



CHAPTER ONE

DISASTER

January 1994: St. Lucia, Brisbane, Australia

*Sometimes it is the people no one imagines anything
of who do the things that no one can imagine.*

—IMITATION GAME

“Smile, boys,” I say, squinting through the camera lens. I feel the unforgiving Australian sun weigh upon my head, tiny beads of sweat forming at my hairline and trickling down my forehead. Wiping the side of my eyebrow clears any moisture that might interrupt my view; I steady the camera, ready for this photo. I want to remember this morning. It’s Nicholas’ very first day of school, and I don’t know who is more nervous—him or me.

We are standing in the backyard of our small three-bedroom brick home in the leafy suburb of St. Lucia. Nathanael, my eldest, smiles with ease. He is ready for the third grade. Leaning nonchalantly against an umbrella tree, he holds Nicholas’ hand with an extra clench of courage to help him face the day. Nicholas clings to his brother, tensing every muscle.

“Can you smile, Nicholas?” I ask, trading my camera for Isaac, my twenty-month-old, with my husband, Chris.

Nicholas rolls his eyes as he shifts from one leg to the other. His mouth moves from a downward curve to a flat line, the closest to a smile he can fake. A bloodless face displays an inner terror, grim under a wide-brimmed blue hat that reads the school's name: *Ironsides*.

This is the best photo we are going to get of Nicholas this morning, I think.

"Boys, you look great," my ever-optimistic husband chirps, snapping another photograph. I turn my gaze to the right for a moment, spotting a stick insect in the trees beside me.

"Look, Nicholas!" I say, pointing to the bug. "You can take this to school today."

Nicholas nods, though the flat line of his mouth doesn't change.

"Show your teacher what you found. It can be a great first impression." *Maybe having something to hold onto will help him through the day.*

He nods again. I sense the fear pouring out of his five-and-a-half-year-old body.

Arriving at the school, we're early. We're early to everything. Nathanael instantly jumps out of the car. Chris unbuckles Isaac, while I help Nicholas as he carefully steps out onto the pavement. His chewed-up fingers move straight to his mouth. I take hold of his hand, stopping him from biting his nails. He grasps the stick insect, which now sits inside a plastic box with punctured holes for breathing. His life raft.

"Nathanael, we will go to your classroom first," I say as we head along the tree-lined footpath, the concrete already shimmering, reflecting the heat of summer. Children rush beside us with their parents. Nathanael darts ahead, crisscrossing through the crowd while Chris carries Isaac on his hip. Nicholas and I follow, every step gaining more and more weight.

Nathanael's room is close to the entrance in a temporary building while the school completes its construction. He drops his backpack, waves hello to his new teacher, and finds his friends. A simple goodbye.

The rest of us trudge up the slope to Nicholas' classroom: a three-story building designed for the first and second-grade students. Entering the classroom, I hear the mingled noise of the parents and new grade one students. I smile, pretending all is okay, as Nicholas' arms stretch and he pulls away from me. He grabs my hand with both of his, before quickening to hide in my skirt. Turning, I pat his head, hoping to inspire confidence. It doesn't work; Nicholas still clings to me. I'm terrified for him. My chest tightens as he continues to hide. Just this summer, at a large gathering in the park, Nicholas wandered off and didn't play, or even communicate, with any other child.

Chris removes Isaac from his hip and encourages him to wander with us. The room is painted a bright distracting yellow with large windows overlooking the busy main road. Tables are in groups of four and six with student names laminated on the desk. I squeeze between the crowds and the desks, guiding Nicholas to a spot at the back of the room. I want to be wrong. I force myself to believe Nicholas will be okay today.

With Isaac in tow, Chris maneuvers his way through the crowd, searching for Nicholas' nametag. He finds it, and without hesitation, Isaac climbs into Nicholas' chair, seemingly pleased to find a book on the desk. He pretends to read as if he's ready to stay.

Nicholas, on the other hand, buries his head in the small of my back. I imagine his golden eyebrows knitted in a furrow, squeezing his blue eyes shut tight against the chaos. I twist around to face him, and he passes me the stick insect as his hand moves toward his mouth again. He looks

like an animal on guard: all senses alert, fight or flight response primed for action. He does not want to take his seat.

This is not the start I wanted.

Other students appear cheerful, chatting with parents and fellow students; some work on puzzles, while others draw. They clearly belong here. I worry my son doesn't.

Chris hunts for a puzzle for Nicholas, which he usually loves. He finds one of a kangaroo with its joey. Nicholas peers at it from around my skirt, but even puzzles fail to garner his attention today.

"Nicholas," says Chris with a forced smile. "This desk is just for you."

Nicholas squints around from behind my skirt, wrapping it firmly around my legs. Seeing his eyes barely moving from the floor to his chair does nothing to quell my fears.

Chris picks Isaac up and waits.

I take Nicholas' hand and guide him into his chair. "Your stick insect can spend the day on the table with you," I suggest.

Gradually and deliberately, he leaves my side and slides into the seat. Disengaging his hand from mine is more problematic. He stares at the middle of the desk.

"I hope you have a great day," I whisper, kneeling beside him and patting him on the shoulder. One last farewell. "Goodbye, Nicholas."

His head scarcely moves. He is stoic, almost a bronze statue. Beginning my departure, I move away, but turn back around to see he's still holding the same pose. That's when I see it: a solitary tear dribbles its way down his face.

With Isaac parked on his hip, Chris wraps his free arm around my shoulders and leads me to the door.

“I hope we haven’t abandoned him to the wolves,” I whisper as we exit the room. My heart, now lodged at the bottom of my stomach, weighs a ton.

Back home, Isaac and I begin the household duties. Chris prepares to take his usual fifteen-minute walk to work as a Professor at the University of Queensland. Hugging tightly, we say goodbye, knowing today may not be the best for our first grader.

I have stayed at home with our boys since Nathanael was born. Before I met Chris, I taught physical education for some years, and then changed careers and worked in London, where Chris and I met and married. Chris received a scholarship to continue his studies at Oxford. After earning his Ph.D, his first job is back in our mutual hometown of Brisbane. Although money isn’t abundant and we survive on one income and one car, I have a more relaxed lifestyle at home with my children. I still have my career goals, but in these early years, I want to give our sons my full attention. I don’t want them to struggle in school as I did.

The house is quiet with three fewer males. Isaac, my dutiful follower, tags along as I fall into my routine. I scrub the breakfast dishes in warm soapy water and wonder about Nicholas. Will his teacher be kind to him, as she promised during our grade one meeting last year? Will he make friends? Will he be okay?

Moving outside, Isaac plays in the sandpit as I gather wet clothes from the washing machine, a never-ending task with a small child. We do at least two loads every day, and each one must be hung on the line. Isaac is still in cloth diapers, and they are a pile on their own. Placing the clothes in the laundry basket, I wheel the trolley along the concrete path to the line. The bright blue sky shines, as if to add optimism and laughter, despite my heavy heart.

Isaac takes the spade, working in the sand pit. He squats, digging to fill the green plastic bucket before he stands and tips it out to start over. I see him covered in sand and make a mental note to wash him off before we go inside.

Pegging diapers to the line is my task. Holding three or four plastic pegs, I raise my arms and hang one large square after another. My mind wanders. Nicholas. Nicholas with his slow milestones. Ambidextrous. Clumsy. His day dreaming.

I stare at the sodden fabric. How is he coping? How will his teacher survive?

Having Isaac to care for brings me back to the present. Stopping at the pit, I survey my smallest son flicking sand. Slight rustling sounds come from under the shrubs surrounding our small back garden. A blue-tongued lizard slips out, flicking his brightly colored tongue which gives it its name. Basking in the sun for one moment, his scaled skin shimmers in the light.

“Look, Isaac,” I say quietly, picking him up and pointing. “There’s a bluey!” As a typical Australian, I shorten the names of almost everything.

“Dre!” Isaac says, spotting it too, and points. We watch him for a short time, before it disappears under the bushes. Seeing the local wildlife brightens a few moments during an otherwise dark day.

“Let’s go inside, Isaac.” I lower him to the ground and clasp his hand. “Let’s have some morning tea.” Even while I set the kettle and place Isaac in his high chair with a snack of diced apples, my mind reverts to Nicholas.

He often appears to live in his own world and takes an inordinate amount of time to tell any story—and it takes an enormous amount of patience to listen. He seems lost in his head. When I listen, I must give him my undivided attention to follow what he says.

Giving Nicholas a simple instruction, such as “Please get in the car to go swimming,” is a long process. This includes touching him or making sure I have fixed eye contact while giving the directions.

“Nicholas, we are going swimming,” I told him last week. “What do you have to do?”

He stopped. Listened. Thought. The manual hand slowly cranked in his mind as he processed the instructions. *Click...click...click.*

In the amount of time it took for me to draw in a deep breath and then exhale, he responded.

“I have to get my swimming bag,” he said, hesitating.

“Yes, Nicholas,” I immediately replied. “Get your swimming bag.”

Again, he pauses. *Click...click...click.* More thinking. He appeared to take his time. Then, he stopped. Stood. It was as if he was unsure what came next. I fear for a moment that he suffers from amnesia or is lost in a daydream. He grips his bag, studying it in confusion.

I stay calm and ask again, “Nicholas, are you ready for swimming?”

He stops again, recalling the instruction. He moves with his swimming bag, finally making his way to the car. No rush, no defiance, just going slowly. He seems so lost in his mind, always thinking about something known only to him.

Unfortunately, this process accompanies every task. I can hardly bear to think about what might be happening in his classroom today.