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**The Co-op, Hope Junction, Western Australia –
Saturday, 9.30 am**

Today. It's true. Well, I don't know, I guess she'll be taking the bus from Perth. Although being a celebrity and all, maybe she's chartered her own jet. She has got a nerve, I couldn't agree more.

Oh, hi Mrs Willet. Just the apples this morning? Yes, I was just chatting about it with Linda. I'm surprised the news isn't front page of today's West, I thought she would have rated higher than the Premier opening a regional hospital. You're absolutely right, it's because it's here. Small town, back-of-beyond. Oh geez, but if they knew the truth, if they only knew what she left behind. She was always a bit of a snob at school, none of us could believe it when they started going out. And then when, well, you know ...

Me? I would have sold my soul to marry him. We all would've. Phvoar ... Speak of the gorgeous devil.

**About Coffee Time, Hope Junction, Western Australia –
Saturday, 9.45 am**

The usual, thanks Sherry, but make it extra strong today. My nerves need it. Oh, you haven't heard? A jet plane apparently. Chartered. You know,

I'm not one to listen to gossip but she's bringing her own pilot. A toyboy, barely over twenty but buff as they come. Or so I'm told. You ask me, he'd have to be pretty damn alluring to hold a candle to our Flynn. Most Saturdays, you say? Well, he'll no doubt be a little flustered this morning. Maybe give him a free slice of your fabulous chocolate cake, and your ear. You're still single, aren't you, dear?

Outside the post office, Hope Junction, Western Australia – Saturday, 10.00 am

Sorry, can't stop to chat, I have to get back to the café. I'm expecting Flynn – he grabs the paper at the Co-op and then comes for a late breakfast. A lot of the footballers do, I feed them up good before the game. Do you think he'll still come? You're right, he might be keeping a low profile. Maybe won't even play today ... He's not one to dwell on the past but Mum always says that's a front. Men, they're not as strong as us, you know, they don't get over that sort of knock easily. I bet he still thinks about her. Hard not to when her smug face is on the telly every night. Ouch, what'd ya do that for?

Oh, hi Flynn.

Hairlicious, Hope Junction, Western Australia – Saturday, 10.10 am

Sure, I heard about it yesterday, people tell hairdressers things, you know. You'd be amazed; sometimes it's a real chore. Yeah, I did her hair once. Between you and me, it's quite thin and flyaway. They must have good hairdressers and makeup artists at Channel Nine. Me neither, I always thought she was a bit skinny, anorexic even. Too worried about her image, I suppose.

She'll not have it easy around here though. There's not a person within two hundred kilometres who doesn't like Flynn. You are so right, there's probably not a girl anywhere who wouldn't like him. And she won't do well with the blokes either. They're not as shallow as those city guys. Just



*because her legs never end and you could wrap your fingers round her waist,
won't mean a thing to them. They'll not go near her. Boys from the bush
look out for their mates.*

What's that, Emma? Is he really? 10.15? Well, well, well ...



Chapter One

When Flynn Quartermaine drove into town, he couldn't get a newspaper or pick up his mail without being stopped by someone or other on the main street. He'd lived in the small farming community of Hope Junction – south-east of Perth and affectionately known to locals as Hope – every one of his twenty-nine years. He knew everyone and they knew him. And he was famous. Aside from his legendary streak across the oval on grand final day ten years ago, he was the last baby born in the local hospital, having just slipped out before the maternity ward was closed and everyone had to travel further afield.

What was most embarrassing to Flynn was that people still talked about this. Whenever someone new came to town, or a long-lost rellie was passing through, the first thing the introducer would say was, 'Meet Flynn, he was the last baby born in our hospital'. Nothing about the fact he ran one of the biggest farms in the district. Nothing about almost doubling his family's income by

introducing South African Meat Merinos (or SAMMs for short) to their flock. Nothing about how other local farmers followed suit. But then, perhaps he should be grateful people didn't mention other things.

There were some things no guy liked to be reminded about.

Today, however, there wasn't a single mention of babies. And instead of flocking when they saw him coming, people quickly turned away. It was odd. Flynn picked up some supplies for his mother and drove back out to the family property, keen to return and get onto the football oval, run around with his mates, and shake this sense of unease.

The feeling started to dissipate as soon as he turned his ute into Black Stump – the 5,000-acre property that had been in his family for four generations. As corny as it might sound, he loved the place. He'd been raised on the massive homestead, with board games round the fire in winter and fun in the dams (when they had water) in summer. He belonged to this land and it had a way of calming him like no person ever could. Well, not anymore.

But the moment he walked through his mum's kitchen door, the strangeness returned. His heart kicked up a notch and he knew he hadn't been imagining the weirdness in town. In fact, he sensed Saturday was about to get a lot more than strange.

Flynn's grandmother sat at the family's big oak table knitting another tea cosy to be sold at the CWA craft stall. Karina, his mother, hovered at the stove stirring something which smelled a lot like her famous crisis-time minestrone. It was her contribution whenever the townsfolk got together to provide for volunteers in an emergency. And his teenage sister, Lucy, had her iPod around her neck and one foot on the table, painting her toenails a ghastly shade of purple, which no doubt had some ridiculous name like Flashbulb Fuchsia. They were deep in conversation. Or had been, anyway. He could tell because the moment he stepped inside, the



room went eerily silent and they all feigned over-the-top attention to their various tasks. Exactly like every shop he'd stepped into that morning. *What the hell was going on?*

Flynn stomped to the fridge, retrieved an ice-cold can of Coke, cracked it open and turned to face them all.

'Okay. Out with it. Have I grown an extra head or what?' He ran a hand through his blonde, freshly cut hair. Even Emma, his hairdresser, had been strangely quiet. She hadn't tried to con him into enhancing his tips like she usually did.

'No need for sarcasm, love.'

He tossed a reproachful glare at his mum and, for one terrible second, wondered if someone had come good on their promise to enter him in Australia's much-loved *Farmer Wants a Wife* show. Friends and family had been threatening for years: *You're almost thirty, Flynn*. As if being thirty meant he should suddenly hang up his single cap and find himself a wife, a four-wheel drive and a white picket fence.

He wouldn't do it though. No matter how good the PR would be for the town, there was no way in hell he was pimping himself in such a manner. Unlike some people he knew, he didn't see the appeal of publicity and bright lights.

Still eyeing him warily, Karina dumped the wooden spoon in the pot, wiped her hands on her apron and sighed. 'Well, I suppose if anyone has to tell you, it might as well be me. Sit down, Flynn.'

Sit down? He looked long and hard at the three women scattered around the traditional farm kitchen. People only ever said sit down when it was bad news. When someone had been killed or given months to live. But they were all breathing – even Granny, who'd just celebrated eighty years, was healthy and vibrant – and he'd already lost his dad. So what could be so terrible? So dramatic? Who could it be?

Granny stood and beckoned a long, knobbly finger at his sister. 'Come on, Lu, you can help me box my tea cosies.'



‘No thanks,’ Lucy said. ‘I’ll help later, Gran, but I wouldn’t miss this for an-y-thing.’

‘Scoot, Luce,’ shot his mum without breaking his gaze.

Lucy groaned, moaned and did her usual teenage eye roll, but she eventually vacated the room, followed by their grandmother.

‘Must be something terrible,’ mumbled Flynn, collapsing onto a chair. When his mum pulled her stool close and scooped up his hand, his heart went into overdrive. He ripped his hand back, feeling momentarily guilty as hurt flashed across Karina’s eyes. But all such emotions were lost when she finally spoke.

‘Ellie’s coming back.’

Flynn opened his mouth but no sound came out. He sat still for a moment, the words echoing in his head.

Then, ‘Fuck!’ He shot out of his chair and stormed onto the verandah.

Ten years! Ten years since she’d left him standing at the altar in a mixture of shock, hurt and embarrassment, questioning why. He thought he’d pulled through, dealt with all those feelings, moved on. But he couldn’t have, not the way his eyes were prickling and his heart was pounding.

He spun around, not knowing what to do, before he thumped the verandah post and headed back into the kitchen. Needing to keep his hands busy, he reached for his Coke, but he misjudged and his fingers hit the side of the can, toppling it over.

‘Leave it,’ his mum said. Her lips were pursed and he could tell she was a hair’s breadth from tears herself. ‘It’ll be okay.’

‘No use crying over spilt Coke,’ he said, trying to make a joke. But his tone wasn’t funny and Karina didn’t laugh. He knew she was terrified that Ellie’s return would send him back to the way he’d been before. She’d already lost her husband. She didn’t need to lose her son.

As much as he wanted to retreat to his own space – to forget about the afternoon’s game and head to the dam at the far end of



their property – he couldn't. He had to maintain the façade for his mum. For the town. He had to pretend he didn't care, pretend the thought of running into Ellie didn't send him into a cold sweat.

It would be easier, he reflected, if he'd found out she'd died. At least that way he'd come to terms with the grief. Surely. Things would be completely different. He wouldn't have to hide photos of her in a box at the back of his wardrobe. People would talk about her fondly, sharing memories, rather than making sure they never uttered her name in his presence. He knew they talked; it's what people in small communities did best. But they never talked about her to him. The town protected him. If people pitied him, he didn't know, but around here, there wasn't any sign that Ellie Hughes had ever existed. It was as if the moment she'd walked out of his life, she'd vacated the planet. In the newsagent, he never saw her face in *TV Week* or on the cover of *Women's Weekly*. But if he went further afield, to Perth or Bunbury, she was constantly in the limelight. Australia adored her. In a way, that hurt Flynn, but it was nothing on the sadness she'd left inside him. The black hole that no attempts at relationships, no casual sex, no nothing, had ever been able to fill.

Working hard to keep his breathing steady, he cleaned up the Coke and recalled some gossip he'd heard at the hairdresser. He might not be able to take his mind off Ellie, but he'd do his damn best to stop his mum thinking about her.

'Some townies are reviving the theatrical society.' He ditched the wet tea towel in the sink and leaned back against the table.

'So I heard. Good news travels fast.' Karina gestured to the row of tiny nail polish bottles on the table. 'Lucy's planning on auditioning. For some reason, she thinks the colour of her nails will make all the difference. And of course, she has to test them all first.'

Flynn frowned. 'You're not going to let her, are you? Year twelve is huge, she should be concentrating on her studies.'



Karina raised her eyebrows and smirked. 'When did you become so old and stuck-in-the-mud?'

'Don't forget the *wise* bit.'

'Whatever,' Karina said, waving a hand in front of her face, mimicking her daughter in both language and action. 'Lucy won't listen to me. She'll only sulk and pout and ignore her exams altogether if I don't let her get in on this. Besides, it's just a fad. She wanted to start a cheerleading troupe for the Hurricanes last term, remember?'

'Yeah, I suppose.'

But his gut felt heavy at the thought of his little sister acting. No matter, the distraction seemed to have worked. His mum was once again stirring her soup with an attentive look upon her face.

Flynn took the chance to slip out the back.