. He digs in the pocket of my shorts with the other hand, pulls out Nao's twenties. 'What's this? Where is it?'

I smile 'cause he won't find it, but he's twisting the shirt so I can't get air. I'm on tiptoe, fighting for breath, the stuff on the fridge clanking like it's gunna come down on us. 'Sold it,' I gasp.

'Bulldust.'

Nao. 'You're choking her.' Useless.

My feet leave the floor and my mouth opens. Can't breathe. I grab the top of the fridge with the arm he's got pinned there, kick up at his nuts and miss.

'Put her down. Please.' Nao grabs his arm. He shakes her off but his grip loosens. I get my left arm free, scrape at the neck of my shirt. Too tight.

'I'll put her down, all right.'

I grope the top of the fridge with my right hand. What's up there? Wok, bread board, baking stuff. I hit something – smooth, a long handle.

Nao yanks on his T-shirt. 'Stop! Look at her face.'

The T-shirt rips and she falls backwards. Daryl rolls his neck and keeps digging, the other pocket now – wrong again, except he won't let go. This pressure in my head like there's too much blood in it.

My lips go numb. Black spots start up in front my eyes and I can't see Nao. My heart's bashing away like a Melbourne Cup loser but I'm fucked if he's gunna kill me. I get one hand round the thing on the fridge and then the other one. It's stuck underneath something, won't shift. I yank harder and it does, swinging out and down, too quick. Daryl rears backwards and his eyes go massive.

There's a shit-awful crunch and we go down hard, a twist of



Charlie

arms and slippery sweat and Daryl's big bastard legs. The black spots do ballet in my face until I get my fingers to my neck and pull the shirt away, and I choke and cough and try to get my breath until I can. The banging of blood in my head getting less and the gold digging my thigh where I've landed on it. 'Fuck, Daryl,' I say. 'You fucking bastarding fuck.'

It's only then I hear Nao. 'Oh God. Oh Jesus. Oh God,' over and over.

I lift a hand off the floor and get why. The slippery wet is hot dark red, pooling under Daryl and soaking the top of my shirt.

It's not sweat.

'You could have, like, tried to knock him out with something,' Nao says. 'Not chop his head in half.'

'As if I meant to!' I'm leant over the sink, coughing and retching, except there's nothing coming out – only spit. My voice rough as guts and my throat aching. 'Didn't know what was up top of the fridge, did I? How about you? No use to anyone.'

She's bent over in the doorway to the sleep-out, near his legs. I'm not gunna look.

'Not . . .' I swallow. 'Is he?'

'I'd say so. Come and see.'

I shake my head. It hurts like a bastard. 'No way.' I stay at the sink and keep one hand around my throat. Shivering, the flanno shirt sticking to me, my blood slowing down, after—

Fuck. Daryl. Geen. Fuck. *Don't think about it.* I go for the phone on the kitchen bench and punch in the numbers. 'You have dialled emergency triple zero. Your call is being connected . . .'

'Recorded message,' I say to Nao. 'Triple zero, you'd think they'd—'

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She's across the room in two steps. Smashes the phone onto the floor and the case cracks open. 'Are you crazy?'

'I was talking on that!'

'You just—'

'Yeah and I didn't mean to! And he might not be . . . He might need a hospital.'

'Wait.' She sticks a palm in my face. 'There could still be someone—' She picks up the front part of the phone and listens. 'Okay,' she says. 'Dead.'

She looks at me and her eyes go big and she looks at Daryl. I do too and my mouth fills up with spit. It's like Stephen King . . . Daryl on the floor with Geen's meat cleaver rammed into the front part of his head. Dad gave her that cleaver.

'Thought it was the wok,' I say.

Did too, 'cause I was panicking. And that's what I'll tell the cops. But are they gunna—

There's a choking sound from Nao and I look up. She's got half a fist in her mouth like she's trying not to laugh. Fucken fruitloop.

I rip the phone off her and get the back part of it off the floor and try to fit them together. 'You've wrecked this. Geen'll be spewing.' I keep trying but it's no good – a bit's cracked off the side and my hands are shaking.

What's she gunna say? He's a dickhead but he's still her boyfriend. 'How can you tell if someone's dead or not?'

'You want to check?'

'No! But what if he's not?'

'I'll do it.'

I stay hunched over the phone while she does it.

She comes back. 'He's dead. No breathing, no pulse.'

*Charlie*

If I didn't know better, I'd reckon she was relieved. 'For real?' 'For real.' She climbs onto a stool at the breakfast bar, her good hand wrapped around the cut one. Musta hurt it, bashing the phone out my hand like she did.

'Still have to call the cops, but, don't I?'

Nao doesn't answer. She's got her lips pressed together. I see Geen's keys, on the floor by the oven. I imagine telling her, what it's gunna mean for us, the heap of shit I'm in when it wasn't even my fault.

Geen thought it was bad I got expelled from school this week. 'Not thinking, Charlie!' she said. But I am thinking, I'm thinking all this crap. I'm thinking about Mum and Dad, and everything going to shit, and what it's like in jail when you're only seventeen.

'Why don't ya want me to call?' I say to Nao. 'What the fuck's going on?'