

“The world is round and what might seem like the end may also be only the beginning.”

DELIVERANCE

Maddie Becker reaches behind her to close the door. Outside, a chill wind rattles loose iron on the barn roof.

She turns to her brother. “They’ve gone. Now tell me.”

“What?”

“Don’t do this”, she says quietly. *Stay calm.*

“Do what?” He asks innocently. He’s flicking through a stack of family photographs.

“You *know*. Something is going on. Is it school? You’re nearly finished, Marcus. It’s the way out, that escape route we always talked about. I’ve taken that first step for us, I’ve got a place...”

“You’ve got a place for *you*,” he interrupts gently, almost sounding like the sensible one, the one with a handle on things. “Come on, Maddie, you know what I’m saying here, you’ve got your life mapped out. Those city kids in the share house aren’t gonna want to have little brother coming in looking for a bed.”

“We have plenty of drop- ins...”

“Sure. Overnighters.”

“...and no one cares. They come and go.”

“Huh...I probably couldn’t get in anyway.” *God, don’t whine.* Marcus glares out the window at the fading glow on the horizon. The sky is already dark.

“Don’t you see? That’s the way we’ve been taught to think. That we’re just no-hopers, we’re useless...we’re never likely to cop a break...”

“Nah, the old bastard’s right there, I reckon. Except for you. You’re the strong one. No wonder he hates you. Oops,” Marcus laughs. “Don’t know if you knew that.”

Maddie smiles bitterly. “Oh yes, I know.” Good old Dad. Total control freak. She wears the battle scars. And Mum? Worse than useless. Degraded and beaten during her marriage, she had no fight left to save her daughter.

“What I’m saying ... Uni isn’t the only escape.” He shrugs. “Things will work out.”

She sighs, giving up for now. “Those old photos are all of Mum’s family. You can see the Irish heritage. Dad called them schemers and layabouts, remember? ‘Musicians and poets – worthless’. No wonder we’ve never met any of them. Here, we both look like Mum, don’t we?”

It was like holding up a mirror. Same straight black hair, blue eyes, pale skin. Slender and fine featured.

“I don’t know how you did it.” Marcus, suddenly serious.

She’s surprised. “You were part of my survival. *Our* survival.”

How could she forget? The school day over: standing at the top of the long, dirt road, the bus rumbling away into the dust. Walking together to the homestead, in the searing heat of summer or the cold sleet of winter. Lucky to grab a glass of milk from the fridge before work started.

“Remember rounding up the cows? Milking them?”

“Still do it. My favourite’s mending the fences in winter...with frozen fingers...” All to the accompaniment of shouted abuse, often blows if they didn’t move fast enough.

“Digging the vegies, cleaning the hen runs...,” Maddie remembers. “All before cooking the dinner”.

‘Helped’ by Mum, glassy-eyed and well away on her own escape route.

They would eat stoically, heads down, silently seated around the large wooden table. No one remarked on Mum’s beatific smile as she ate nothing, or Dad’s looming menace at the head of the table. Worse probably, was elder brother Jonas, Dad’s clone. The same heavysset build, lowered brow and surly expression. The same threatening silence. Both spoke in monosyllables about the farm, making decisions around its future, its finances.

We knew how to keep silent, Maddie thinks.

Eating finally done, Jonas would take off into town to do who knew what. Dad either followed him in the pickup to go to a landowner’s meeting or slumped, asleep, in front of the television.

It was Marcus who washed the dishes, nodding his head towards her room where she would finally get to her homework and study. Handing her mother a tea towel, Maddie would steer her towards the sink to dry the dishes.

“Amazing we got the results we did,” Marcus says, shuffling the photographs into a pack.

“How did we not fall asleep in class?” Maddie shakes her head, slowly turning the pages of a photograph album.

“I did, a few times. Old Mackie’s history class. He sent me to the Principal to be checked out for drugs but she knew you didn’t need tranquillisers in Mackie’s class”.

Marcus grins at the memory.

But Maddie flinches and her brother notices. He puts down the photographs.

“It was one time”, he says softly. “I just couldn’t cope anymore. I needed....”

“I know,” she interrupts quickly. She remembers covering for him, protecting him from his father, those other kids pushing drugs. Of course she’d protected him; he had no one else. *How was I so young and yet so old at the same time*, she wonders.

“...leave Mum.”

“What?”

“I’m saying I can’t leave Mum here, on her own. With them.”

Maddie looks at her brother. He’s taller, filled out more but his newfound strength isn’t just physical.

She stifles an unreasonable stab of jealousy. “Would she notice you were gone? She certainly hasn’t registered that I’ve been here for almost a week. Maybe she doesn’t know where I’ve been for the past two years.” She gets up abruptly and checks the coffee pot, flicks the switch.

“She knows you’re away studying law,” Marcus says quietly. “And she’s really proud of you.”

“Is she?” Maddie turns, astonished. “How do you know?”

“We spend a fair bit of time together now you’re not here. All that dishwashing,” he grins. “We talk.”

“I’m gobsmacked. What about? What do you talk about?”

“This and that. You’d be surprised. Sometimes though, she’s *really* tired and can’t get much out at all. Other times...”

“Wait, wait. Are you telling me she’s sick? Not just, you know...” Maddie nods towards the liquor cabinet.

“I had to drive her to the doctor. Dad was too busy and Jonas, well...” he shrugs.

Maddie pours the coffee into mugs, forages in the cupboard for biscuits. “Go on.”

“The news wasn’t good, obviously, but she seemed quite calm and lucid. She told me she has maybe six months. Less. Liver cancer.”

“Six months! Cancer?” Maddie bangs the mugs onto the table. “Does everyone know?”

She means everyone except her, Marcus thinks.

“Hey, calm down! Look, they only know she’s sick. They *don’t* know that she’ll be dead before Christmas. And that’s the way she wants it.”

“Well, why was I not told?” Maddie is angry with herself, she realises. Her mother has lost weight, becoming more fragile and she hadn’t noticed. Or was it more that she hadn’t cared? It’s hard to still hold on to resentment towards someone who’s dying.

“We found out three months ago when I drove her to the doctor. Mum told me she doesn’t care about dying... she asked me to drive her to the solicitor’s in town so she could make her will.”

“What would she have to leave to anyone?” Maddie muses, shaking her head. She leans back in her chair, frowning. “Mum’s never had a brass razoo to spend on herself. It was the best motivation for me to do well at school, come to think about it. My future life is going to be nothing like hers, I promise you.”

“Well now, that’s the *best* part. While we were out in the back paddock and I was giving her driving lessons...”

“*Driving lessons?*” Maddie screeches. “*What the hell...?*”

“I know. I thought the same thing when she asked me.”

“*When* did she ask you?”

“As we were leaving the solicitor’s.”

“Where she made her will. “

“Yes.”

Maddie senses her brother is trying to be patient. She draws a deep breath. “Mum doesn’t even like travelling in the car.”

“You’re right. Absolutely. But that’s because she’s scared of the way Dad and Jonas drive. Too fast and often they’ve been drinking...”

Maddie groans. “Tell me about it! I don’t know how they’ve survived so long. Jonas drove me to the dentist in Mountford once. That narrow stretch across the mountain

at Lawson's Gap? He sped up at the bends! I was so scared, I wet myself. He just laughed."

She shudders and continues to turn the pages of the photograph album. They are all there, in varying ages and stages. Dad: scowling. Mum, looking anxious and clutching one or the other of her kids. They seemed to have stopped smiling at an early age.

Maddie indicates the photos. "We weren't a happy bunch," she says, quietly.

Marcus is silent, waiting. He knows she will get to it eventually.

Maddie turns to him, frowning. "You were saying something about 'the best part'? When you were teaching Mum to drive?"

And there it is. No going back now.

"Yeah," Marcus nods. "Mum and I had quite a conversation in between crunching gears. She'd overheard Dad and his tax agent talking in the barn one day, a couple of years ago. Apparently the farm and all holdings were put in Mum's name as a tax dodge. Now, she's made her will, and she does have something to leave. To you and me, her only beneficiaries."

"Oh, I think *Dad* will have something to say about that!" Maddie is shaking her head in disbelief. Honestly, it's all too much to take in.

"Well, Mum's just started going into Mountford with Dad when he has his Apex meetings each week," Marcus says, casually. "She'll be playing bingo with the wives about now."

"Really?"

“Really. For the past three weeks. She suggested to Dad that now she could drive him home if he has a few too many drinks. He wasn’t keen at first but he’s warming to the idea.”

“Generous of him.” Maddie doesn’t sound too convinced. “I’m worried about her on that road near Lawson’s Gap, though. It’s dangerous even for experienced drivers.”

Marcus nods. “She hasn’t moved out of second gear yet, apparently. Annoys the hell out of Dad. Any faster though...”

“And the car...” Maddie says, slowly. “Didn’t you tell me *not* to take the Rover into town? To take the truck instead? Something about the brakes?”

“Dad told me to take it to the mechanic in town to get them checked.”

“And?”

“And Mum told me not to bother. She said the brakes would outlast her.”

“Unless there’s an accident.”

“I guess.”

“Am I supposed to understand...?”

“...I don’t know what you understand or *don’t* understand. I’m just filling you in on what’s been happening while you’ve been away. I only know that some days Mum is *really* sick but others, she looks ...fearless... ready for anything. Like, taking control of something for a change.”

“That would be a first. Sort of, what goes around comes around,” Maddie says, thoughtfully.

“Or maybe she just likes bingo.” Marcus shrugs. “Who knows?”

“So what do we do now? Just sit and wait until they come home? “

“Or not.”

“I can’t believe you’re so *calm*, Marcus! I feel *sick*...”

“I’ve had time to get used to it all. The illness, then the business with the will. Then the waiting until I hear the car pull in. Or... will it be the police? I do know Mum’s pleased that you’re here, now.”

Maddie seems stunned, unable to speak. Then she gets up slowly and moves to the sideboard. Opening the doors, she starts to pull out some boxes.

“Ah, here it is. Just the thing. Fancy a game of chess?”

“Why not?” Marcus shrugs, obviously relieved. “Be prepared though. This could be a long game.”

Maddie sets up the pieces on the board. “We can only control what happens on this board. I’m playing to win and I’ll show no mercy. Now... I believe it’s your move.”

Their heads are close together over the board and they frown in total concentration. Pieces are moved or clatter in defeat. The monotonous ticking of the grandfather clock competes with the wind, howling shrilly outside. In time, above the noise, they hear the rumble of a car engine and they tense.

“Checkmate,” says Marcus, softly.