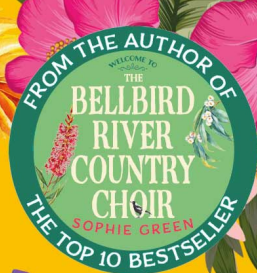


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with the
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SOPHIE GREEN



Published in Australia and New Zealand in 2023
by Hachette Australia
(an imprint of Hachette Australia Pty Limited)
Gadigal Country, Level 17, 207 Kent Street, Sydney, NSW 2000
www.hachette.com.au

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the National Library of Australia

ISBN: 978 0 7336 4942 4 (paperback)

Cover design by Christabella Designs
Cover images courtesy of Shutterstock
Author photograph courtesy of Jen Bradley
Part heading illustrations by Sophie Green
Typeset in 12/16.25 pt Sabon LT Pro by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group

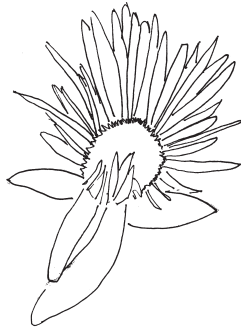


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*In memory of my grandfather, a lifelong gardener.
And for my parents in honour of their years of
weekends in the garden, raking leaves, pulling out weeds
and creating beauty.*

MARCH 1987

PIGFACE



CHAPTER ONE

Noosa Main Beach is the same yet not. Eternal but changed. There is still the view that takes in Fraser Island on a clear day; the shoreline still curls around towards the national park on one end and is truncated by the breakwater at the other. Over that breakwater there are rougher waves and braver surfers. Here, hugging into the lee side, there tend to be more gentle, rolling waves that can turn vigorous on certain tides but usually welcome timid swimmers.

The beach has been fortified by rocks and sand has been pumped in from the river that empties beyond the breakwater. If this hadn't been done erosion would have caused this beautiful, bright stretch of sand to disappear. Noosa Heads, locals say, is being loved to death. Everyone wants it to look perfect so they can have their perfect holiday. Time and tides – and some people's opinions on the form the shoreline should take – have other ideas. So every now and again the beach washes away, the rocks are exposed, and the tourists ignore that because sand will be brought in to cover up those rocks and everything will look perfect again. But the locals know what it used to look like. Cynthia knows. Or, more truthfully, she remembers. Because she hasn't been home – not properly – for fourteen years. Even though she was twenty-five then she thought she may never return. Not because she doesn't

love the place but because she wanted to leave it behind. She had a new life and it wasn't in Noosa. Or Australia, for that matter.

A child squeals close by and seagulls bustle around the sand. One of the lifesavers folds his arms and squints as he regards two swimmers between the flags who look like they're about to be outside the flags. His mouth opens; there's a warning coming. The swimmers, as if intuiting that they're about to be told off, change course and move back between those flags that promise safety, protection. Lifesavers. *Life savers*. What a concept. It would be nice, Cynthia thinks, if someone could come along and save her life. Or, rather, rescue her from it because it feels like her feet have been pulled from under her.

She digs her toes into the sand and waits for the wave that's coming towards her. When it arrives the water is warmer than she expected. It's reassuring. These are the waves she grew up with. This is the sand she knows.

She hadn't expected to feel reassured when she came back. She'd thought she may feel disappointed in herself for scurrying home from Los Angeles instead of staying to deal with the end of her marriage. She suspected she'd feel superior to the Noosa locals who'd stayed put while she went off to have the sort of life – and lifestyle – she'd always believed more suited to her than anything on offer in the fishing-shack town she'd left behind. Noosa isn't that town any more, though. It's busier and has the patina of a place that is well loved: lots of smiling visitors, rotating frequently, and the wear and tear that comes from so many different humans passing through, along with the new coats of paint on buildings that signal that the town is being tended.

As a child and teenager and young mother here Cynthia never quite understood what Pat, her first husband, called 'Noosa magic', and she still didn't understand it all those years she was away. Now, though, with this sea foam on her feet and these gulls and this breeze, with those rocks leading the way around the coast to the bush beyond, and the sky that is the most gentle shade of

blue she's ever seen, she wonders. Perhaps there is magic here. And if there is, she needs to find it. Along with some fortitude and forbearance.

Cynthia jumps as a hand is placed on her shoulder.

'Missed it?' her father says, his voice croakier than it sounded on the phone during their long-distance calls.

'No,' she says, and it's both a lie and the truth, because she has and she hasn't at differing times.

Her father peers at her and nods slowly, like he's figured her out. Then again, he always has.

'Sure,' he says. 'Well, the house missed you.'

'You mean the house misses Mum's housekeeping,' she says wryly.

The state of the three-bedroom, one-storey dwelling at Little Cove, almost within sight of where they're standing now, suggests her father hasn't lifted a finger since her mother died five months ago. Not that Cynthia knows what he's been doing or not doing, because she couldn't come back for the funeral.

She had visited, once, after her mother was diagnosed and before they knew how serious her illness was. No one told Cynthia it was terminal; if they had, she would have come home and stayed until her mother died, then dealt with the mess of her life in Los Angeles later. For as much as she and her mother weren't close, they were connected, and while Diane always seemed to live at one remove from everyone around her, Cynthia loved her. Loves her still. Yes, everything else could have waited because, as Cynthia knows now, we have so few chances to stand witness to the biggest changes in the lives of those we love.

'Could be,' her father admits. 'I'm not that good at keeping things tidy. Doing washing.'

'How would you know?' she says playfully. 'You've never tried.'

'I don't expect you to do it,' he says gruffly.

'Course you do.' She pats his hand. 'I don't mind, Papa. I came back to spend time with you.'

He peers at her again. ‘Uh-huh. And Odette, of course.’

‘Yes, of course,’ Cynthia smiles tightly.

Odette, her daughter, had been the ever-present witness to the unpleasantness – to put it mildly – of Cynthia’s second marriage and, as soon as she turned sixteen, she told Cynthia she wanted to move back to Australia to live with her father. It wasn’t as if Cynthia could claim that life in Los Angeles wasn’t worth leaving. She’d wanted to leave it too, but sometimes marriages aren’t that straightforward.

They had been so close. But Cynthia failed Odette, or she felt she had, by not protecting her from what was going on, so she didn’t call her that often. Didn’t write. She wanted Odette to be happier than she had been all those years away from her father. Except those years of living apart made Cynthia unhappier than she has ever been, and now she feels so disconnected from her daughter it’s as if they’re former colleagues who shared a terrible boss and all they have in common are war stories they don’t wish to repeat. She doesn’t know how to talk to Odette any more, let alone how to be her mother.

Cynthia has to reacquaint herself with that role, however, because what has really brought her back to the place of her youth is that Odette, still in her own youth, has announced that she’s two months pregnant and planning to keep the baby. Cynthia plans to disabuse her of that notion. Odette has so much life ahead of her – and Cynthia is more aware of that than most. She was nineteen when she became pregnant with Odette.

Her father probably knows Odette better than Cynthia herself does these days. He also probably knows that while his daughter is pleased to see him, the real motive for her return is to try to talk his granddaughter out of becoming a mother. He won’t say anything about that, however. Minding his own business has been Wilfred’s life credo.

‘I suppose I should call her,’ Cynthia says.

Her father nods slowly. ‘Yep.’ He glances out to sea then back to her. ‘But first I have some fresh prawns and some bread from the junction.’

‘Don’t tell me Sid’s bakery is still there?’

‘No. But the bread’s good.’ He pats her shoulder. ‘Come on. Time to go home.’

Cynthia takes one more look at the sea and thinks about coming back for a swim later. Those LA beaches just weren’t the same as this glorious expanse. She wants to plunge into the salt water just so she can turn around and look at the shore, revel in the beauty of it, and try not to think about how many years she could have been enjoying it.

‘Yes, Papa,’ she says. ‘It is.’

CHAPTER TWO

Lorraine slams the Wettex down on the sink and exhales loudly. ‘Terry, I have told you a *million* times that when you go to the shops you need to take Simon with you!’

‘I don’t want to,’ her eldest son replies.

‘I don’t *care*. I don’t have time to watch him all day, every weekend – I need your help. Plus he loves going with you.’

‘Yeah. That’s the problem.’

Terry glowers at her. He’s fourteen and riding the messy wave of puberty, alternately loathing her and wanting her to tell him that life will turn out okay. Ha! She’d like someone to tell her that too.

‘Mike, say something,’ she mutters as her husband enters the kitchen.

‘Mate,’ he says, ruffling Terry’s hair.

‘Dad, stop it!’ Terry looks mortified then mildly pleased.

‘Why?’ Mike chuckles and winks at Lorraine. ‘It’s too much fun seeing your reaction. Darl, did you hear about Howard sacking Andrew Peacock? Can’t believe it – I thought that bloke had nine lives.’

‘Why – because he’s had an affair with Shirley MacLaine?’ she mutters.

Mike chortles. ‘Yeah, probably.’

‘Terry, where’s Simon now?’ Lorraine turns fully away from the sink and puts her hands on her hips.

Terry shrugs. ‘Dunno.’

‘Could you *find him*?’

‘Why do I have to hang out with that little creep?’ Terry says just as his brother walks into the room.

Lorraine sees Simon just in time to also see his face crumple. ‘Darling.’ She yanks off her rubber gloves and throws them on the kitchen bench before going to her youngest and giving him a hug. ‘Terry didn’t mean it,’ she says softly, kissing the loose curls on the top of Simon’s head then glaring at her teenager.

‘Yeah, I did,’ Terry snickers. ‘He follows me around. It’s embarrassing. My friends think he’s a loser.’

Mike chuckles again.

‘Michael, it’s not funny,’ Lorraine says just as Simon starts to snifle.

When she waited five years after Terry was born to have another child it was because she needed to get used to the idea of one kid before she added another. She didn’t stop to think that her eldest child would be a teenager while her youngest was still in single digits, which is like parenting two different species instead of one.

‘What is happening?’

Mike’s mother, Cora, has joined them, wafting through the doorway. Cora likes to waft. She once told Lorraine that she’d read in a magazine that a lady should look elegant when she walks; her interpretation is to waft all over the house, day and night, until she finally retires to her bedroom. Although she probably wafts in there too. Lorraine wouldn’t know. Cora keeps the door closed unless she wants the room vacuumed, when she leaves it open. Presumably as an invitation to Lorraine to do that vacuuming.

Cora’s all right, really. She just used to have a maid or a cleaner or something back when Mike was growing up in Toowoomba. Now that she’s living in Cooroy with grown-up Mike and his wife, she thinks Lorraine is that maid. And Lorraine, not wanting to rock the boat or her marriage, goes along with it. So she probably

only has herself to blame. She shouldn't have let Cora move in when Mike's father died. That was the original mistake.

'It's fine, Cora,' Lorraine says, stroking Simon's head as he continues to sniffle.

But Cora has spied the tears on Simon's cheeks and is now wafting in his direction. 'My poor baby,' she murmurs, kissing his cheek. Simon's her favourite. Which Terry knows. It hasn't helped with Terry's attitude towards his brother.

'Honestly, Cora, it's fine.' Lorraine looks pointedly at Mike, who is, inconveniently, looking in the fridge.

'Where are the snags?' he asks, presumably of her.

'In the freezer,' she snaps. Where he put them when he brought them home from the butcher.

The ringing phone on the kitchen bench gives her an opportunity to step back and observe the scene playing out before her: teenage son looking at her like he wishes she'd disappear into a hole; husband's head swivelling from side to side as he continues to look in the fridge, not the freezer; nine-year-old son sniffing as his grandmother squeezes him into a hug.

'Hello,' she says curtly into the receiver.

'Lorraine?'

'Yep.'

The voice on the line sounds vaguely familiar, which means it's probably one of the school mothers wanting her to make toffee for the fete or whatever it is that's coming up. There's always something. Fundraiser, fete, dance, teacher leaving.

'Hi,' the voice says.

Lorraine frowns. 'Yeah. Hi.' Who does this joker think she is?

'It's me.' The voice is meek now.

'Who's me?'

'Cynthia.'

That makes Lorraine pause. Cynthia Scheffer used to be the best thing in her life. The funniest, smartest, trendiest person she knew at school; the most daring of them all even after she

had Odette. So daring she up and left for Los Angeles with that surfer she met after he caught a wave off Tea Tree Bay and found her sitting on the rocks, almost as if she was waiting for him. Because she was. She'd spied him waxing a surfboard in the car park nearby and decided he was a better prospect than her husband. Or maybe she just wanted to force a change. Either way, Pat never saw it coming.

Now that Lorraine has been a mother for fourteen years, she understands the desire to force a change. But that change took Cynthia far away from everyone who loved her and, after an initial letter-writing spree, she stopped contacting Lorraine, and eventually Lorraine stopped trying to contact her.

And the clincher was that the surfer didn't last but Cynthia stayed over there, with Odette, and married some film producer or whatever. So Cynthia's dad told Lorraine when she saw him fishing round at Noosaville one day. After that they started catching up for tea every now and again; they'd always got on when Lorraine was a teenager. Less so Lorraine and Cynthia's mum, who was a little stand-offish. Wilfred hasn't said a word, though, about Cynthia coming home. Which, given the lack of STD pips or international dialling noise, she must be.

'Hello, Cynthia,' Lorraine says in the most formal voice she can muster.

She glances at Mike, who was privy to her tears when Cynthia stopped writing back. Now he's shut the fridge door and has that look on his face he gets when he's worried that the dog has pooped on the neighbour's lawn. He leans his head to one side, holding her gaze. She knows what it means: *Are you all right?* He can be sensitive sometimes. Usually when it counts. That's why she puts up with having his mother in the house.

She smiles at him. Yes, she's all right. Cynthia may have broken her heart but Mike and Terry and Simon glued it back together.

'How . . . how are you?' Cynthia says, her voice soft.

'Fine. You?'

'I'm . . . back.'

'Yep. Gathered that.'

Lorraine hears a sigh. 'I haven't been a good friend.'

Lorraine makes a face into the phone. Useless but satisfying.

'You've been no kind of friend,' she says, although her voice is calm. She's just saying the truth, isn't she? No need for drama.

Silence for a few seconds. Then another sigh. 'No, I haven't.'
More silence.

'But I'd love to see you,' Cynthia goes on.

Lorraine thinks about that. What would it be like to see Cynthia again? Would she want to kick her in the shins? Or would she – more likely, she believes – want to wrap her in a hug then go back to the way things were? Because she's never had another friend like Cynthia. No one who has encouraged her to be herself as much as Cynthia did. Lorraine knows now that friends like that are so rare that a person needs to be prepared to overlook some dodgy behaviour from time to time. Because we all make mistakes. Which doesn't mean she's going to let Cynthia off the hook straightaway. Lorraine isn't a pushover. Much. Not in this case, anyway. She still loves Cynthia – you don't stop loving someone when you've been as close as they were – but she's not just going to forgive and forget. That's for people who watch daytime soaps and think life is as easy as saying a few nice words.

'I'll have to think about it,' she says, even though she already has. 'I have a lot on.'

'Of course.' Cynthia sounds relieved. 'I'm at Dad's if . . . you know . . . you want to call.'

'Yeah, all right.' Now it's Lorraine's turn to pause. How do you end a conversation like this?

'I'd better go,' she says eventually. 'Things to do.'

'Okay.'

'Ta-ta.'

She hangs up in time to see Simon stick out his tongue at Terry and she braces herself for whatever's coming next.