



RAIN MAKER

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The heat lay across every surface. The lacquered wood of her desk. The sticky leather of her chair. It clung to her thighs, hurt as she shifted and pulled skin with it. Sweat against her back, under her blouse, under her breasts, soaking her bra until it was damp against her skin. A simmering heat that open windows and failing air conditioning couldn't help. There was a small desk fan, but after the combined days of what seemed a hundred droughts, it only moved hot air. In front of it, a small desk-sized plastic Christmas tree, which was supposed to look festive but only seemed as wilted as everything else, failed to sway in the artificial breeze.

The boy didn't seem to notice. Or if he did, he wasn't showing it. He wasn't showing anything.

Dressed in black, heavy boots, dyed shock of hair falling across downturned eyes, scowl. The uniform of a thousand rebellious teenagers. She'd seen it before, in all its variations. Nothing to be afraid of. He presented different to the photo in the thin slip of a file put together by the court-appointed social worker. A school photograph over a year old now, from whatever hick country-town school he'd been in at the time. Then he'd been short haired, clean dressed.

Smiling. Crooked toothed, but happy. What a difference a year could make at that age.

She looked at her notes so far. A few scrawls, useless things made to look like she was paying attention, words without purpose. He said little, only the most perfunctory. Unsurprising. Even the kids who were only there because their parents were over-anxious often said nothing in the first session. Or the third. Or the sixth. Sometimes it seemed they all knew the code. Sit sullen and silent until the hour was up.

Sometimes she managed to make a connection.

Sometimes she didn't.

This kid needed her to. He was down to his last chance. She decided to try again.

'So. Jeremy. Shall we talk about your father?'

Dark eyes flashing. A nerve hit. 'Tell me about your mother,' he said, mimicked in falsetto, squeaky and mocking. 'Tell me about your childhood.' He lifted his chin. 'Whatever, Sigmund-fucking-Freud. You're the expert. You tell me.'

Obvious aggression. Defensive, hurting. At least he was saying something. She kept his gaze, not about to let her eyes drop first when he hadn't even looked at her for the first ten minutes sitting there. Tried to ignore the bead of sweat trickling down the centre of her back and focus instead on him, but the heat was suffocating.

'I'm not an expert. I'm just the one the magistrate appointed to try and keep you out of prison.'

'Juvenile detention,' he said, making it clear he knew she used the word for effect.

'It's the same thing, Jeremy.'

He smirked. 'You think?'

She glanced at her non-existent notes, made a pretence of flicking through the file, inspecting the first bit of paper to hand. 'It says here you were a straight A student back in Hallsworth –'

'Hallysworth. Get it right.'

'Hallysworth. Excellent school results. Liked by teachers. Worked hard.' She tried to meet his eyes, but he looked away, out the window to the heat-suffocated urban landscape beyond. 'So what happened this year?'

'Dunno. My father died. You reckon that might be it?'

Three days before Christmas last year. Stripped off, took a cold shower and hanged himself in the hayshed still dripping wet. Found by his only son, fifteen at the time, eldest child, two younger sisters, ten and six respectively. A mother who couldn't cope, knocked out on pills or booze from before Dad's death. A farm with starving cattle Jeremy had taken his turn at destroying, the last thing he and Dad had done together, shotgun to large bovine temples, cattle too weak to shy away. Dad found wet and swinging barely a week later. Land sold for almost nothing. Mum still unable to get it together, State threatening to take the kids. Instead they were dragged here to live in Gran's tight, three-bedroom brick-veneer in outer suburban Melbourne, all within a couple of months of Dad's funeral.

The file said it all. She'd read it more than once, looking for clues, a way in. It was certainly enough to screw up a teenage kid. It was enough to screw up anyone.

'You like Southtern East High?' she asked. He shrugged, a languid, uncaring movement.

'Is alright. Don't care. Same as anywhere.'

'Same as your school back in Hallysworth?'

A flash of animation in his black-rimmed eyes. If she didn't know better, she'd have read it as amusement. 'Nah. That was a shithole.'

Got better computers here. Science labs and stuff. Didn't have that at the old place. Underfunded. Department of Education neglects the country kids.'

'So this school is better?'

'Didn't say that. Only that the resources are better.'

The file didn't say it all, of course, despite its extensive, clinical detail of dysfunction and tragedy stark on the page. Something was missing from the official record of this hurting, damaged teenage boy who'd apparently watched as three of his classmates drowned. Such as how they'd managed to drown in a suburban high school toilet block. She'd heard of heads flushed down toilets, she'd never heard of anyone dying from it before.

Someone had appended a copy of the inquest report before sending the file over. It arrived complete with lurid images of the three dead boys. Coroner's findings, water in the lungs, drowning. Which didn't explain the photographs of husk-like bodies so dried-out they looked half-way to mummification.

Three dead teenagers sucked dry. One dead father, dripping wet in a drought.

'You've been accused of vandalism at the school,' she said, eyes scanning the pages. 'Of destroying one of the Food Tech kitchens by flooding it. A science lab, same thing.'

'Wasn't me.'

'You've been accused of vandalising bathrooms. Of blocking the plumbing. On one occasion, getting into the mains and turning the water to the school off completely.'

He didn't drop his stare. 'Wasn't me.'

'Before leaving Hallysworth you hadn't been in trouble with police even once.'

Silence. If anything, he looked bored. She supposed he'd heard this before, the litany of his supposed crimes.

'You seem to attract trouble, Jeremy.'

'Did you know the fully grown human body contains on average 40 litres of water?' he said, a sudden announcement that made her shoulders straighten. 'Adult bodies maybe sixty to seventy per-cent water. Children even more.'

He was changing the subject. But at least he was talking. She could go with that.

'I didn't know that.'

'Learnt it in school. In those science labs I'm meant to have destroyed just for the fun of it.' He half smirked, a point scored. 'Actually, I knew it before. Southern East might have better resources, but the Hallysworth curriculum was way more advanced.'

He leant forward and shifted the desk fan an inch to the right. Immediately, the little plastic Christmas tree, with its painted cardboard ornaments and tiny colored-string tinsel, fluttered with the fan's slow turn. Fake presents propped up underneath, matchboxes painted gold, silver, red, green. Only a week until Christmas. She still had shopping to do, presents and food to buy for the extended family onslaught. They came to her place because she had a pool. Annual ritual. Aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews.

Jeremy leant back again. Black hair falling across his face, all snarls and attitude. Still a sixteen year old boy who this time last year had found his Dad's hanged body. The anniversary of it was only a couple of days away. What sort of Christmas must he be expecting?

'How's your Mum?' she asked, on impulse. Would his mother even be able to think of Christmas for the kids? Was Christmas even possible for his family?

'Drunk probably. Why? You stuck on that Freudian-childhood thing again?' he said. 'Why don't you ask what you really want to know?'

'And what would that be, Jeremy?'

'About Davy. His mates. The dead ones. The ones dried out and drowned.'

'Why do you think I want to know about them? I'm here to talk about you.'

'Because that's all anybody wants to know. Either them or Dad. The dead speak loud.' He looked out the window again, to the oppressive blue sky beyond. 'I know cos I hear them.'

It took deliberate effort to keep her expression neutral and her hand steady as she wrote a careful note. This was a kid who'd been straight As in Hallysworth and straight Cs at Southtern East. Literally straight Cs, his last report card sporting a suspicious uniformity. He wasn't stupid. If he could engineer exactly the same C grade in every class he took, he could figure out which buttons to press to get a reaction from authority figures around him. His teachers. The Principal. The police. Her.

Knowing that didn't stop the wash of professional scepticism cross her face.

He rolled his eyes at her. 'Don't worry, lady. I ain't about to go all *I see dead people* on you.'

No, but when telling her he heard them, it was the first time he'd sounded genuine since walking in here. Was he trying to get a reaction out of her? Or was the trauma of the past twelve months evolving into something else again?

'Do you mean their stories have become more important than your own?' she said.

'Jesus, you're good with the psychobabble. I said I hear them. Talking, whispering. Words. Their incessant, unending words.'

'Okay. Well. What words do you hear?'

'Can I have a glass of water?'

It took a moment to realise he was asking for himself, not telling her what he heard the dead supposedly say. She nodded a perfunctory agreement and slipped sweating feet back into shoes beneath the desk before getting her up. Her toes squished in the low, enclosed heels, her blouse damp against her back as she moved. She couldn't help but think of the swimming pool at home. Wonder how much longer she could banter with the boy without getting anywhere.

She asked Sally on reception to fetch the water. Returned to her desk to find Jeremy staring again out of the window. Sally entered, all middle-aged bustle and greying hair, handed the glass to the boy. He murmured a thanks, but sat unmoving until Sally was forced to leave again, quizzical glances unanswered.

When the door clicked firmly shut behind the receptionist, Jeremy lifted the glass. Half way to his lips, he paused. Glancing down and staring into the glass. Hesitating. There was a flash of something across his face. Guilt or despair or pain? Some unbidden memory catching him without warning?

She couldn't shake the thought it looked like fear.

It was stupid to read too much into body language. One of the earliest lessons of her career. Sometimes someone crossing their arms wasn't being defensive, it was just a comfortable way to sit. And sometimes someone who winced and hesitated before drinking a glass of water wasn't afraid, they just had indigestion.

He brought the glass to his lips. Took the slightest of sips. Breathed deeply, paused, considered, then drank more, a real gulp.

Taking the plunge and drinking it all, finishing the glass in several long swallows. The kid must've been desperately thirsty. By the time he brought it down again, there wasn't a drop left in the glass.

She waited until he'd put the empty glass back on the desk, pushing it well into the middle as if afraid it might fall from the edge.

'Better?' she asked, vaguely wishing she'd asked Sally to bring her a glass as well. Her throat was parched, watching him drink like that.

Typically, he shrugged. She let the silence sit before pushing for more.

'You were saying you hear your father. That he speaks to you.'

'I said I hear the whispers of the dead. I didn't say they were Dad.'

'Who are they then?'

'I don't know. But they're thirsty. Always so fucking thirsty,' he said in a dull voice, as if he knew how it would sound. 'Began when the water ran out on the farm. Got worse after we shot the cattle. Whispering about thirst, about other stuff.'

'What other stuff?'

He chewed his lip. The internal battle common to every damaged kid who walked into her office, visible behind his eyes. To take the leap, or not. To open up, or not. To trust.

Or not.

'Bringing the rain.'

She made some scratching marks in her notebook for the sake of it. 'I see.' Used her most clinical tone. Looked up again to realise he was scowling at her and had the sudden sense of being see-through, transparent. As if he'd caught her wearing a mask as ridiculous as his own, only far easier to rip off.

She pushed on.

'Do you believe the voices you hear, Jeremy?'

'I know how it sounds, Doc,' he said. 'I know what you're thinking. Troubled kid hears the dead. I know what it means to you.'

He didn't say the word. *Psychosis*. But she wrote it down anyway.

'The thing is,' he said, after enough pause for her to note it all on her pad, 'you're wrong. They wanted the rain. Well, we all fucking wanted the rain. The farm was going to shit and Dad was freaking out. So I did it. I thought, what the fuck, why not try? Only then....'

He dragged off. She tried to swallow, her throat too dry.

'Only what, Jeremy?'

'Only it went wrong. I only wanted to bring the rain. I didn't realise what it'd mean. What'd happen.'

'What did happen?'

'Dad walked in. It wasn't my fault. He didn't get it, didn't understand. I tried to stop it. I really tried, I -'

He jolted, shut his lips. She said nothing, hoping he'd fill the silence, but he let it stand, as if happy to have them sit without words as the minutes ticked by. A battle of wills, one she almost thought he'd win, before he finally burst out with more.

'It's coming,' he said, in a rush.

'What's coming?'

'The rain. It'll be here in time for Christmas. Any day now. Any minute, maybe.'

His urgency was almost infectious. She drew breath through dry lips, deliberately letting his words wash over her. It was easy to get caught in the paranoia of another's delusions, in their irrationality. You had to keep an emotional distance, a professional stance. She took pause and looked down to her notes, trying to wet her lips with

a tongue near as dry. She wondered if she'd any lip-balm in the bottom of her handbag.

On her notepad, she scribbled *rain making*, circled it, drew a line back to an earlier note, *hears dead father*, and circled that too. Jotted at the side, *anniversary of father's suicide*. Added *Christmas* next to it.

'Many would hope you're right,' she said. 'This drought is threatening country and city alike. Everyone would love to see the rain come.'

'Not this rain. They won't want this rain.'

'Why not?'

'This is rain without clouds. Rain without clouds has gotta come from somewhere else.'

Where? She resisted asking, despite the urge. This was the centre of his delusions, which meant he needed her to buy into it, make it real. He was more coherent than she was used to, they usually rambled more, had less point to their vague assertions of threat. By contrast, Jeremy seemed almost too consistent. Yet the signs were clear. Paranoia, delusions, hearing voices. Traumatic instigation. Classic psychosis. Practically textbook.

He sat with elbows on knees, staring at the little Christmas tree. She should've moved it before his session. This season was not one of joy for Jeremy. Disintegrating families, destroyed farms. For him, Christmas would forever be the season of death and loss. Next to that, the tacky cheer of her little plastic tree seemed inappropriate.

'Tell me about the voices, Jeremy. Where do they come from?'

'The drought brought em, I think. They're all the ones who died thirsty and now they're trapped in the drought.'

'Why are you the only one who hears them?'

'I'm not. I'm the only one who listens.' He sounded matter-of-fact, looking at that tree. 'Know what Davy and his mates were do-

ing in the toilets at school, Doc?’

Changing the subject again. She decided to let him, shaking her head with a ‘no, what?’, then trying yet again to swallow. Her throat felt like sandpaper. Maybe she was coming down with something, a summer cold. Rotten timing, just before Christmas. She made a mental note to go by the chemist on her way home, get some throat lozenges. The last thing she needed was to get sick over Christmas.

‘They were shitheads,’ he said, as she thought of pharmaceuticals. ‘But far as bullies go, least they were modern. Flushing heads in toilets was way too old-school for them.’ He uttered a bleak laugh. ‘They got their ideas from politics. Waterboarding. Only way to go.’

Her face fell. Calculations of which chemist was closest on her route home disintegrated. It wasn’t that she was unfamiliar with the extremities of schoolyard bullying; many of the kids she saw were either victims or perpetrators, each troubled in their own right. The imagination of childhood was always so potent. But this was new.

She tried not to seem shocked. She was a professional. She tried to take it in calmly, clinically.

‘Did they try it on you, Jeremy? Waterboarding?’

‘Started to, yeah.’

She chose her next words with care, as familiar with the fragility of young male egos as she was with tales of schoolyard bullying.

‘There were three of them. Two were footy players, athletes,’ she said. ‘It’s okay if you couldn’t stop them, Jeremy.’

‘I did stop them.’

Her lips cracked as she tried to lick them. ‘What happened in that toilet block?’

He smiled. A reaching expression stretching across his face. They were back to this. Again. *Why don’t you ask what you really want to know?* Maybe he’d manoeuvred her to it, maybe she’d always have

come to this question. To asking it so breathlessly, with such anticipation. It wasn't her job to determine what happened to the dead boys. That was for the police, the Courts, the Coroner. She was here for the one boy who'd walked out still living. The only witness. The only suspect. Correction: potential suspect. It was her job to assess his mental state for the Courts. That wasn't looking good.

Yet he was right. Just like everyone else, what she really wanted to know was what happened to those dead, drowned, dried-out boys.

'They tied my shirt around my face,' he said, now full of detail. 'Held me down as they ripped it off me and tied it over my head. Poured water on it. On my face. I tried to fight them. They laughed. I could hear them laughing.'

'Bullies will do that.'

'Aren't you going to ask why they were bullying me?'

She swallowed back the feeling of sand. 'Okay. Why?'

The corner of his mouth flicked up. 'Bullies pick on the vulnerable. Isn't that what you're meant to say?' he said. 'And then you're meant to tell me that it doesn't get any more vulnerable than a kid who found his father dead at Christmas. Am I right?'

'It's true,' she said. It sounded like a protest. A weak one.

'Well it makes no fucking difference either way. They'd been threatening me for weeks, at me every other day, but no-one ever tried to stop em. Now it's too late.'

'Too late for the dead boys?'

'Too late for this whole fucking city. Nobody else was going to stop those fuckers, so I had to. I had to save myself somehow,' he said, stiff shoulders and clenched jaw. 'Even though I knew. After Dad, I knew what it'd mean. There'd be no stopping it this time. It'd build and build. But fuck it. I had to do it.'

'Jeremy, what did you do?'

'I got help. I did as they wanted. I brought the rain.'

He laughed. She let out fast breath. The door flung open.

She jumped so high it felt like three layers of skin ripped from her legs, left behind on the sweaty leather of the chair. Found herself standing with her hands on her desk, sucking in hot air, adrenalin shaking her from the inside out. It took a moment to grab back control of her limbs. To push herself straight and school her face into something vaguely professional.

In the doorway, Sally frowned at the spectacle.

'Yes, Sally. What is it?'

'You've gone over time. Jeremy's case worker is here to pick him up. She'd like to know how much longer you'll be. Didn't you hear me knocking?'

She glanced at the wall clock. Shit. No wonder Sally looked unimpressed. She'd gone so far into the next session's booking they were practically through to the one after. Sally would've been apologising, rescheduling. Telling everyone this hadn't happened before. And it hadn't. She was always careful of the clock, it was part of the job. Sometimes it was necessary to stretch a session, it was unprofessional to shove someone out the door in the midst of emotional outpouring, but she never let it go by so much and never without deliberate decision.

Her eyes flicked to Jeremy, the dark smirk on his face.

'Thanks, Sally. We'll finish up and be out shortly.'

Sally backed out of the room, clicking the door shut behind her. She waited until the receptionist was gone and the silence resumed. Still standing, still trying to get her thoughts back into some kind of order.

She should say they needed to wrap up, propose another appointment. Suggest, gently, she'd be advising the Court he needed immediate and regular medical attention, appropriate medication, a stay in hospital.

But when she met the challenge in his stare, her carefully planned words evaporated.

'What happened in the toilet block, Jeremy?'

The question was out of her mouth before she could stop it. Her tone hoarse, strained words on a tacky tongue.

'Okay, Doc,' he said. 'Davy and his mates, they reckoned I was crazy. Scared-of-water crazy. But they never checked where the water they were pouring on me was coming from.' He paused, as if to let her wonder the same thing. 'Stupid bastards. I'd fucked up the taps in there already, busted the pipes. There was no water to those bathrooms.'

'That's vandalism –'

'That's survival. They'd been threatening to do it to me for weeks. Nobody was going to help me.'

He stood. A slow unravelling of limbs on the other side of her desk until he met her eye to eye. He was tall, a lanky sixteen, thin and towering. He put his hands on the edge of her desk, shoving his face close to hers. She tried not to back off, but couldn't help the flinch. The automatic step away. Her calves hit the chair behind her. It skidded backwards.

'Human body, a good forty litres there, Doc. Just ripe for the harvest,' he said, face too close, angry eyes all she could see. 'So I made it rain. Just like they wanted. I made it rain and now it can't be stopped.'

'Jeremy...'

'The dead, they're thirsty. They need it to rain so bad.'

'Jeremy!'

He slammed both his hands on her desk. A sudden crash, she cried through her dried-out throat. His face was a distortion of pain and distress. The kid nobody would help. Not his parents, not his school, not the authorities. Not her.

'I had to do it. They'd have fucking drowned me. So I had to and now it's too late,' he said. 'My Christmas present to this fucked up, drought-ridden, shitty city I never wanted to be in. So you can all stop complaining about your water restrictions and your brown lawns and not being able to fill your fucking swimming pools.'

She clutched the edge of her desk. Feeling for the alert button wired just below the lip, a signal to reception for assistance. An insurance requirement; at least half her patients were referred from the courts. She'd never used it before. She prided herself on being able to calm the most agitated, handle the most distressed.

She pressed now over and over again.

'It's coming in time for Christmas, Doc,' he said as she hit the alert. 'This year everybody's Christmas is going to be as fucked as mine.'

The door swung open. Sally rushed through, no disapproval now, all concern. Behind her another woman, young, flame-haired, quirky green summer suit. The social worker. The minute they entered, Jeremy pulled back. Glanced over his shoulder to see the women coming in, snorted derision and stepped away.

Still behind her desk, her knees buckled. She sank, shaking, to her chair.

'Sally. Yes. Hello. We're done here,' she said, voice as shaky as her legs. 'We're done.'

The social worker surveyed the scene with narrowed eyes before turning to the teenager. He was calm now, mild expression on his

face. No slouch. He gave the social worker a friendly smile.

'I hope you didn't screw yourself up here, Jeremy,' the woman said. 'This is your last chance.'

Jeremy shrugged. He looked happy enough. There was a fluidity to the movement of his gangly teenage limbs. The woman turned her back on him, mouth a tight line.

'Is all okay, Doctor?'

'Yes. It's okay.'

'Do you need more time? I can stay if you need to extend the session further.'

But she shook her head. She needed no more. 'Thank you. I've enough.' She pulled herself together. 'Thank you. I'll have my assessment to the courts by Monday. You'd like a copy yourself? For the file..?'

The social worker nodded. Curiosity in the woman's eyes. No doubt she was used to dealing with Jeremy and his sullen scowls. Not that he was scowling now or even looking sullen. He was standing with hands in the pockets of his jacket, head up. Gone was the alienated hunch, the cynical sneer at the world. He'd even pushed the hair out of his face, tucked behind his ears. It made a difference. His eyes were green, his face expressive, open. Friendly, even.

He looked like the boy in the photograph. The one from eighteen months ago, back in the country, in happier times.

'I can tell you what's in the report, Geraldine,' Jeremy said and even his voice was different. No growl, no cynicism. No attitude. He sounded relaxed.

Geraldine only half turned. 'Jeremy, let's just go.'

'No, really. It's not hard,' he said. 'Damaged teenage boy, classic dysfunctional background. Mother undiagnosed alcoholic. Father clinically depressed, eventual suicide.'

His stance was easy as he met their eyes without any challenge in his own. Just a smile to assure them that he was right on this.

'Shows signs of guilt, self-blame over father's suicide,' he said. He looked straight at her, safe behind her desk. 'Victim of bullying following disruptive move away from familiar home environment. Reports hearing voices. Shows signs of paranoia, delusion. Further assessment needed to reach firm diagnosis. Schizophrenia, bipolar one or PTSD all possible. Recommend immediate psychiatric counselling, anti-psychotic medication and hospitalisation.'

He let a beat of silence pass. Cocked his head. 'Ain't that right, Doc?'

It clicked. He'd been playing her. This whole time. Like the straight Cs so obviously engineered at school, it was an act. The troubled teenager act. Every scowl, every jaded tone, every sarcastic comment. Even the outfit, the black boots too heavy for the weather, recently dyed hair. All classic adolescent alienation, the vulnerability, the aggression. All carefully chosen.

A construct. Designed to lead her to this precise point.

What choice did she have but to go along? She could only report what she'd seen and heard. What'd happened in this room, up to and including why she'd hit the alert.

'Yes, Jeremy,' she said, because she had to say something. 'That's about right.'

Sally took the lead to show the social worker out of the room. Jeremy followed. Only looking back once, with a friendly, open smile that seemed natural to his face, and as he paused in the doorway he gave her a farewell wave.

'Merry Christmas, Doc.'

She didn't return the expression.

When they were gone and she was alone, sticky in the oppressive heat and silence, she closed her notebook. Pushing it and the boy's file to the middle of her desk. Had the social worker, Geraldine, figured him out? Had the school? The Magistrate? She was willing to bet if Jeremy hadn't outed himself there at the end, she wouldn't have clued to what he was really doing, either.

It wasn't that he'd tricked her that bothered her. It was why.

Why would a kid so dangerously smart choose to manipulate a deliberate diagnosis of trauma-induced psychosis?

The reason was as veiled as what'd really gone on in that toilet block. Except now he'd have an official expert assessment positioning him as *victim*, rather than *perpetrator*. Three dead and the only witness officially deemed unreliable, due to reasons of professionally diagnosed insanity.

After a while of sitting in the silence and heat, she stood, moving on automatic. She'd cancel her appointments for the rest of the afternoon. The air conditioning mechanic couldn't come until the morning and it was too stifling in the office now to see anyone else. Too hard to breathe in here, the heat filling all available space. Instead she'd push Jeremy out of her mind by doing something fun, something Christmas. Even presents shopping was enough. She'd not write the assessment tonight, she'd leave it a day or two. Until she'd had a chance to process everything. Until she could get the kid and his Christmas out of her head.

She looked at the little plastic tree. Couldn't help but think of Jeremy as she did.

The window was still open. She walked over to shut it, only to find herself staring at the bleached street beyond. The sun a power overhead, washing out the landscape, draining everything of color

and energy. Forecasts said it was to hit forty degrees today. She guessed it higher. Christmas day itself was forecast to be forty-three.

She looked at the sky. Uniform blue. Not a cloud in it. Not a hope. It made her shudder.

She shut the window and grabbed her handbag, her keys, her laptop in its case. Gathering her things, little sounds making empty echoes across the office. Slipping off the uncomfortable, sweaty heels and replacing them with light canvas walking shoes fished out of her bottom drawer. Everything about her felt damp, sweaty. Only her throat felt dry, her mouth, her tongue. No saliva, no moisture. She was so thirsty.

She tried not to think of tales of the thirsty dead and reached instead for the glass of water on her desk. Beside the little Christmas tree, beside the boy's file. She even got so far as to raise it to her mouth.

She stopped.

She could almost feel the cool, clear liquid at her lips.

When she put it back down again with a slow-moving hand, she placed it on top of the file. Jeremy's file. Jeremy's glass. The same one she'd seen him drink until it was empty. She'd seen him swallow every last drop.

She heard her own breath a wheeze in her dried throat. So hard to breathe, hard to stretch her lips, her throat and mouth dried out, her stomach twisting with the thirst of it.

Then behind her, a soft, fat splat. Another. More. It became a kind of patter. She turned to stare at the window.

Outside, it was beginning to rain.