

PROLOGUE

Robert was wide awake. His parents had sent him to bed hours ago, but their voices, too muffled to be heard clearly except for the acidic tone, still wafted through the house's vents like poisonous vapor.

Robert glanced across the room to the bed against the opposite wall. His sister Suzie lay there, fast asleep. At least she didn't have to hear any of this.

Her arms cradled Wally, a stuffed toy koala. Wally had been a present for her fourth birthday. As his parents continued to argue, their voices growing more vicious with each passing minute, Robert let his mind drift back to that sun-drenched day: the four of them—Robert, Suzie, their mother and father—were at the Rocks Market on Sydney Harbour. A passerby had knocked into Suzie and she'd fallen to the ground, scraping her knee on the cobblestones. Their parents had pulled her aside and attempted to soothe her crying, but tears continued to drip down her face. While their parents tried to console her, Robert had slipped away to a nearby market stall.

Holding the \$20 bill his parents had given him that morning, Robert had looked over a small army of fuzzy, round-eyed creatures: seals, pandas, elephants. They'd been at the Taronga Zoo that morning and Robert recalled how Suzie's face lit up with delight as koalas nibbled leaves from the branch in her outstretched hand. He spotted a koala among the plushie ranks, pointed to it, and handed over his \$20. He returned to his family, ignoring his mother's scowl and her mutter of "She already has a mother, you know," and handed the toy over to Suzie.

Her sniffles stopped instantly, and her round face broke into a wide smile. It had made Robert so happy, seeing her smile return. He felt joy shine off her like light from a beacon.

She grabbed the toy and buried her face in its soft fur. "Wally," she dubbed it, stroking the toy's ears. Wally had hardly left her side ever since.

Robert was brought back to the present by the distant sound of glass shattering. He heard his mother's voice sharply berating his father in response. Intermittently, Robert caught fragments of their argument when their voices climbed to an audible pitch: he discerned the name Wayne Brewster, whom he knew from a school project was the governor of Sydney; he heard words like contracts, and inquiry, and scandal. His father's voice built to a scream as he said, "If this ever gets out, we will lose everything."

"And what if you don't do it?" his mother snapped. They had moved and now, Robert could tell, they stood near the staircase that led to the children's room. "How exactly do you plan to continue paying for our yacht? My God, have you thought about what it would do to me if we had to end our membership at the yacht club? I couldn't face our neighbors ever again. And what about our son's boarding school? Do you expect me to raise him here, by myself?"

Robert's father pleaded, "Janet, please, you're not being rational—"

"And you are being a coward." The coldness in his mother's voice made Robert instinctively press into the blankets. She wasn't even speaking to him and yet it still felt as if her words could pierce him. "There is no proof. They've got nothing but hearsay. So get it together, David. For God's sake. You're embarrassing yourself."

His father answered, much more quietly, and Robert caught only the words "married you." A door slammed. Another glass broke—this one hurled against a wall, by the sound of it.

Robert pulled a pillow over his head, closed his eyes, and willed himself to fall asleep.

Robert woke the next morning and the first thought through his brain immediately eclipsed all memory of the previous night: today was his twelfth birthday.

He raced downstairs. Suzie was already at the breakfast table, along with their father. “Hey, kid,” his father said, reaching across the table to ruffle Robert’s hair. His father, David, was bespectacled and had a widow’s peak that made him look professorial, distinguished beyond his 30-something years. The look suited him. He was an up-and-coming architect who spent weekdays in the city and only came home on the weekends. “Happy birthday.”

“Happy birthday, Robbie!” Suzie said, and let go of Wally (who was joining them for breakfast) long enough to give him a fierce hug. Robert kissed the top of her head.

He glanced around, but his mother was nowhere to be seen. His father was already reading the paper. Suzie looked up at Robert and asked hopefully, “Breakfast?”

A few minutes later, Robert was setting down two plates of pancakes on the table—one for himself and one for his sister. As they started to eat, Suzie chattered happily about their plans for the day; their father had told them they would take the yacht out to a secluded cove on the bay. They’d go fishing, have a picnic on the beach. It struck Robert as the design for a perfect day.

Then their mother appeared, arranging herself in the one remaining chair at the breakfast table. Janet was a severe woman, beautiful in a statuesque, near-lifeless way. Suzie, with her warmth and her bubbly laughter, had inherited her blonde curls from Janet but nothing else.

“Nice of you to finally join us,” Janet simpered to Robert.

The mood of the room frosted over. Robert asked, “Are you still coming with us today?”

“Oh, you won’t miss me if I stay home, will you?” she said. “I’m sure you’ll all have a fine time without me.”

Robert dropped his eyes to his plate, trying to hide his disappointment. “You promised,” he whispered.

“What was that?” she said sharply.

Robert was startled by his father’s hand on his shoulder. “That’s all right, son,” his father said. “We’ll still go. The three of us.”

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Robert walked toward the dock behind the house, his arms laden with supplies. Suzie trotted beside him, a tiny life jacket dragging from one hand and Wally held more carefully in the other. Their father had sent them down to load up the yacht, promising that he’d join them in a minute. Robert’s pace slowed as the sound of raised voices floated over to them from the house. It was like a nightmare that had followed him into the daylight.

“Come on, Suze,” he said, doing his best to shepherd her out of earshot.

Moments later, their father appeared at the back door. He joined them at the dock and made an effort at a breezy smile. “Everything ready to go?”

Robert looked up at him. “She didn’t change her mind?” he asked quietly.

“I’m afraid not, kid,” his father answered. “She, ah...she has some things to take care of here at the house.”

Robert was silent for some time. “But she promised.”

“I know she did, Rob. But when we get back—”

“I hate her,” Robert said. “She never keeps her promises. I *hate her!*”

Suzie looked between Robert and their father with wide, uncertain eyes.

Robert's father was silent for what seemed like a long time. Then he set one hand on each of his children's shoulders and steered them toward the boat. "Come on. Let's get those life jackets on, now."

They cast off. As the yacht began to maneuver away from its slip, Robert caught sight of his mother on the back deck of the house, a martini glass in hand.

She watched the yacht's departure for a few moments. Then she knocked back her drink, turned and walked into the house without a backward glance. Robert stared after her until his father told him to come help with the sails.

By the time they'd reached open water, Robert had forgotten his anger at his mother. In fact, when he remembered to think of her at all, he was quite pleased she hadn't come with them. Without her, everything seemed as it should be.

They set up a fishing line to trail along behind the boat. At his father's instruction, Robert made studious adjustments to the sails. He took deep breaths of the salt-laced air, enjoying the satisfying snap of the sailcloth as the wind caught it. Suzie was in the cockpit, deep in conversation with Wally.

"Think you can handle things up here for a few minutes while I go make us some tea?" Robert's father asked.

Robert nodded dutifully, and his father cracked a smile at the seriousness on Robert's face. "All right. Hold her steady." He stepped aside and offered the helm to Robert.

He took up his new post as his father disappeared down into the cabin. Robert heard the clatter of cupboards being opened as his father extracted a tea kettle and filled it with water.

"Turn on the gas, would you?" his father called up.

Robert opened the locker beside the helm so he could get at the gas canister within it. As he had been taught in the safety lessons that his father insisted upon at the beginning of each season, Robert shouted, “Gas on!” as he twisted the valve on the canister.

A few minutes later, Robert heard the whistle of the tea kettle, accompanied by his father’s voice telling him to shut off the gas. At the same moment, the fishing line at the back of the boat snapped taut.

“Dad, come quick! We’ve got something on the line!” he shouted down. Suzie, overhearing him, let out a squeal of delight and bounded up to the deck to watch the excitement. Their father was right behind her, rushing to grab hold of the reel.

His father let out a whoop as the line jerked in the water, the catch resisting his efforts to bring it to the surface. “We’ve got a whopper here, kids!”

At last, he managed to haul the writhing fish into the boat. It landed on the deck with a *thud*. “Look at that. Beautiful Australian salmon,” his father observed. He neatly dispatched the fish with a winch handle to the head, washing the floor of the deck in blood and scales.

Suzie gave a disgusted shriek and raced back to the safety of the cabin. But Robert, never squeamish, watched as his father opened the cooler they’d brought and started to pack the fish in ice.

“We’ll have a barbecue on the beach. How’s that sound for a birthday lunch?” his father grinned.

From the cabin came Suzie’s impatient voice. “Daddy! I need the toilet!” she called.

“Be right there, sweetie!” He quickly towed the blood off his hands and went to help his daughter.

Robert remained on the deck. He leaned on the railing, contentedly watching the sparkle of the sun off the water. This was, he decided impulsively, his favorite birthday ever.

His father helped Suzie into the head and closed the door behind her. Then he picked up a pack of cigarettes and a lighter from the table in the cabin. From his vantage point up on the deck, Robert saw his father place a cigarette between his lips, raise the lighter, and press his thumb on the trigger.

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When Robert's eyes finally cracked open, it seemed to take ages for him to make sense of what he was looking at. Finally, he understood: there were phantoms of thick black smoke drifting across the sky.

He was floating on his back in the water. With a groan, he lifted his head and found himself surrounded by wreckage—wood and cloth and shards of fiberglass. And all at once, he remembered. There had been a burst of light so intense it had blinded him, and an earth-shaking sound that was still ringing in his ears, as if some part of the explosion had been trapped in his skull and lodged there.

He flailed, searching for some sign of movement in the water. In desperation, he cried out to his father, over and over again. He called for his sister, too—“*SUZIE, WHERE ARE YOU? CAN YOU HEAR ME?*”—his voice almost lost in the ringing in his own ears. He yelled until it felt like his throat would bleed. But no response came. Just a deep, awful silence.

Something was floating toward him. Compulsively, he reached out and grabbed it. Its waterlogged shape wasn't recognizable until he turned it over and saw its kind, cheerful eyes staring out of a charred face.

Wally.

There was no other sign of his sister. Robert was alone.

