

## CHAPTER ONE

### *An Unexpected Absence*

CHRISTIAN DE PALMA WAS RATHER PROUD OF HIS NAME. HE WAS TOLD repeatedly by his mother that the de Palma family had been wealthy aristocrats, originating from the town of the same name in Majorca, but having acquired their wealth in Haiti before the slave uprisings. During the uprisings they had escaped to Cuba, where, he was assured, the family's wealth was only finally broken when Castro seized power. Most of the family had fled to the United States. A small splinter, however, found itself in Paraguay, where his grandfather met and fell in love with a young girl by the name of Marietta, who was a member of the Australian community in Paraguay. They married and, finding little of merit in the tiny, dusty community of *Nueva Australia*, this elder de Palma persuaded her that their future, and the restoration of at least his portion of the family's fortune, lay in her 'homeland'. The fact that neither of them spoke much English did not deter this ancestor and his now pregnant young wife from boarding a trading vessel one day with their meagre belongings, and disembarking in Darwin almost three weeks later, where they managed to slip away into the bush.

The father took work on a cattle station that he one day dreamed of owning. Unfortunately, the elder de Palma's dreams of regaining the family wealth were cut short one day when, during the wet season, he was taken by a crocodile. Happily, he had lived long enough to see the success of his only born son, the charismatic Santo de Palma. Santo had become a successful lawyer in Darwin; and even as the crocodilian jaws closed around him, the elder de Palma was content with the knowledge that the restoration of the family's wealth and honour was in good hands. Sadly, Santo de Palma was himself killed

during the cyclone on Christmas day in 1974; but not before leaving his own young wife pregnant with Christian. The young, pregnant widow, Theresa de Palma, decided to return to Adelaide where, although she no longer had family of her own, she could rely on friends during the difficult times that lay ahead. And it was in Adelaide that Christian grew up, proud of his Majorcan-Haitian-Paraguayan-Australian heritage.

The fact that, according to some, Theresa de Palma had, in fact, been Emily Duckworth, until she changed her name by deed poll, that she had been born in the northern suburbs of Adelaide, that she had never left the state, and had never been married, were just some of the lies that Christian de Palma had to endure as he grew up.

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The young mother doted on her little boy, who was convinced that his heritage was not just one of wealth but of nobility. That was what the 'de' meant in their name, his mother insisted. She regaled him almost every night with tales of the family. He heard of great uncles and aunts, those who had made it to the United States. He learned how some of these relatives, second and third cousins, perhaps a time or two removed, had restored the family fortunes. That one day he would restore their fortune, and perhaps even be re-united with those cousins who, his mother assured him, were still in touch.

Almost every Saturday, Theresa would take Christian to the markets. He loved it because she loved it. He would accompany her, attached by his hand to her hand, and she would stop and chat with Franco at the fruit and vegetable stand, Kristoph, behind his stacks of chilled meat, and Bliss behind her silks and crocheted foot warmers. There was almost no one, it seemed to him, that did not know and love Theresa de Palma and, by extension, him. He loved her more because they loved her. His mother would chitchat and laugh her way between the stalls. She reminded him of a willy wagtail, tail up and flicking from side to side, chirping merrily and apparently at random. She

bought little, but seemed to wander home, somewhat wearily, with her heart, if not her arms, full.

He would have plugged the leak in her heart if he could. He knew there was a leak because almost always, by mid afternoon, the fullness seemed to have seeped away. He tried to fill the emptiness as best he could, often to no avail. By nightfall, it often seemed darker than it really was.

There was no one else in Christian's life. His mother filled the big screen. The director insisted on breathtaking close-ups. But then, suddenly, when he was just nine years old, there was no one in his life at all.

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It was a day in early spring, at the Royal Adelaide Show. This was only Christian's second visit to the show. His mother was celebrating because she had just completed her first month in a new job, her first job for several months. She was working in a music store in the city.

'You're old enough to go on the rides now,' she assured him. 'Even the Mad Mouse! We'll go on together and have a really wild time! I *love* the Mad Mouse.'

She had been spending money extravagantly, by her standards, on show bags, food, and rides. But it was the Mad Mouse, the roller-coaster that looked as if it were constructed from an oversize Meccano set, that really beckoned. They walked past it several times on their way up and down the sideshow alleys. The sounds, the crowds and the smells were a little overwhelming to the young Christian. Some of the men and women standing in front of the rows of toys, calling out in a language of their own, would haunt his nightmares during the years to come. One man in particular stood out for him, striding back and forth behind the laughing clowns. He walked with his hands behind his back, clenching an unlit cigar between stained, broken teeth. He tipped forward as he walked, his legs constantly in danger of losing contact with his head and shoulders. On one pass, the man caught Christian's

eye and ... smiled. At least, it may have been a smile. He raised a hand and gestured for Christian to come forward. He said something unintelligible around the dirty wet stub of the cigar. To Christian it sounded like, '¡Cuidado!' At least, in later years Christian convinced himself that this was what he might have said. It was what he said in Christian's nightmares. 'Beware!' But his mother just shook her head and pulled him away, saying, 'Not that one. It's rigged.'

The paths between the sideshow stalls, once grassed, were now bare and dusty from the passage of so many feet. Those feet—thousands of them on this warm, spring Saturday afternoon—raised a slight haze of dust which coated every surface. One such surface was Christian himself who, when wiping the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hands, left muddy streaks across his face. He asked his mother to pass him his water bottle. Whenever they were out together, Theresa de Palma would carry two water bottles, one with a blue lid for him, and one with a pink lid for herself. She passed him his now, and took a swig from her own, as they walked by the Mad Mouse once more. On each pass he would look up at her beseechingly.

'Not yet,' she would say, coming up with a different reason each time. 'Let's save it for later, or you'll have nothing to look forward to,' she said on one occasion. Then it became, 'You've just had lunch. You'd better let that settle.' Then she might say, 'We have to see the dogs first! I don't want to miss the dog show!'

His mother did, indeed, love dogs, although they were unable to keep one in their small apartment. So they went to the dog show. Then the cat show. Then there were horses and flowers to look at. And odd looking chickens. Until finally ...

Sometime after mid afternoon they joined the long queue, which snaked around the corner, and again, and again, until it almost met its own head. Christian's energy could not quite be contained, and he jiggled and danced on the spot, sometimes bumping into the woman in front of them, to her obvious irritation. She glanced at Christian's mother, and hours of accumulated weariness and irritation threatened to escape from between tightly pursed lips. However, she thought

better of it, and turned to rein in her own tribe of pre-teens. The glance did not escape Theresa, however, who emptied her own water bottle, sharing her look of disgust between the back of the woman and the empty bottle. She tossed the bottle back into her bag.

‘You can have some of mine, Mummy,’ Christian offered.

She shook her head, and Christian could see that her mood had changed. The friend, who had seemed little more than his own age a moment ago, had become the dark, brooding figure that sometimes sat in the dark in the apartment and sent him to bed early.

During the wait in line, the cacophony of music from the Dodge ’em Cars, the Crazy Mirrors, and the Gee Whizz, threatened to pile on top of Christian, pressing him down into the ground. That, and the weight of his mother’s mood. He avoided looking back at her, but thought that he could detect, despite the noise, some muttered curses. Nevertheless, the increased weight did not press him down too much, because he just passed the height test, and they scrambled into the first available car, he taking the front position, and she sitting behind, her arms around him, her thighs pressing against his buttocks. The excitement of the moment surpassed all other considerations.

The car edged slowly forward and began to climb steeply. Excited cries were already issuing from Christian’s lips, cries that shuddered strangely in rhythm with the rattling and vibration of the car.

‘This is great, Mummy,’ he called back over his shoulder, emphasising the juddering in his voice.

As the summit of the climb drew closer, there was nothing in Christian’s world except the blue sky, and that strange metallic horizon, beyond which terror and excitement beckoned. But Christian was a little disappointed when, at the top, instead of plummeting downwards, they began a series of jerky turns that tossed him from side to side. Nevertheless, the fresh breeze that blew up there, beyond the crowds and the dust, beyond, even, much of the noise, was more refreshing than any drink. He laughed excitedly at the miniature world below. Then, after the last turn, the track ceased to exist in front of the car, and he knew that it was coming: the plunge that seemed to have

been awaiting him all his life. He gripped tightly onto the rail in front of him, and guttural sounds rose from deep within, as, first, they stood poised at the precipice for what seemed an eternity, and then leapt downwards into the abyss. Christian felt himself lifted slightly from the seat until the seatbelt held him in check. The wind rush passed his face, whipping back his hair, taking his breath away and scattering it somewhere behind him. His stomach, too, was left behind, somewhere up there on the slope; and he whooped and hollered as they reached the bottom. There were other, smaller climbs and descents, other jerky turns to left and right; but nothing could match that initial precipitous plunge.

It was not until the car was turning the last bend and coming jerkily to a halt that Christian became conscious of an absence. At some time—he was unable to say exactly when—his mother had released him. Her arms were no longer around his waist. But it was the absence of the pressure of her thighs against his buttocks that was more surprising. Even before the car came to a complete halt he was turning around in his seat to find his mother—gone.