

Day One

Vicinity of Orange, Blayney Shire, New South Wales, Australia

Connor Farm

Drenching rain continued to pelt down as Gary trudged towards the house. The sensor light, perched high on the rear veranda flared to life, producing a valiant and yet mostly useless effort to light the otherwise gloomy area. His pace slowed as the ground underneath changed from clinging ochre mud to smooth wet concrete.

Grasping the fly-wire screen in hand, he used his other to brace against the siding. With a deft kick of each leg he escaped his gumboots. Standing tall he pulled open the lightweight fly-wire door, producing a loud creaking sound as the aged hinges protested. Leaning forward he turned the handle and pushed open the heavier wooden back door and stepped through into the kitchen.

Steaming damp thick woollen socks dirtied the lime green plastic flooring as Gary moved within, allowing the twin doors to close behind him. In a well-practiced fluid move, he shrugged out of his long, heavy weatherproof coat and removed his saturated beanie. Using both hands he hung the items up onto hooks aligned on the nearest wall.

Gary frowned as he looked about the all too quiet kitchen. No further preparation for the evening meal had occurred since he headed down to the southern paddock over three hours ago. Usually Simon, Gary's 11-year-old son, after catching the school bus would prepare the vegetables or at least warmed the oven.

"Simon?"

Gary listened for a moment, hearing a faint answer, muffled by other sounds. Concern washed over him. With a jerking start he continued onwards through the house at a quick pace. Simon had been a passenger, an innocent victim of the horrendous car crash that claimed the life of Jessica, the boy's

mother and Gary's love. Ever since that fateful day, the responsibility of raising Simon had been his alone.

Simon had spent 4 months in hospital. The doctors declared him recovered and Gary had brought him home. The medical paperwork listed a minor loss of higher brain function as the ongoing ailment and advised continued psychological assistance. Gary knew his son carried additional scars, both physical and mental and would carry these for the rest of his life. Gary had been forced by necessity to bury his own feelings of grief deep within so he could focus on the boy's needs. After all, he had no choice.

Arriving at the living room Gary could see the fire had burned itself out. Simon sat on the recliner, still wearing his school clothes, eyes fixed on the television. His knees were raised up, hands pulling them close to his chest. The boy rocked back and forth, every so often biting at a fingernail. Gary moved closer and could see the telltale facial tics and occasional jerky head movements.

Moving in front of the television he asked "Simon, Simon?" with a hint of desperation in his voice as he tried to get the boy's attention. Gary chastised himself. Again, he had left him alone for too long. Something had gotten to the boy causing the reaction. What though, thought Gary? Picking up the remote from the arm of the chair, he pivoted towards the screen.

A reporter droned on "Both Devonport and Launceston have been declared disaster zones. In a press conference this afternoon, the Tasmanian Premier stated the focus has shifted from limiting property damage to evacuations and the preservation of life. The unusually large weather pattern has savaged parts of New Zealand as well, with reports of similar wide scale flooding."

Images of flooded towns, stranded people rescued by emergency services and army personnel flashed across the screen like a desperate montage of misery.

Gary flicked the off switch and the room fell silent, the only sound the persistent rain dancing on the tin roof. "Simon, look at me, please?" he asked in a soft, slow voice, mimicking the technique the doctors had used.

Simon slowly turned his head, his eyes wide. "Dad?" asked the boy as if seeing his father for the first time or waking from a dream.

Gary smiled offering confidence he didn't necessarily feel, replying "Good. ... How about we have a nice hot dinner? I'll cook a couple of Pizzas, get the fire going?"

"Uh huh."

Gary gently moved Simon's hands out of the way. He managed to coax his son up out of the chair and moving toward his bedroom. "Come on, let's get you into your pyjamas."

50 minutes later, in front of a roaring fire, Gary carried in 2 small pizzas. Simon, his breathing back to normal, brightened at the sight and smell of his favourite dish. By the time they had finished eating he had calmed considerably. Gary felt greatly relieved, the anxiety symptoms had almost completely gone.

The psychologist emphasized the importance of talking through issues. Rationalisation of fears would help Simon deal with elevated anxieties. Gary always made a conscious effort to do so in a calm quiet voice. He knew he couldn't have drawn a coherent conversation from the boy in his previous state. Waiting until now had been his only viable option.

"Was it the flooding that upset you?"

"Yep. You should have seen it, cars and whole houses floating away like they were on a river. Lots of people are missing and I ... I think I know what that means."

"Oh?"

"They're dead, drowned or worse. It's the same in New Zealand too. ... With all the rain here I, I'm worried Dad."

Gary gathered the plates and rose from the table, casually asking "What about?"

Simon fidgeted before asking "Will umm, will we get washed away too?" The last delivered quickly in a nervous rush.

Gary paused his clearing and replied "I don't think so. We're up high on top of a hill. Maybe there'll be some flooding in town and the low lying farms but not here, not after the drought. ... Besides, the rains are good for the farmers."

"Yeah I know but still" replied Simon. Suddenly another question leapt to mind "What about Frank and Lou, and Mr O? Will they be alright?"

Gary had moved towards the corridor leading down to the kitchen and stopped. For a moment he thought of his close friends. Frank and Louise with their newsagency and her extravagant garden and immaculate house. An image of water surging through their home did little to help. The scene changed and Jim, Gary's best friend since school sat on the narrow balcony of his second storey apartment. Again the raging torrent moved with a hunger as it raced down his street, devouring parked cars in the process.

Turning he replied "I'm sure they'll be fine. Jim's no doubt out working, doing rescues, like the ones on the TV. You know he's good at his job, well trained and knows what he's doing. Frank's ex Army and knows how to deal with hard times. Of course Louise will carry on like she does about her flowers but we're used to that." Gary paused to gauge Simon's reaction for the boy didn't seem convinced. "Besides, the flooding isn't too bad here, compared to Tasmania and those other places. ... Now, come on, go brush your teeth and hop into bed. I'll tuck you in once I've done the dishes".

With Simon in bed and finally asleep, Gary returned to the living room and closed the interconnecting door. He turned the television back on and kept the volume down low. For the first time since his lunch break he checked his mobile phone. 1 message.

'Town meeting 2:30 pm Civic Centre to discuss the floods, all welcome. Jim O'Lachlan SES Section Leader.'

Gary moved through his contacts, found the number he wanted and pressed the dial button. After 2 rings a friendly voice answered.

"Hello?" asked Louise.

"Hey Lou, it's Gary."

"Is everything alright?"

Gary paused, looking to the clock and realised the time, 9:35 pm. "Yeah fine now. Simon had another episode. It's taken me a while to get him off to sleep."

"Did you use the tablets?"

"Nah, didn't need to this time, thank God. You know I don't like the side effects."

"What set him off, something at school?"

"No, the TV. I came in a little later than usual; the fence in the south paddock needed some attention. I found him watching all the footage of the floods."

"I see. I've struggled to get Frank up off the couch all afternoon. I think I'm going to lose my roses to rot if these keeps up. ... Oh, are you coming to the meeting tomorrow at the Civic Centre?"

"Yeah, I got an sms from Jim. I bet he's busy, probably pulling an all-nighter."

"It's a terrible night to be out working like that. ... Was there anything else Gary?"

"Nah, I just wanted to hear a friendly voice. See you tomorrow arvo."

"Make sure you bring Simon. It'd do him a world of good, dispel his fears of the floods."

"Sure, I can't leave him here now anyway, not with all this going on. Say hi to Frank. Bye Lou."

"Goodnight."

Gary hung up the phone and moved through to the living room. He poured a shot of Port before settling down in front of the fire to watch TV. He found the occasional flash of lightning distracting as it flared to life, illuminating the twin curtained windows. It suited his mood. He found little comfort for every channel covered the floods and he discovered how bad they actually were.

Casey Station, Antarctica

Researcher Amanda Fitzgibbon sat bored, watching the array of computer screens at her terminal. The data surrounding the radar imagery danced as the strong winds fluctuated. Half way through her early morning shift, she spoke to Robert Sayer, chief meteorologist at Davis station, Australia's second research station over 500 kilometres to the southeast.

"I'm telling you Rob, we're getting a lot of icy sleet and strong winds. Last night peaked to 180 k's and averaged 110 to 120 all yesterday."

Rob wore a headset as he doodled in his notebook. Without pause he replied "That makes no sense, not for this time of year. ... What does Ray say about it?" he asked, referring to Ray Stoner, Base Commander of the US McMurdo based on the edge of the Ross Sea, 1100 Kilometres to the southwest.

A look of aggravation crossed Amanda's soft features before replying in a sickly sweet voice "You know you really should read the briefings."

"Yeah maybe I should. I should also call my Mother but hey that's life. Besides, I've got you and well, you've got nothing better to do than tell me all about it right?" replied Robert as he grinned knowing how much his comment irked her.

Amanda paused, trying to think of something witty to say. Her banter with Rob filled in many long, boring shifts. They had begun to be able to read each other's moods with confidence. She knew he hoped to get a rise out of her. The realisation seemed strange, as they had never actually met. Her tenure in Antarctica encompassed only 3 months and seemed to be hurtling to an end.

Amanda eventually decided to simply tell him the truth, replying "He's mostly worried about the ongoing seismic activity. Having Mount Erebus on my doorstep would probably make me worry too. They say she's due for a minor eruption sometime soon. ... The historical weather data shows similar

sized storms in March '88 and April '93. They don't seem all that fussed about it. It's messing with everyone's equipment, so who knows? They recorded some weird temperature readings so it's probably a malfunction. I heard they've been working with the French, can you believe it? US and French collaboration?"

"Yeah, who would've thought? ... Anything else?"

Amanda tried to remember everything they had discussed yesterday. She hated repeating herself and Rob always seemed to recall every tiny detail as if he kept a transcript, maybe he did. "Ev wants reports on it all so I'm doing hourly logs. I'll send through an update if you want?" she asked, referring to her boss, Casey Station Leader Miss Evelyn Chambers.

"Yeah alright, ta. ... Hammond wants the weather reports for New Zealand and Tasmania. Can you make sure we get included on today's emails please?" asked Rob, referring to his Station Leader William Hammond.

"Fine, I'll leave a note for afternoon shift. You know this bloody storm couldn't have come at a worst time. I'm so close to finishing my report on Adelie penguins. I reckon a couple of days and I'd be done. I'm scheduled to catch a ride out on Friday's drop too which won't happen now. ... Typical, screwed over by the weather again" explained Amanda.

"Not the Penguin's again" replied Rob in jest. His tone turned serious as he added "I know what you mean though. We can't get out in this either and we're also falling seriously behind schedule. Not much else from us, looks like another long, boring day."

"Tell me about it. We've watched all our DVD's too many times to remember. ... Try to be a good boy Rob? Casey out."

"I'll try but no promises. Seeya sweet thing. Davis out."