

***Oh! Why does the wind blow upon me so wild?***

***- Is it because I'm nobody's child?***

***(Phila Henrietta Case. 1864)***

# **1**

## ***Perth, Western Australia: March***

It was the first month of autumn but the weather was still hot. Gina Porter wiped the sweat from her brow as she braced herself mentally to clear another roomful of her father's possessions. His hoarding had been a joke in the family for years but had turned into a burden for her now that he was dead, because there was only her to deal with the house.

Her daughters said she should simply call a charity and give everything to them, but she couldn't do that, just—couldn't. And had been proved right. In the spare rooms her father had rarely used, under mounds of papers, books, old photos, bric-a-brac, tools and bits that “might come in useful one day”, she'd found some pieces of furniture which had turned out to be quite valuable antiques. These were now going to auction. And there were some old family photographs, which she'd added to her own meagre collection, not to mention the occasional item for her home or garden. She hadn't found her parents' wedding licence, though, and that had surprised her. She'd have liked to keep it.

“You should have cleared out some of this stuff yourself, Dad,” she said aloud as she looked round the cluttered room.

She almost tossed the crumpled plastic bag into the big, black rubbish bag then

her frugal nature took over and she shook out its contents “just in case”. Having been chronically short of money when she was younger, she couldn’t bear to waste anything now.

Inside the package was a brown paper carrier bag, its creases worn, its string handle greyish and limp. How old must this be? She hadn’t seen a bag like it since she was a child, though paper bags were coming back into fashion again now.

“Oh, thank goodness!” Here were various official looking certificates, for births, marriages and deaths. There were also quite a few photos, though the faces and names on the backs of these meant nothing to her. Happy to have found them at last, she began to gather them together to take home for future investigation. Then something about the top marriage certificate caught her eye and she smoothed it out.

It was her father’s name: Daniel James Everett. . . but the woman’s name underneath it wasn’t her mother’s. And the date was wrong too. It said 1942 not 1955.

She jumped in shock as a voice called from the hall, “Mum?”

“Along here, love.” She didn’t want to share this puzzle with anyone yet, so hastily bundled the papers together and slipped them into the carrier bag again.

Lexie came up to join her, carrying her three-year old son. “I got off work early today so I’ve brought you some more boxes and bags. How long have you been here?”

“What? Oh, since about nine this morning.”

“That’s quite long enough. Ben and I are taking you out for tea. I do wish you lived nearer to me then we could do it more often.”

“Lovely.” Only when she got to her feet did Gina realise how stiff she was. She

bent to pick up the precious bag.

Lexie looked at her accusingly. “You’re not taking any more rubbish home, surely? You really ought to be throwing things out at your place, Mum, not adding to them. I don’t want to have to do this sort of clearing up after you go.” She gestured round with a theatrical shudder.

Gina hugged the package to her chest. “These are old family papers. They’re important.”

“You’re as bad as Pops was. I give you warning, when you die I shall just hurl everything into a bin and have it carted to the tip.”

“I’m not so old that you need to worry about that!”

They both stopped short as knife-edged memories sliced into them both. Gina’s husband hadn’t been that old, either, but he’d been wiped out at the age of forty-six by a drunken driver.

“Sorry, Mum.” Lexie gave her a hasty one-armed hug and Ben offered a sticky kiss. “I didn’t mean to remind you of Dad. You know me, open mouth, put foot straight in.”

Ben began struggling to get away from his mother, reaching out towards the piles, his chubby fingers waggling in anticipation.

“Don’t put him down! I’ve sorted those out.”

Lexie muttered something under her breath and hitched her son into a more secure position.

“These things you consider rubbish are important to me,” Gina said quietly. “I’ve always envied people who come from large families and know their backgrounds. Neither Mum nor Dad would ever talk about theirs so I don’t know anything, not one single thing . . . Well, you’re aware of that. But I’m hoping to find something

out from Dad's papers and . . . " She broke off remembering the marriage certificate, wishing she was alone and could study the rest of those documents straight away.

For a moment she was tempted to share the news with Lexie, but dismissed the thought quickly. Neither of her daughters really understood her deep and abiding sadness at her lack of family connections. She turned to lead the way out, wiping her eyes quickly on her arm and hoping Lexie wouldn't notice. "You're right, though. I have done enough for today. And it'd be great to have tea with you and Ben."

She let Lexie take her to a nearby Chinese restaurant which her father had loved and to which they'd often gone as a family during the past few years. As usual, the cook made Ben a small omelette, which the little boy ate with messy enthusiasm while the two women shared a szechuan beef and chicken chow mein.

Half an hour later Gina smiled and sagged back in her chair. "I think everything's catching up with me now. That drive home always seems longer at night, so would you mind if we wound up the evening?"

"Course not. I can't stay out late with Ben anyway or he'll be unbearable tomorrow."

They walked out to their cars each holding a hand of the little boy, who was drooping and quiet. The air was balmy after the hot March day and Gina stopped for a moment to gaze up at the sky. "Your father always loved summer evenings like this one."

"March is autumn, actually."

"Well, it feels like summer. It was thirty-two degrees today."

"I still miss Dad."

“So do I. But it’s three years now and I’ve moved on.”

There was silence as they reached the car park, then Lexie picked Ben up and said in a rush, “I don’t think you have, Mum. Moved on, I mean. I think you’ve sat still.”

Gina stared at her in shock. “I’ve done all sorts of new things since your father died.”

“Cosy little things—joined a reading group, gone out for meals with your friend who’s also a widow. That’s not exactly living it up, is it? Some women get new jobs or even start dating again. But you haven’t. You live in the same house as before and you’re still working part-time in the same craft shop. You’re only fifty-one and young-looking for your age. I hope I last as well as you have. Why, your hair isn’t even grey yet, apart from a few threads. I think you should get a new job and go out to places where you can meet some unattached men. Dad wouldn’t want you to spend the rest of your life alone.”

Gina swallowed hard. “I don’t need this just now.”

Lexie leaned against the side of her mother’s car. “There’s never going to be a perfect time to tell you.”

“I suppose you and Mel have been discussing me.”

“Of course we have, but she doesn’t agree with me. Well, she wouldn’t. She always wants things to stay the same. Other people put down roots; Mel puts down a mine shaft. But I’m worried about you and the future. I was going to talk to you about it in the restaurant, only I chickened out. But when you said you’d moved on, I just couldn’t hold back any longer. It’s like that thing you’ve got on the wall at home. I’ve always hated it. It says ‘Go placidly’. Who wants a placid life? I think you should run joyously forward and have some adventures before it’s too late. I love

you to pieces, Mum, but I had to tell you.”

Gina swallowed hard. “Well, consider me told.”

Lexie leaned forward and gave her a final kiss on the cheek. “You’re the best Mum in the world, but promise me you’ll add a little excitement to your life. Get out and meet new people. *Promise me!*”

“I’ll think about it.” Gina unlocked her car and waited till Lexie had unlocked hers and fastened Ben into his car seat. They were two parking spaces away but she felt as if they were miles apart.

Lexie started up the engine then stuck her head out of the car window and bellowed, “I nearly forgot. Can you come over and babysit for me tomorrow night, please?”

Gina started to say no then realised Lexie had rolled up the car window and switched on her CD player. She’d simply assumed that her mother would agree.

And Gina would. Why not? She had nothing else to do because she *hadn’t moved on*, had she? That accusation rankled. As for Lexie’s advice, Gina had never been the sort to run forward joyously and have adventures, even though she’d have liked to go overseas. Her husband had been even quieter, a home-loving man. And the two of them had been perfectly happy together in their own way.

*Move on, indeed!* Where to? Everyone she loved was here in Western Australia.

As she turned on to the Freeway to drive south to Mandurah, she wondered yet again why her father had never told her he’d been married before.

She drove slowly, not sure she wanted to get home because she now had two things to worry about in the dark reaches of the night: what her younger daughter had just said and unravelling the mystery of her father’s other marriage.

And what was wrong with a placid life, anyway?

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Lexie's way home led near her sister's house, so she made a small detour. Since there was a light on downstairs she stopped on impulse, looking up at the brand new two-storey residence that was Mel's pride and joy. She rang the front door bell and tapped her foot impatiently as she waited.

Mel opened the door, staying behind the security grill till she saw who it was. "Lex! What on earth are you doing here at this time of night?"

"I wanted to talk to you about Mum. Are you busy?"

"Just sitting watching TV. Simon's out. Come in."

"I'll get Ben. He's asleep in the car." She carried her son inside and laid him gently down in the corner, his head on a cushion. "Where's my gorgeous niece?"

"Asleep, thank goodness. Emma's been a terror this evening, came home from school in a temper because she'd fallen out with her best friend."

"I'll be glad when Ben goes to school. It'll make things so much easier."

"In some ways. But schools don't keep them until the working day ends, so you'll still need babysitters. And kids catch everything that's going round once they start, so you'll have trouble when he's ill."

Lexie shrugged. "There's always Mum. She pulled you out of a hole when Emma got 'flu so badly."

"Yes. Mum's been great. But you can't have it both ways. If she does what you want and gets a more exciting life, she might be too busy to babysit for us."

"She'll still do it for us now and then."

"What if she decides to travel?"

"Mum's not the travelling sort." Lexie flung herself down on the couch with a sigh.



“Glass of wine?”

“No thanks, not when I’m driving. But I wouldn’t mind an orange juice, if you’ve got one.” She bounced to her feet and followed her sister into the kitchen. “You all right? You look very pale. You’re not coming down with something, are you? Thanks.” She raised her glass. “Here’s to us.”

“Let’s go and sit down. I’m exhausted.”

“You try to fit too much into your life, you know. Um—I’ve just been talking to Mum about moving on.”

“Wow. I didn’t think you’d actually do it. What did she say?”

“She got a bit huffy—you know that look she gets.”

Mel rolled her eyes. “Don’t I ever.” She waited expectantly. “Is that all? Well, I bet things don’t change. How’s she going with the house clearing?”

Lexie sighed. “She’s still taking things home. She had a big bundle of old papers today.”

They were both silent for a moment or two then Mel cleared her throat. “I’ve got a bit of news of my own.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m pregnant.”

Lexie gaped at her. “But you said you weren’t having any more children after being so sick the first time. You swore once was enough to go through nine months of chucking up.”

“It is—was. Only, good old Mother Nature has decided otherwise. Take it from me, the only safe method of birth control is complete abstinence. I told Simon after Emma was born that he should have a vasectomy, but he wouldn’t, damn him!” She snatched a tissue and mopped her eyes. “Sorry. Hormones have gone

haywire.”

Lexie went to sit next to her, rubbing her back gently. “You poor love.”

“Simon’s pleased, but it’s not him who’ll be getting fat and feeling sick for months on end, is it? All he can say is, he always wanted another kid. Men are so selfish.”

“You’ve quarrelled?”

“Have we ever! He stormed out of the house in a huff tonight and I don’t know where he is.” She reached for another tissue.

“You’ll sort it all out.”

“I suppose so.” Mel stared down at the dregs of her orange juice. “But I’m already throwing up several times a day and I feel worse than last time.”

“You were bad enough with Emma.”

“And you were fit as a flea when you were expecting Ben. I hate you.”

Lex grinned at her. “No, you don’t.”

“I do at the moment. Why can’t I be like that? I can’t afford to stop work. We need my salary to pay the mortgage on this place. I suggested to Simon that I have a termination. That’s what tonight’s quarrel was mainly about.”

Lexie gaped at her. “But you’re married! There’s no reason for you to have an abortion.”

“Except that I *don’t* want another baby. I was throwing up for the whole nine months last time. It seems to have been going on for ever already this time and I’m only just over two months. I can’t face it, Lex.” Her voice wobbled, a tear escaped and she took another sip of juice.

“I thought you were looking pale.”

“Yeah, and this is the best time of day for me. You should see me in the

mornings. Not a pretty sight. Thank heavens for make-up.”

“Well, you can always sell this house and buy somewhere smaller. You’ll make a huge profit. Things won’t seem so overwhelming then.”

Mel sat bolt upright. “We sell this place over my dead body! I put down roots here when we moved in and I’m not pulling them up again, whatever anyone else wants.”

Lexie opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again.

Mel took a deep breath. “I’m hoping Pops’ money will help us through the first year—wasn’t it kind of him to leave us something?—then I’ll go back to work properly. Only, I can’t seem to start planning, my brain’s turned to mush and I get so *tired*.” She stared down at her hands for a moment, examining her nail varnish with great care, and brushing away another tear with a scowl that defied Lexie to comment. “So . . . how’s the new guy?”

“OK. Fun, but not a keeper. Look, I’d better get Ben home to bed and leave you to sleep.”

But as she drove away, she wondered how bad the row had been between Mel and Simon. Surely her sister wasn’t serious about a termination?

Lexie looked down at Ben as she carried him into the house. He was all soft and floppy, like a rag doll, and she loved him to pieces. For all her troubles with her ex, she wouldn’t be without her son for anything in the world. And she was glad his father had gone to work in Sydney because she didn’t want to share Ben with the Rat.

She laid the little boy carefully in his bed then walked slowly along to her own room. Mel must be feeling really bad to talk about terminations!

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Brad Rosenberry picked up the mail when he got home from work on that hot autumn day, shuffling through the pile and stopping at the sight of an airmail letter from the UK. The others were only bills, so he put them down and turned the letter over to see who it was from. But there was no address on the back.

He didn't open it, because he'd done the shopping on the way home and had some frozen stuff to put away. Helen had always done that and since her death he'd followed similar patterns. He still missed having her around. They'd been through troubled times in their marriage but had grown a lot closer since the kids left home, and even more so during the years she'd been fighting breast cancer and had needed him so desperately.

He realised he was still standing there clutching a packet of frozen raspberries and quickly put the last few things away. There. All neat and tidy, and he'd eaten at a café near the supermarket, so didn't need to mess the kitchen up again till supper time.

Pouring himself a glass of red wine he took it and the strange letter out on to the back patio, where he liked to sit on warm evenings. He studied the envelope again, unable to decipher the post mark. Who would be writing to him from England? He seemed to hear Helen saying, "For goodness' sake, open it and find out, Brad!" but he enjoyed guessing what letters contained.

Since this one offered no clues and the postmark was indecipherable, he tore open the envelope and spread out the thin sheet of paper which was all it contained.

*Dear Mr Rosenberry*

*My name is Rosie Quentin and I think you knew my mother,*

*Jane, about twenty years ago when she was visiting Australia.*

*She was Jane Carroll then.*

*My mother didn't know she was pregnant with me when she left Australia. If you're the right Bradley James Rosenberry, you're the father. I only found out Dad couldn't be my biological father when we were doing blood groups and genetics at school.*

*I found your address in the Australian white pages on line and there wasn't another BJ Rosenberry listed. Then I found that you'd written a couple of training manuals and the bio put you at the correct age. You can find nearly anyone on the Internet these days.*

*I hope you don't think I'm cheeky, but it's terrible not knowing what sort of background I come from, so could you please write and tell me something about yourself?*

*I really like to meet you one day as well. I'm going to do a gap year starting in fifteen months, before I go to university—well, I hope I'll be going to university. I'm planning to go backpacking with a friend and we both want to visit Australia. Would you mind if I came to see you?*

*Finding out about you has sort of taken over my life and I feel a bit lost at the moment about who I am.*

*I've enclosed an international reply coupon, so please, even if you're not the right man, could you let me know because I'll have to start searching again? Only, I have a hunch you are the right man and my hunches aren't usually wrong.*

*Rosie Quentin*

*PS I'm sorry if I've not written this tactfully, only I tried six times*

*and this was the best I could do.*

Brad gaped at the letter, then re-read it slowly. “Jane Carroll,” he murmured as memories came flooding back. She’d worked in a café near his office, so bright and full of energy and enthusiasm. He hadn’t meant anything to happen, but he and Helen had been going through a bad patch just then and Jane had been lonely because her travelling companion had met a guy and moved on without her.

It was the thought of his children that had made him finish the affair a few weeks later and try to make his marriage work.

He’d never forgotten the cheerful English girl, though, and had wondered from time to time how she was doing. But she’d not given him her address in England.

*She’d had a daughter! His daughter.*

Why the hell hadn’t Jane told him? He’d have helped her financially and . . . Then he remembered how short of money he and Helen had been in those days and knew it’d have not only have been a struggle to support Jane and her child; it’d have been the final straw that destroyed his fragile marriage.

A daughter! Was she called Rosie because of his surname? He smoothed out the letter, touching the signature, not knowing whether he was glad about this or not. But the words touched his heart. *I feel a bit lost at the moment about who I am.* Poor kid.

A sentence near the end of the letter caught his eye again. *I have a hunch you are the right man and my hunches aren’t usually wrong.* He was prone to hunches, too, uncanny feelings about the people he loved. And his weren’t usually wrong, either.

Psychic, his mother had called it, and said it ran in her family. He didn’t know about that. He wasn’t into ghosts and all that sort of woo-woo. But he had to admit

that he did have hunches from time to time.

He couldn't think of anything else but Rosie all evening, lost track of his favourite TV show in the middle of the episode, drank a second and then a third glass of wine, and eventually went to bed to toss and turn.

At three o'clock the solution to all his problems came to him and he lay smiling as he thought out the details carefully. It would work, he knew it would!

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When she got back home from her meal with Lexie, Gina could wait no longer. She spread out the long, thin piece of green and white paper that was headed Certified Copy of an Entry of Marriage and studied it intently. Daniel James Everett, bachelor and soldier, had married one Christine Frances Pirie, nurse, at The Register Office, Blackpool, in June 1942.

So it had been a war-time marriage.

She knew her father came from Lancashire, because he'd never lost the accent, but she'd thought he came from near Preston from something she'd overheard once. Perhaps Blackpool was his first wife's home, or he'd been stationed there. It upset her not to know.

Here in faded black ink, for the first time, she found her paternal grandfather's name and the information that he was a shopkeeper. She mouthed the name and touched it with one fingertip. Why had her father always refused point-blank to speak about his family? The old resentment surged up. She'd begged him to tell her about them so many times and he'd insisted she was better off without "that lot". And her mother had just shrugged and said she had no close relatives left, so it didn't matter.

Clearly Dad had quarrelled with his family, but Gina had never been able to

understand how that could have happened, because Dad had been a calm man, the best of fathers, a loving husband, a generous friend.

What had happened to his first wife? She must have died very young, poor thing, because Gina knew her parents had married the year before she was born.

She re-read the marriage certificate, this time noting that the bride's family were also shopkeepers. Then she let the piece of paper drop and sat staring at nothing, losing herself in her thoughts.

Blackpool. Her father's family had come from there, not Preston. She'd seen the famous seaside resort on television a few times. There had been a drama series set there quite recently. It looked to be the most amazing place. She had wanted to visit the UK, but her Tom had hated flying so they'd only once flown across Australia to Sydney—and he'd been white-knuckled all the way—and had never gone overseas.

With a sigh she turned to the other papers in the bundle and what she found made her cry out in shock and seriously consider burning the whole lot in the garden incinerator.

She didn't, of course. She stuffed them back into the carrier bag and dumped it on the dining room table.

It was a long time before she got to sleep that night.