

Currawong Creek

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Extract

Chapter 1

Friday morning. Clare finished the interview and sized up her client. Too thin, junky thin. Red eyes, more than a hint of the shakes and she couldn't stop sniffing.

'I advise you to plead guilty,' said Clare. 'We'll present a plea in mitigation and ask for a bond or for a community-based order. It will be better all round.' This week she'd seen too many cases just like this one. The young woman was going to make a bad impression on the court without even opening her mouth.

'Can we nick out for a smoke?'

'Of course.'

The boyfriend was already out the door, and the girl wasn't far behind. Clare started making notes on the file, then looked up. The little boy was still sitting there. Clare walked to the door and called after the two figures retreating down the hall. 'Haven't you forgotten something?'

The boy regarded her with solemn eyes, peeking from beneath cartoon-perfect lashes. An uncommonly pretty child in spite of his snotty nose and soiled, shabby clothes.

'Mummy and Daddy will be back soon.' Clare's voice was bright and encouraging, but the boy's expression didn't change.

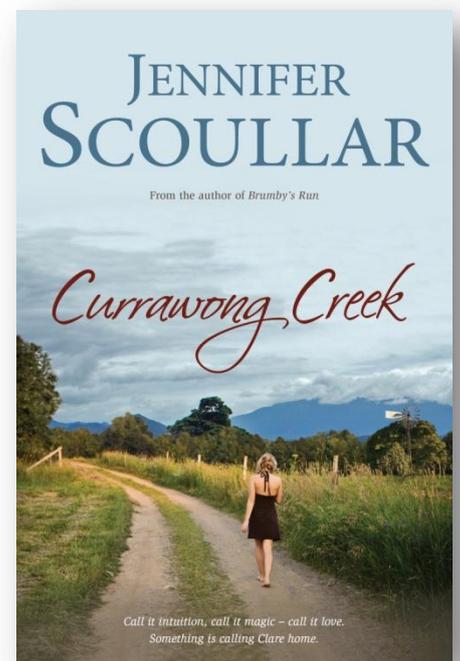
'Daddy's dead,' he said in a small voice. His bottom lip began to quiver.

Oh.

Tiredness and guilt washed over her, along with a feeling that she couldn't name. A vague dissatisfaction that had troubled her all week, each time she'd looked out of her narrow window to the view of the stunted Coolabah tree, and beyond it, the barren car park. A *missing*. Or perhaps a *wishing* for something indefinable. Clare averted her gaze both from the tree and the boy and riffled through the files on the desk. What on earth was his name? It was hard to concentrate with him looking at her like that. She glanced down at the interview sheet. The mother was Taylor Brown. But that was it, no mention of the child at all.

'What's your name?' she asked.

He didn't answer. He just maintained that unsettling stare. It didn't matter. How long could it take to smoke a cigarette? Clare turned back to her work, reviewing her record of the interview so far. It was clear that the plea in mitigation would be simple. Taylor had a depressingly familiar tale: growing up in a series of broken homes, women's refuges and foster care placements. She ticked



all the boxes for a history of domestic and sexual abuse – and she was a heroin addict, although currently on methadone replacement. Clare reread the charge sheet. Theft of a Bull Terrier puppy. Cute, really. The rest wasn't so cute. Around three o'clock in the morning of May the second, police had stopped and searched her vehicle on Wickham Street in the Valley. They'd found cannabis, money and various stolen items. The boy had been unrestrained in the front seat. Clare looked up and surprised herself by imagining him with a puppy on his lap. Would the puppy have made him laugh? Put a smile on his serious face? Had Taylor wanted to see that smile?

Time ticked by. Her next appointment would be here soon. Clare day-dreamed out the grimy window. A bird sat in her poor excuse for a tree. She'd never seen a bird there before. A currawong, big and black, with bright yellow eyes and startling white crescents on its wings. It looked straight at her and uttered a wild, ringing cry. The call sounded disturbingly out of place in a city car park. With a wrench Clare returned her attention to the boy. What was Taylor's mobile number? The digits on the legal aid form were a series of uncertain scratches. A quick glance over the rest of the largely incomplete application, revealed her to be barely literate. Under date-of-birth, Taylor had laboriously written 20. Only twenty years old. Jesus, how old could she have been when she had the kid? Clare began to key the numbers into her phone. There were only seven of them. Oh god. Taylor had listed only seven numbers.

'Hey, come back here,' said Clare, as the little boy got down from the too-big chair and went to the door. 'Where do you think you're going?'

The child turned to face her. Pale blue eyes. A tangled lock of golden hair fell into his eyes. He pushed it aside with a thin hand and said, 'Mummy.' He tugged at the door knob.

The phone rang. Clare automatically reached for it, then let her hand fall and hurried for the door instead. She guided him back to the chair, impulsively putting her hands around his waist and lifting him into the seat. He was light as a feather. She kneeled in front of him on the old blue carpet. 'What's your name?' His mouth moved to shape a word, ever so slowly. 'Jack,' he said at last. The word was no more than a sigh. If her face hadn't been so close to his, her green eyes so close to his wide blue ones, she would have missed it. Clare loved the name Jack. It was her father's name, a father that she'd recently lost, way too early, to cancer.

'Stay,' she said, and reached once more for the phone. It stopped ringing. A knock came at the door. Thank goodness. 'Here's Mummy now,' said Clare.

But it wasn't Taylor. It was Debbie, the legal aid centre's one and only secretary. 'Just letting you know, Clare, your ten-thirty's here.'

'Could you have a look outside please?' said Clare. 'A young woman, tall and thin, with long brown hair.' She nodded towards the boy. 'His mother, and a man. They went for a cigarette.'

Debbie retreated from the room, looking doubtful. She returned a few minutes later, shaking her head. 'I'm sorry. No sign.'

Clare frowned. She lifted Jack down from the chair, picked up Taylor's file and took hold of the boy's pale hand. 'Ask my next appointment to wait,' she told Debbie. 'I need to see Roderick.'

Clare finished speaking and watched Roderick stroke his bush of a beard with a forefinger, deep in thought. The child pressed in against her knees, pushing her pinstriped linen skirt up her legs.

His skinny warmth radiated through her black tights. Eventually, Roderick held out his hand for the file and she handed it over.

'Ring Child Protection and have them send somebody round to pick him up,' he said at last. Clare nodded and tried to prise the child from her legs.

Jack began to scream, a piercing cry that tore through the thin walls of the office.

'I have a client . . .' she said through the noise.

'Stop,' Roderick said. 'I'm begging you! He obviously wants to stay with you.'

Clare let her hands fall from Jack's shoulders and the screaming ended as abruptly as it had begun.

Roderick picked up the phone. 'Debbie, send Clare's next one to me and see if you can divvy up her morning slots between the rest of us.' He put down the phone and smiled at her. 'Last time I looked, I was the director of this legal aid circus and not a babysitter. You'll have to look after the boy, Clare. Until a social worker collects him.'

Clare felt her mouth fall open. 'What do you expect me to do with a kid?'

'Don't ask me.' He fished a wallet from his pocket, and plonked some money on the table. 'McDonald's? Get him a Happy Meal or something.'

Clare dragged herself from the room with Jack still attached to her leg.

Debbie watched her struggle back towards her office. 'Adam rang,' she said. 'Reminding you about the ballet tonight?'

Clare nodded. Adam's sister was performing, opening in the lead role of Queensland Ballet's production of *Giselle*. Clare secretly didn't like the ballet, was bored after ten minutes. But Adam and his friends loved it and tonight was a very big deal.

Debbie smiled at the little boy. 'He's a sweetie.'

Clare nodded again, finally made it to the door, and slammed it behind her.

The child was sitting in the too-big chair again, watching her with those wide eyes. Every now and then he looked out the dirty window. The currawong had flown, leaving the misshapen little tree looking even sadder than usual. Clare's arm ached from holding the phone to her ear. The department's intake worker was apparently on the other line, trying to tee up a place for Jack. 'Clare,' she said at last. 'I've found something. An experienced foster carer who lives in the same suburb as the boy's mother. It's a stroke of luck that we can keep the child within his community, don't you think?'

Clare bit her tongue. What did it matter? Taylor was transient. She'd listed her address as a caravan park. What sort of a connection were she and Jack supposed to have with that particular community?

'The carer can take him this afternoon,' said the intake worker.

'Great,' said Clare. 'We'll be waiting.' She hung up the phone. 'Good news, Jack. Let's celebrate with McDonald's.'

He didn't say anything. As she took his hand he looked out the window again. She followed his gaze to the bare tree. His hand felt warmer than before, and it nestled into hers like a baby bird in a nest.

The pimply-faced teenager behind the counter put a colourful cardboard box and a drink cup on the tray. They sat down at a corner booth. Jack pulled ineffectually at the tough plastic bag containing the Happy Meal toy, then handed it to Clare. She used her fingernail to poke a hole, then extracted the small item inside – a fat, orange hog-like creature with tall black ears and a yellow nose. Its face was angry, like it was about to bite someone. Clare looked at the instructions. Its name was Tepig, and it was something called a Pokémon. According to the leaflet, its little ball of a tail was supposed to light up. Clare squeezed it a few times. Nothing happened.

Jack wiped sauce from his mouth, then leaned over and took the toy from Clare's hand. He put it on its back. Ah, there was a switch. Jack flicked it and Tepig's tail glowed purple.

'Well, what do you know?' Clare smiled at him. 'You're a pretty smart kid.'

Jack picked up a card that had fallen out along with the toy. It was some sort of a trading card with a hologram of a bird on it. His eyes lit up and, for the first time, he smiled. He pulled a dog-eared deck of cards from his pocket and proceeded to lay them out, side by side, on the table.

'What's that you've got there?' she asked.

Each card had a picture of an odd animal on it, twelve cards in all. The new card was the only one with a sparkly hologram, and Clare guessed it was special. She felt ridiculously pleased about it. Jack handed her the paper cup that minutes ago had been filled with cola. His little box of food was empty as well. The burger and chips hadn't even seemed to hit the sides going down. 'Same again?'

He nodded, eyes shining.

Whoever said looking after kids was hard? This was a breeze. She leaned over and he let her wipe his nose. 'How about I have a Happy Meal too? We'll get more toys that way.'

Four Happy Meals later, and they were both full. The table was littered with empty food wrappers, Pokémon figures and swap cards. Jack burped, then lay down on the bench seat and patted his tummy. Clare found herself copying him, stretching out on her back, along the bench seat at right angles to his. The tops of their heads were almost touching. Jack reached backwards and touched Clare's face, an unexpectedly tender gesture. Then he got up and started to tickle her. Clare laughed in surprise.

'Jack, no,' she said. 'People are looking –' But her inhibitions were no match for Jack's wriggling fingers. 'Stop,' she gasped, but it only spurred him on. Now he was giggling too – peals of musical laughter shaking his slight frame.

'Clare? Is that you? What are you doing *here*?'

She felt herself redden. She knew that voice.

Clare sat up to find one of her fellow solicitors regarding her with an expression halfway between curiosity and distaste. What on earth was Veronica doing at McDonald's, of all places? The overpriced tapas bar down the road was more her style. Clare attempted to reclaim some dignity, straightening her skirt, and running her fingers through her blonde bob. As she did she noticed a smear of something yellowy-green on her shirt cuff. Pickle?

'We came here for lunch,' Clare said, unnecessarily. 'Would you like to join us?' What a dumb thing to say. Jack's expression was one of rebuke. He was right of course; Veronica would spoil their fun. Veronica would spoil anybody's fun. Clare looked at her over the top of Jack's faded jumper. The woman was, as always, immaculate, wearing head-to-slender ankle Gucci and Louboutins on her feet. Veronica had ambitions to be a trial lawyer. Next year she was reading at the bar with Paul Dunbar, one of Brisbane's top criminal barristers. It was essentially an apprenticeship. What Clare wouldn't do for such an opportunity. The only reason that she and Veronica were working in the same building was that Dunbar had a social justice agenda. He liked to see himself as a defender of the common man and often appeared for a reduced fee, or even pro bono, if the trial was high profile enough. Dunbar required his readers to spend twelve months as legal aid lawyers, believing that nothing blooded a future barrister better than the world of petty crime. So unlike Clare, Veronica was a reluctant champion of the underdog.

Her mouth twisted at Clare's offer of joining them. 'I didn't come here for lunch.' She spat out the last word like lunch was something loathsome, like she'd never eaten lunch in her life and didn't intend to start now. 'I'm here to find you. You're needed back at the office.' Veronica's expression suggested that she couldn't imagine why anybody would need Clare for anything.

Clare wanted to say that she'd only come to McDonald's because of the kid. But then she stopped herself. It might hurt Jack's feelings, and anyway, what did it matter what Veronica thought?

'Why didn't you just ring me?' asked Clare.

'Ringing you really would have been so much easier,' agreed Veronica. 'Since I'm absolutely swamped with extra work today. But somebody' – she took a phone from her bag and placed it on the table in front of Clare – 'forgot her mobile.'

Clare picked up her phone. 'Sorry,' she said, feeling about as tall as Jack.

Veronica looked at the discarded wrappers from the four Happy Meals, at the sauce on Jack's sleeve and finally at Clare. 'Enjoy your . . . lunch,' she said, and swept from the restaurant.

As they walked back to the office, Jack volunteered his hand. It fitted so comfortably into her own. Clare gave it a pleased squeeze.

For the first time, she tried to imagine where he might be going. An experienced foster carer, that's what the intake worker had said. Jack should be okay with somebody like that, shouldn't he? Until his mother came back?