

THE BURROW extract

LUCIE

HE looked different from the photos. When she looked at him from the side, he didn't even really look like a rabbit, more like some hurried craft project—a couple of tan-coloured pompoms with two oversized black beads for eyes. Where were his whiskers and his nose? He seemed unfinished, like Ruby when she'd first come home—fleshy and lumpy and unformed. But that hadn't stopped the adults from saying how much she looked like Great Auntie So-and-So and how she had inherited the Lee mouth. Lucie didn't get it. She thought Ruby—in all her doughy formlessness—somehow resembled everybody and nobody at all.

When he had arrived with the rabbit, Lucie's dad had placed the cardboard box on its side on the small patch of grass in their backyard. Lucie had flopped down, belly first, with her head propped up on her hands.

'Open it, Dad!'

The lid had come away to reveal a huddled ball of blond fur in a tangle of yellow hay. Lucie felt her mother crouch beside her and rest a cool hand on her shoulder.

'Don't rush him.'

They waited, barely breathing, until he ventured out of his cardboard cave. Lucie watched with silent delight as he took hesitant strides across the grass. Until then, she hadn't known a bunny's nose was constantly twitching—as relentless and tireless as a pulse.

'Rabbits are prey animals,' her mum said as they watched him. 'They're not like cats and dogs.'

As Lucie observed her unnamed pet, she imagined an owl nosediving from a nearby tree and whisking the bunny away in its leathery talons. She shook her head to rid herself of the image. Twitching limbs. Cloudy eyes. Matted, metallic-smelling fur.

The family had decided that, during the day, when they were home, the rabbit would be free to roam the fenced backyard, but at night, when cats were prowling and birds of prey were hunting, he would be safer inside the hutch. It was a two-storey structure, with an upstairs bedroom and a play area on the ground floor. After a couple of arguments, the family had agreed on a location: in the left corner of the backyard, beside the water tank and in front of the shed. For weeks, Lucie had imagined a mini lop bounding through the chipboard arches and scaling the timber ramp. But that first evening, much to her disappointment, the rabbit had refused to enter his new home. Instead, he'd spent the night in the vandalised cardboard box, which had been placed on the floor of Lucie's room.

The rabbit was always watching, always listening. He was completely in tune with his environment. These were all the things that Lucie's softly spoken psychologist had told her to do in order to relax. Only the rabbit didn't look calm. Not at all. Perhaps, Lucie contemplated, relaxation was just for predators. She had a flashback to a David Attenborough documentary she'd watched with her dad during the school holidays. She remembered the way the lions had slept, with their legs long and their bellies exposed, and their bulging neck veins on glorious show.

The rabbit didn't like being touched. When she reached out to pat his back, he pulled his body flat against the grass like a cat to avoid her fingers, and when she tried to pick him up, he boxed her with his paws and scratched her with his claws, although they'd been trimmed to uselessness by the breeder. After a few days, he would permit some brief strokes of his head and nose, but even then it was a reluctant surrender—a flinch followed by a slow melting of muscles, a hesitant closing of eyes.

At first, Lucie hated him for his hostility. Raw with rejection, she wished she'd nagged her parents for a puppy like every other ten-year-old she knew. With a pang, she remembered the way her Grade Two teacher's collie had waited outside 7-Eleven with his eyes wide and his ears pointy with anticipation.

But resentment did not come naturally to Lucie. After she had sulked and ignored the bunny—to no avail, of course—a steeliness evolved somewhere deep inside her. She would make this grumpy creature love her. If it killed her.