

1

August – Perth, Western Australia

The doorbell rang twice before Laura realised what the noise was and jerked out of her reverie. She pressed the intercom and called, “I’m coming!” then walked reluctantly down the stairs to answer it, wishing whoever it was would go away and leave her in peace.

Craig had been gone for a week now. Their marriage was finally over. It had been faltering for a while and she’d tried to tell herself they could patch it up again once he slowed down at work. She should have thrown him out the first time she found he’d been unfaithful, she knew that now. But she’d believed his promise never to stray again, believed he really was working late. How stupid could you get?

The trouble was, she felt disoriented on her own, lacking confidence in her own judgement. Well, she and Craig had been together since she was eighteen and he twenty-two. All her adult life, really. It would mean changing everything about her life now, and she could do it, she was sure she could, but it wasn’t going to be easy. So she was taking it slowly. The first step would be to sign up for that advanced course on interior design she’d always wanted to attend. She’d got the information on it from the technical college where she’d studied the beginners’ course, and had even started filling in the forms before this happened.

Craig had rung her a couple of times to discuss business matters but had refused point blank to tell her where he was. She had his mobile number if she wanted to contact him. That was

enough. So of course she hadn't tried to contact him. What else was there to say anyway? They'd only wind up having another row.

She sighed and opened the door, staring through the security screen in shock. Two police officers, a man and a woman, with solemn expressions on their faces.

“We have some bad news for you, I'm afraid, Mrs Wells. May we come in?”

Her first thought was Ryan. She'd read an article saying young men had more car accidents than anyone else. As she fumbled with the lock she prayed silently: please let him not be dead, please, please, not dead, not my Ryan. Images of him as a boy, a youth, a sometimes defiant but always loving young man, flashed in front of her.

Numbly she led the way to the family room and gestured to a sofa, sitting opposite them. “Who is it?” she prompted. “Who's hurt?”

The female officer leaned forward. “It's your husband, I'm afraid.”

Craig, not Ryan. She closed her eyes for a moment in relief. “How badly?”

There was a pause. The silence went on and on. She stared at them in shock. “He's not . . . he can't be . . .” She couldn't get the words out.

“I'm afraid Mr Wells is dead.”

Laura closed her eyes to stop the room spinning. Next thing she knew, the female officer was forcing her head down. She struggled against it. “I'm not going to faint.”

“Just stay still for a minute, please, Mrs Wells. It really does help.”

“Let me up!”

They did but continued to watch her warily.

She straightened her tee shirt, avoiding their eyes, her thoughts in a tangle. She couldn't imagine not seeing him walk through the door again, just couldn't.

When she looked up again she saw them all reflected in the mirror: two solemn young officers, one forty-four year old woman with a white face wearing a shocked expression. Was that really her?

“How?” she managed at last. “How did he die?”

“Car accident. He was killed instantly. He couldn’t have known anything, wouldn’t have suffered.”

They were expecting her to weep. The male officer cleared his throat and reached for the box of tissues, pushing it nearer. She *should be* crying, sobbing on someone’s shoulder, calling Craig’s name—shouldn’t she? Only she didn’t feel like weeping, just felt chilled and distant, as if this was happening to someone else.

The male officer cleared his throat again. “Is there someone we can fetch, Mrs Wells? Someone who can stay with you?”

Her brain seemed not to be working properly because it took a while to realise who she should send for. “My children.”

“Are they at school?”

Another moment of blankness then, “Heavens, no. They’re grown up, at work.”

“Tell us where and we’ll get someone to contact them.” The male officer took down the details and went away. She could hear him in the hall talking into his mobile phone, but couldn’t make out the words.

The female sat watching her.

“I need a drink.”

“Shall I make you a cup of tea, Mrs Wells?”

“Not tea. Brandy.” Her father always gave people brandy for shock.

“Are you sure that’s wise?”

“I’m not sure about anything, but I’m definitely going to have a brandy.” She pushed herself to her feet and made for the bar, sloshing some cognac into a brandy balloon. She sipped it slowly, finding its warmth comforting because she felt cold.

When the male officer came back, he saw what she was drinking and exchanged worried glances with his companion. “You need to keep a clear head, Mrs Wells.”

Laura shrugged, then caught sight of the framed photo on the mantelpiece—Craig, Ryan and Deb, arm in arm, smiling. Other memories flashed before her eyes, the laughing young Aussie she’d met in

Lancashire and fallen madly in love with, the proud father holding their new-born son, the not-brilliantly-successful business executive skirmishing at office parties, turning on her after they got home for not getting on better terms with the Chairman's wife. Why had she remembered that stupid incident, for heaven's sake?

She and Craig had drifted so far apart in the past few years. When had he started being unfaithful? It didn't matter any more—not now.

Yes, it did. It always would. She took another swig of brandy to drown the pain.

“We'll wait with you till your children arrive, shall we?”

Shrugging she set the empty glass down, feeling suddenly swimmy-headed. When had she last eaten? She couldn't remember. She was on a diet, trying not to eat too much because during their final quarrel Craig had told her she was a fat old cow. She'd intended to lose weight and prove him wrong, but already the diet was faltering. She wasn't fat, just a few pounds overweight, but he only admired scrawny women.

As if all that mattered now!

She turned to the young officer. “Where was he?”

“Pardon?”

“My husband. Where was he when he was killed?”

“On the freeway heading south.”

“Big pile-up?”

“No.” The woman hesitated, then said, “Actually one of his tyres blew and he slammed into a bridge. He was killed instantly.”

Laura tried to picture it. “Did he have his seat belt on?”

“I couldn't say.”

Craig had hated seat belts. Often drove without. Pretended to be contrite when the police stopped him and gave him a lecture, then unfastened the belt again within minutes. A sudden thought occurred to her. “Am I supposed to go and identify the body?”

“I’m afraid so.”

“Well, I won’t do it.”

The officer blinked in shock.

“I definitely won’t. It’d give me nightmares for years.” She couldn’t even watch a horror movie without it playing back in her memory regularly. Craig had laughed at her for that, called her a wimp. Well, he wasn’t going to have the last laugh now and have his battered corpse haunt her nightmares for ever. No way.

There was a sound of the front door opening and footsteps running down the hall. Deb came in, stopped at the sight of the police officers, then flopped down opposite her mother. “What’s wrong? They told me there was an emergency.”

“Your father’s—” Laura hesitated, wanting to soften the blow, but finding no gentler way through the tangle of words in her head than the bare truth, “—he’s been killed, Deb.”

“I don’t believe you!”

“It was a road accident,” one of the officers said quietly.

Deb stared from one person to another, then wailed, “Nooooo!” She burst into tears, shrugging her mother’s hand off her shoulder and burying her face in a cushion. Laura gestured to the police officers to leave her alone, set the box of tissues on her daughter’s lap and they all waited uncomfortably for the first paroxysm to subside. Deb never cried for long, not about anything. She was the sort who held her sorrows inside her, striking out at those who tried to comfort her.

After a few minutes Deb grabbed another handful of tissues, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. As she straightened up, she looked at her mother and her expression hardened. “Had you two been quarrelling again?”

“What on earth has that got to do with it?”

“You *had* been having a row! It’s your fault he’s dead. He’ll have been upset.”

Your fault! The words seemed to echo round the room then Laura rejected them, stared at her daughter and said very loudly and clearly, “He’d left me, been gone for a week, so if someone made

him angry today, it certainly wasn't me. You were holidaying in Bali with your friends or he'd no doubt have told you what had happened."

Deb goggled at her. "He'd been gone for a week?"

"He found someone else. Moved in with her."

"Caitlin?"

"He didn't tell me her name."

"He was seeing someone called Caitlin, but it wasn't serious. It *wasn't!*"

"Does that matter now?" Laura watched her daughter frown. Deb looked so like Craig, same dark wavy hair and eyes. His princess, he'd always called her, and spoiled her in every way he could. After she'd left home, Deb and her father had lunched together regularly. Laura had never been invited to join them. Deb came home for lunch sometimes, usually with her brother, rarely on her own.

Ryan came to see his mother much more frequently, eating huge meals and making her laugh. A gentle giant, her son. Everyone liked him. And very mature for his age. He'd been good buddies with his father. They'd gone fishing together and lately started playing golf. And he'd been a protective older brother.

"They want someone to identify the body, Deb."

"Aren't *you* going to do that?"

Laura shook her head. "No. I can't face it."

"It really should be you, Mrs Wells," the female officer said quietly.

She swung round. "Well, it's not going to be. What are you going to do about it? Drag me to the hospital screaming all the way then force my eyes open?"

The officer looked helplessly at Deb, who gulped audibly.

The front door banged, Ryan came rushing in and Laura had to explain it all again.

He sat in frozen shock for a minute or two, then shook his head and wiped his eyes, saying in a thickened voice, "I can't believe Dad's dead. He was always so—alive. I haven't seen him all week. I wish now I had."

“I haven’t seen him, either,” Laura said quietly. “He left me last week.”

Ryan stared at her. “Oh, Mum. I’m so sorry. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I couldn’t tell anyone. I felt so ashamed.”

“She won’t even go and identify the body,” Deb offered as her contribution once the explanations had tailed away.

“God, you’re a hard little bitch sometimes!” He looked across at the officers. “I’ll come and identify him. I’d like to say goodbye. Deb? You coming?”

His sister stared at him in shock, then shuddered and shook her head.

“Then how can you blame Mum for not doing it?” He went to put his arm round his mother’s shoulders. “Will you be all right while I’m gone, Mum?”

That act of sympathy was Laura’s undoing. She began to sob, clinging to her tall son and shaking with the vehemence of her grief. Because now she and Craig would never patch up their last quarrel. Because so many hopes had died in the past few years. And because no one deserved to be wiped out at the age of forty-seven.

The more she tried to control herself, the harder she sobbed. In the end Deb and the woman officer put her to bed and Ryan sent for a doctor.

He offered her some tablets to make her sleep and she took them, closing her eyes in relief and letting the world tick along without her for a while.

When Ryan went downstairs after seeing his mother sink into sleep, he found Deb curled up on the sofa, sobbing quietly. He went across and put his arms round her, letting her continue to weep against him, knowing she only let down her guard with him and their father.

It was a long time before she stopped, then he had to take her home before he could go and identify his father’s body, because she was in no condition to drive.

His own grief ran deep but somehow he managed to control it, because someone in the family had to take charge and there was only him now. Grandpop had taught him that: you did what was necessary to look after your family. Oh, hell, he'd have to phone his grandparents and let them know.

What the hell was going to happen to his mother now, though? How was she going to cope? She hadn't worked outside the home for years.