

**THE
GLASS
HOUSE**
BROOKE DUNNELL



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– ONE –

Rowan had wanted the two of them to tell Evie together. If only one parent was there, he argued, she might get the wrong impression. Both of them being present would demonstrate a united front: we will be separate but also connected. Together, although apart.

Julia thought that was dramatic. ‘It’s only for a few weeks.’ She was clicking around the internet for her ticket, unable to decide whether it was worth the extra cost to catch a flight leaving at midday rather than the crack of dawn. ‘If you make it into a big deal, she’ll get suspicious it’s something more.’

‘If I’m there, I can calm her fear.’

‘If you’re there, you’ll *create* her fear.’

They gazed at one another, a *détente*. Rowan cleared his throat. ‘It isn’t something more, is it?’

Julia sighed and selected the early flight. ‘No,’ she told the laptop. ‘I don’t think so.’

‘And you’ll tell Evie that?’

‘I don’t lie,’ she reminded her husband.

Which was not strictly an answer to his question, but at least it was honest.

Evie was Rowan’s daughter, Julia’s stepdaughter, but to the extent she could know what it was like to have a child of her own, it felt like the girl was hers. They’d met when Julia was twenty-five and Evie three; she felt they’d grown up together. If only one thing would bring Julia back from her trip, it was the greatest teenager in the world.

On the afternoon Julia chose to tell her, the two of them walked to the Botanic Gardens for an iced chocolate by the lake. Evie wore her school blazer and hat and Julia’s heart clenched to see the happy girl sucking on her spoon, brackets of dark sauce collecting in the corners of her mouth. Their drinks were almost finished by the time she brought herself to say, ‘So there’s something we have to chat about, okay?’

Evie’s cheeks flushed. She removed the spoon and lay it on the table. ‘Oh, God.’

‘What?’ The girl’s anxiety transferred instantly. Julia’s heart pounded. ‘What is it?’

‘You’re asking me?’ Evie objected. ‘You’re the one dropping the bomb. *We have to talk*. That’s how you cardiac arrest a person.’

‘I didn’t mean to frighten you,’ Julia said. On the lake, one duck chased another, climbing on its back and pushing it below the surface. The aggression was unsettling. ‘It’s not as serious as that, I promise.’

Evie removed her hat and shook it. The hair below was

perfect even after being squashed under straw all afternoon, the skin of her forehead creamy and clear. Weren't fourteen-year-olds supposed to be pink and yellow with pimples, hunched in permanent angst? Evie replaced the hat. 'Well, what is it?'

'I have to go to Perth for a little while.'

'Oh.' Evie's shoulders relaxed. 'Is it Grandpa Don?'

Julia nodded. Her father was a ninety-two-year-old widower whose children now lived in the Eastern States, a four- or five-hour flight if something were to go wrong. Don remained in the family home, a late seventies build full of hazards: a step-down lounge and a step-up dining room, cabinets and coffee tables with thin glass panels, tiles with the unforgiving texture of cliff rocks. Since his wife's death, Don had accepted minor assistance in the form of grocery delivery and a cleaning service, but it was getting beyond him now. Julia and her brother had agreed.

'Is he sick?' Evie asked.

'Just old. He can't take care of himself anymore.'

Evie nodded, but she didn't know. Her mother Samara's parents had died when she was young, and Rowan's were in their mid-sixties, in robust good health, living their sea change down on Phillip Island. Julia's blood pressure and resting heart rate would be more worrisome than her mother-in-law's.

'How long will you be gone?' Evie asked.

'I don't know yet. A couple of weeks. Not too long.'

'Will you bring Grandpa Don back to stay here?'

Julia was startled. 'Why would I do that?'

'Because he doesn't have anyone.'

Julia looked back at the lake. Though there were dozens of ducks, all more or less identical, she felt she recognised the vicious one gliding around the water, its bill proudly erect. The victim duck was nowhere to be seen.

‘He wouldn’t want to move here,’ she told her stepdaughter. ‘He’s very set in his ways.’

Nodding sombrely, Evie used the metal straw to vacuum up the rest of her drink. Julia’s own flat white was going cold, so she finished the last two-thirds of it in a few quick swallows, displaying yet again that she was not a true Melburnian.

The temperature had dropped while they were in the park, and they bent forward into the chill breeze for their walk back, the light disappearing around them. Evie reached for her hand as they crossed the road and Julia’s chest warmed. But Don needed her more than her stepdaughter did. Evie was young, but she could protect herself and had a father and mother, both ready to defend her to the death. All Don had was Julia and Paul, and Paul couldn’t get much time off work.

They weaved south-east towards the flat on Fawkner Street, Evie still happy to hold hands even though she was a teenager and they were safe on the footpath. They swung arms, quiet in the darkening afternoon, and Julia told herself it would all be okay. She’d go and sort her father out, and then she’d come back and things would return to normal.

But Evie was sharp, alert to the subtlest of changes. ‘And you and Dad are okay?’ she asked as Julia tapped her fob to the panel by the gate. Rowan’s bike was chained to the nearby rack; he’d be upstairs, watching out the window as they came up the street.

Julia pushed open the door, their conversation paused by the buzzer. ‘Hey,’ she said when it went quiet again, catching her stepdaughter’s arm before she could go ahead to the stairwell. ‘You don’t have to worry about that.’

Evie nodded, her cheeks pink, breath warm and chocolatey. Julia folded her into a hug and the girl accepted readily, their bodies swishing back and forth like a windscreen wiper. When they touched, it was sweet but there always had to be movement, slightly exaggerated, in the way of little kids: swinging hands, rocking hugs. Evie could be still and unselfconscious only with her mother.

Julia released her stepdaughter and watched her leap up the stairs three at a time, light and bounding until she rounded the corner and disappeared.

Though Julia never felt completely at ease around Evie’s mother, their relationship was a good one: civil, verging on friendly. They had little in common, but there were always the topics of Rowan and Evie to fall back on: his minor flaws, her major accomplishments. Samara was also happy to talk about herself, and Julia to listen. Like the older sister she’d never had, Samara was the one in charge: of Evie, of Rowan, still, and certainly of Julia. The idea of not having Samara in her life felt reckless to Julia, like leaving one job without another lined up. She would need Samara to write her a good reference.

The two women waited in the living room while Rowan helped Evie pack for the week at her mother’s. Samara sat in the very centre of the sofa as if draped in massive skirts that

required accommodation, her chin lifted slightly to show off the slim line of her throat. Julia placed a glass of water on the coffee table and took a chair opposite, feeling plain in her T-shirt and leggings. ‘They won’t be long, I’m sure.’

Samara sipped her water, then sat back. ‘So. Back to Perth for a while.’

Julia nodded, unsurprised that she already knew. Samara, of course, knew everything.

‘How long has it been?’

She counted back to the end of 2017. ‘A year – no, almost a year and a half.’ The realisation was guilt-inducing. ‘Too long.’

‘Don’t beat yourself up,’ Samara instructed. ‘You’re not your father’s keeper.’

Julia felt some reprieve. ‘Still. He’s old. Someone needs to look after him.’

Samara nodded, unconvinced. She rearranged the lavallière at her throat so that the tails settled in a more flattering way over her breasts. ‘And some space to yourself might be good,’ she commented, not meeting Julia’s eye.

Julia was flustered. How much had Rowan told her? It was one of the small battles of their marriage, to get him to keep things private from his ex-wife. The door they kept open for Evie’s sake was too slowly shut for Julia’s comfort. Rowan found the habit impossible to break; he and Samara had grown up together, they were friends before they were lovers, and because of their daughter they were bonded forever. It was Samara’s impeccable discretion that prevented Julia from being continually embarrassed.

‘This place is so small,’ Samara groaned when Julia didn’t reply. ‘Is Ro ever going to move out?’

Grateful for the neat sidestep, Julia smiled weakly. ‘Maybe in a box.’

‘I hope it feels cavernous for him without you around,’ Samara said. ‘Then he’ll realise what he’s missing.’

Her tone was distant, the verbal equivalent of shuffling papers at a desk, but with Samara it was the words that mattered, not the delivery. Julia was touched.

Evie appeared in the doorway with thumbs hooked into the straps of her backpack, Rowan behind her. ‘Hi, Mum.’

Samara stood and opened her arms. They hugged side-on, cheekbones touching. Evie had so many of her mother’s features: the heart-shaped face and thick eyelashes, the elegant ears, fingers, ankles. Now when she stood up straight, she was an inch taller than Samara and only two inches shorter than Rowan, slender and long-limbed like both of them, with the shine of health in her hair and nails. When her stepdaughter was little, Julia had longed for some stranger to remark on how alike they looked, wanting not only the compliment but to observe Evie’s reaction. Probably she would have laughed, though not meanly. No one would actually mistake the two of them for blood relatives.

Mother and daughter stood with their arms wrapped around each other’s waists. ‘How do you feel about Julia’s news?’ Samara asked.

Evie shrugged. ‘I mean, it’s got to be done.’

‘But you’re allowed to have feelings.’

Samara was a mediator in divorce settlements for the

painfully wealthy. She wore five-hundred-dollar dresses and encouraged former spouses to let it out with love. ‘Only respect can live in this room,’ she lectured, according to Evie. Sometimes crisis meetings were called during school holidays and the teenager had to sit in her mother’s office, listening through the door. ‘Respect and radical honesty. Let’s break this thing clean.’ By the end of the process, some of the couples wanted to get back together, which meant another fat fee for Samara when things went down the toilet again.

‘I have feelings,’ Evie countered. ‘They’re just not the most important thing right now.’

The three adults stared at one another, unsure how they’d created such a perfect, empathetic being.

Julia was careful never to initiate physical contact with her stepdaughter in front of Samara, so she was grateful when Evie stopped to hug her as they left. She tucked her head to fit under Evie’s chin and held her tightly. ‘I’ll see you before I go, okay? This isn’t goodbye.’

‘I know,’ Evie said, releasing her with a soft smile. ‘You worry too much, Jules.’

Watching Samara and Evie descend the stairs, Julia had the urge to call her stepdaughter back, to beg her to come on the trip to Perth. She imagined the cheer and efficiency with which Evie would greet the task. *Come on, Grandpa Don*, she’d say, brushing the old man’s shoulder with a benevolent hand. *It’s got to be done*. Even he couldn’t argue with that.

The hours after Evie went to Samara’s stretched through the flat. It was the only time the space ever felt too big. Julia slipped out to the balcony, but the night had fallen silent. Evie’s

departure left a vacuum so big the whole suburb suffered.

She turned and looked back at Rowan in the kitchenette, cobbling together a stir-fry for two. His shoulders drooped and his hair was flattened, as if a great weight was sucking him down. As he straightened from his search through the vegetable drawer, their eyes met. There was an empty second in which his expression didn't change, like his glance had fallen on a stranger, before his lips pulled into a pained smile. He pointed down at the chopping board and mouthed, *Food?*

Julia sighed very softly, so it was almost indistinguishable from an exhalation, then nodded. The sliding door squealed on its runner as she went back inside the flat.

For the last few weeks, they'd been sleeping separately when they were alone. There was an inflatable mattress that Rowan would set up on Evie's bedroom floor the night she went to her mother's, folding it back into the hall cupboard at the end of the week. When Evie was with them Rowan acted like nothing had changed, slipping his arms around Julia in their bed like he always did. The routine had been established wordlessly and now Julia felt like the time for talking about it had passed. In a few days she'd be gone, and he wouldn't have to leave their bed to get space for himself.

Rowan carried the mattress to Evie's room and Julia followed, watching as he unrolled it and plugged the cord into the wall. The fan was loud. The thing lurched from side to side as it filled with air, the top layer lifting and dimpling to resemble a real bed. Rowan excused himself, stepping past her to get the spare sheets and doona, switching off the power

with practised efficiency. In a few minutes the bed was made. He sat on the end and began removing his shoes.

‘Ro,’ she said from the doorway.

‘Hmmm?’

When she began speaking, she’d meant to ask why he wanted to sleep in here, separate from her, but what came out of her mouth was, ‘I don’t think we should talk while I’m away.’

He looked up with alarm. She was relieved she could still evoke that reaction. ‘What? Why?’

‘So we have a chance to think.’

‘Think about what?’

Julia stared. As if he didn’t know.

‘I don’t think *less* communication is a solution.’ His voice was unsteady as he shoved at the heel of his sneaker.

‘It’s not meant to be a solution.’

‘What is it, then?’ He kicked the shoe off and it hit the wall, though not hard. ‘A punishment?’

‘A bit of insight, maybe.’ She took a breath. ‘Into what it might be like to be apart.’

‘We *will* be apart.’

‘You know what I mean.’ She scrubbed at her forehead with the heel of her hand. ‘Apart for good.’

Barefoot, Rowan rose and stepped towards her. She gazed up at him. He was a handsome man. He was her husband. She gripped the doorframe.

‘I don’t want to be apart from you,’ he said. ‘Not even for a few weeks.’

When she first suggested going back to Perth to help

Don, Rowan had accepted it without argument, though also without enthusiasm. Julia had tried to see the situation as a blessing in disguise, a chance to pull some things together, and she'd assumed he was thinking the same. That was part of her problem: believing she knew what was going on in her husband's mind. Believing that because she felt something, he did too.

'I'm not saying it'll be forever,' she told him. 'I think it will help. Because if we see how it sucks to be apart—'

'I know it's going to suck,' he argued, reaching for the hip that wasn't pressed into the wall and pulling it towards him. 'You don't need to give me the silent treatment to make that clear.'

'It's not the silent treatment.'

'It seems juvenile. *I'm not talking to you!*' His eyes widened as his pitch rose. It was the voice he used to impersonate the nastier girls at Evie's school. '*You can't be my friend anymore!*'

Julia had a flash of memory, disappearing just as she recognised it, like a thought that leads into a dream. She shook her head. 'It's not that.'

He was standing right up against her now, hand moving to the small of her back to pull her towards him. She breathed in: cotton, fading aftershave, light sweat. He was lean and athletic, a head taller than her, stubble darkening his chin in the late hour. 'I hate all of this,' he murmured. 'It's fucked.'

She put her forehead against his chest, not sure whether to slide her hand below the waistband of his shorts, or just sit on the carpet and cry.