



CHAPTER ONE

February, 2006

GEOFF SHOVES the ladder—*thunk*—against the house, and kicks hard at the bottom rung to dig its heels more solidly into the soil of the garden bed. Then he picks up the plastic shopping bag of newspaper-wrapped tiles and begins to climb, the bag heavy in the crook of his elbow as he moves.

He bought the tiles from Macquarie Hardware this morning. He stood in the queue in the cavernous building, as he does most Saturdays, holding the one or two things he needs for the weekend's domestic repairs—a packet of

wall plugs, or a couple of star pickets. This morning after he bought the tiles he walked out into the bright glare of the car park. He put the bag of tiles into the boot of the Falcon and then walked back across the car park to the half-case supermarket, pulling from his pocket the shopping list in Margaret's looped blue handwriting. Although it was early, already the car park was busy with slow cars, with shopping trolleys tinging over the bitumen. Rundle was coming slowly alive for its Saturday.

He emerged from the gloomy little arcade carrying Margaret's extra-large bag of flour against his chest. He shifted the bag to his hip as he bent to unlock the boot again—and as he did a sudden, shocked recognition sprang up at him: the bag was the exact soft weight of a sleeping baby. He was surprised by the physicality of this memory, its strength. He hasn't held a baby in more than thirty years.

Now, as he climbs the ladder, he is puzzled in a pleasing way again at the mysterious and intricate workings of the human brain. He pictures it, a mass of tiny, coloured electrical wires the thickness of hairs. As he climbs, the plastic bag slides forward, its handles cutting into the skin of his forearm; he shrugs his shoulder to shift it down his arm. Near the top of the ladder he steadies himself, pressing his hips forward against the last several rungs, and then lifts the bag carefully into the guttering, making sure the tiles cannot slide away.

Geoff knows the brain doesn't look like electrical wiring, but all the same he likes the image: an old, corroded

thread of wire, deep in the tangle, suddenly sending out a hot white spark of memory.

He climbs the last few rungs, hunching, tilting himself forward, and crawls up onto the roof. He is too aware of his ageing body, of the anticipatory decisions he must always make now about its movement. He steadies himself for a moment, kneeling there on all fours on the sloping tiled surface. He glances about at the bright roofs of his neighbours, the fresco of red and orange tiles, of telephone wires and television aerials and sky. A mynah bird perches on the Collins' aerial, frowning out of its dark yellow-rimmed eye for a moment before flying off. The aerial quivers, an echo of flight.

Geoff crawls a little further onto the roof and then, when it is safe to do so, turns to sit on the slanting tiles, his bony knees apart, hands dangling between them. From here he can see off into the distance outside town, the flat plains, the painted striations of river and hill and horizon. He draws his gaze closer then, to the furze of trees lining the river, nearer again, to the bright metallic sheet of the fire station roof over on Fitzroy Street, then the few houses beyond his, then to the Collins' next door, and his own backyard. From here the view of his yard is spacious, surprising, making the place where he has lived for more than thirty-five years suddenly unfamiliar. He stares down over his garage roof, his barbecue, his pergola. His intimacy with it is in this instant scrubbed away, and he is struck by a light, strange feeling that there might yet be things to discover down there, in his yard, in his life.

Just nearby, in the guttering, he catches sight of a mottled, ancient tennis ball. Again there is the little *zzzt* of memory, to do with the children, to do with the weight of a baby in his arms all those years ago.

When he falls a moment later, what he sees is the colourless flap of a bird's wing and a rushing, tilted sky.

MARGARET STANDS on her tiptoes, peering into the back of the pantry, reaching out her hand to a green-lidded bottle of paprika among others in the blue plastic ice-cream container, when she hears the noise. Something sudden and heavy on the roof above her head. She stands there in her kitchen looking up to the ceiling with a cylindrical little spice bottle held aloft in her fist. She stares upward, listening for more sound.

CATHY FISHES the ringing mobile telephone from her shoulder bag, pushing the groceries along the supermarket's stalled conveyor belt with her free hand. She looks at the screen and puts it to her ear. 'Hi, Mum,' she says into the phone.

'Oh, Cathy,' says her mother's voice, in a surprised way. It is not her usual message-delivering telephone voice, but high, and bewildered.

The checkout girl presses the conveyor button and the last of the groceries jolt, then slide forward. The girl drops a box of tissues and a tube of toothpaste into a pale green bag, unhooks it to sling it alongside the others, and waits. Cathy is hungry. She casts a look along the queue

behind her, wondering if it is too late to run back for bananas. But there are people waiting; a man behind is glaring at her.

'Did you ring me accidentally,' says Cathy to her mother, frowning, tucking the phone between her neck and ear as she opens her wallet and passes a fifty-dollar note to the girl.

Her mother's voice, its disbelief: 'Dad's fallen down.'

HE LIES in the new hospital ward, the dark purple mess of his face obscene in the whiteness of the bed. All around him is white. Stainless steel and white, slivers of blue-and-white, mint-green-and-white. Nurses stride around in the quiet, twirling keys on lanyards, or holding things in their gloved hands. Their rubber-soled shoes on the new linoleum, *squidge, squidge*.

Tony Warren, the wardsman, kneels to check that the brakes on the bed's rubber wheels are properly engaged. Then he straightens and puts his hands into the pockets of his blue overalls. He steps to the head of the bed to look at the man's slack, unconscious face. He moves his own head this way and that, to better view the particular gruesome flowerings of colour and swelling. The ventilator tube coils out from the old man's mouth, then up over the ear and his bald, bandaged head, on the opposite side to the mashed temple. Hands still in his pockets, the wardsman leans in to inspect the dark, pulpy edge of the large wound, which is visible despite the dressing and the sticking plaster holding the ventilator tube in place.

As he inspects the edges of the wound the wardsman winces, showing his teeth and inhaling a quick, quiet breath.

Tony Warren is unnoticed as he stands there by the bed, the large ward empty but for a couple of murmuring nurses and two other unconscious patients at the end.

There are no visitors, yet. They will soon gather, as they always do, rushing into the ward with their eyes wide, glancing around them at their shocking new world. But for now the patient is untended, a mechanically breathing corpse.

The wardsman looks up to read the card taped to the wall above the bed, the name in black texta capitals: GEOFFREY CONNOLLY. The wardsman stops, his gaze fixed on the card. Then he leans in again, removing his hands from his pockets and resting his forearms on the bars of the bed, staring once again for several long seconds at Geoff's damaged, horrible face.

Eventually he sticks his hands back into his blue overalls pockets, pivots around and without looking up, walks back along the wide lane between the beds. At the door he stops and whacks the oversized red button on a panel on the wall, and the wide laminate door swings slowly open with a hydraulic sound.

He leaves the ward, and the door closes, *pssshh*, behind him.