

Stormbringer

Chris Rowley

CYCLONE ZOE HAD devastated the country town of Balla. A week later and there were still chunks of timber, once belonging to weatherboard houses, rotting on the highway. The town's welcoming sign dangled like a broken limb on a single post. Balla was considered the unluckiest place in Australia. Three floods, four cyclones and eighteen dangerous lightning strikes within two frightening years.

Lincoln clutched the leather steering wheel tightly as he turned onto the near deserted main street. The supermarket was still open, though the front window had been replaced by damp cardboard. One of the two banks remained, along with the petrol station that marked the beginning of Main Street. But almost everything else, from the butchers to the hairdresser's, was sealed by tin roller doors. He pulled into an empty spot—though he could've parked in four and it wouldn't have mattered.

Entire shelves had been cleared. There was no sign of bread or milk, or any canned goods. The only person in the store was an old man, slouched on a stool behind the counter. He was reading a newspaper from the week before. Lincoln grabbed a chocolate bar; the last one that had peppermint inside—his wife's favourite. Layers of thin yellow stickers had been placed on the wrapper. The top read: *\$4.90*.

At the counter was a clear plastic container with grimy masking tape slapped on the front: *Relief donations for Balla!* It was in the same handwriting. The case was empty.

Lincoln dropped the change received for the ten dollars he had paid into the container. The coin spun and rattled. "I was looking for this

address.” He passed a scrunched Post-it note to the cashier. “There’s no road signs.”

“Most were destroyed during the flood, a few months back. They never got around to fixing them. Wouldn’t have mattered. They would have been destroyed during the flood two weeks ago.” He handed the note back and gave Lincoln the vital directions to his destination.

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On the street he assumed was the one he was heading too, there was only one house that looked even remotely like it was under repair. It was covered in homemade scaffolding that looked as though a gust of wind would blow everything away.

Here, the devastation had peaked. Opposite where Lincoln had parked was merely vacant land with the stumps of a house’s foundation—the only indication of life once being present there. Both neighbours’ homes had been obliterated. The roof of one was completely missing and the other had collapsed into rubble.

Lincoln knocked on the oak door. There was rummaging behind, followed by the metallic ping of a lock being turned, then another and another. The door creaked open.

“Dr Walsh?” The voice matched the woman he had spoken to on the phone. It was hard to mistake her wailing hisses.

She pushed the door wide open and held out her frail, wrinkled hand. “Patricia. Nice to meet you.” Her skin was ghost white. Her bones were clearly visible at her shoulders and neck. Behind, her husband Jacob stood proudly with his arms folded. But his stance was a lie; he too was pale and his hair was thin at the front—a recent addition. Their clothes hung far too loose on their bodies.

Lincoln held his palm out. “Have my fee waiting.”

They guided him into the living room. Each step he took on the carpet was accompanied by a wet mush. A puddle formed around his feet only to be reabsorbed into the fabric once the weight had been lifted.

“Sorry about the mess,” Patricia said. The paint from every wall was a sickly yellow and most was peeling. “Every time we clean, we’re hit again.”

Lincoln took a seat on the couch. Water seeped through his jeans and drenched his arse.

Footsteps echoed in the house. The couple's teenage daughter peeked from behind the kitchen wall before she stepped into the living room. Her hair had been died pitch black; though in the daylight traces of blue shined. She wore a checkered skirt, with a slight tear at her thigh, and a thick hoodie. Her mother reached out, but she reeled back as though the woman were diseased.

The girl took a seat on the wicker chair opposite Lincoln. "Are you another doctor?" She looked at her shoes. There was a scratch on top. The laces were undone.

"Not quite," Lincoln responded, before he turned towards her parents. "Please, give us a minute."

They left the room, him wrapping an arm around his wife's fragile frame. Still, the girl remained frozen, staring at her feet as though there was some secret Lincoln could not grasp.

"How old are you, Sarah?"

"Fourteen." Her eyes darted up. "Why aren't you taking notes?"

"Don't need to."

She sat upright. "The others who came to study me lied. They acted like my friend." She snickered. "I have no friends. I'm a freak."

"What makes you say such a thing?"

"That's what my father calls me."

"I don't think you are a freak." Lincoln shifted to the edge of the couch. The water in the drenched cushion seeped through his pants and trickled down his leg. "I didn't believe your mother when she called me. But, she begged me to meet you."

"You're here to investigate the disasters around the town."

Lincoln nodded. "I noticed you didn't say *natural* disasters."

"They're not *natural*." She brushed her long fringe from her face. She was fairly pretty, although the purple eye shadow under her blue eyes didn't match her skin and the red nose piercing stood out like a beacon.

"I brought the storms." Her lips quivered.

Her mother had made the same claim. Lincoln had almost burst into laughter. He waited for the radio hosts' chuckling to follow, but it never came. Then, she offered him a lot of money just to come and meet her. More still should he prove her claim, and do as she asked.

"Before the first . . . *disaster*," Sarah continued, "I was at school. The other girls had stolen my bag. They tipped all my things into the bin.

The teachers just ignored it. So, I ran away.” She looked over her shoulder, as though she were searching for someone. “I was hiding at my locker. I was so angry. I clenched my fists so tight my fingernails drew blood. And then I heard screaming.”

“From the girls?” Lincoln found himself leaning forward.

Sarah shook her head. “Everyone.” She clutched a hand and gently massaged her palm. “I went outside and saw the roof of the gym collide with the science wing. People were trampling each other. I hid with some others until the storm passed, then the fire brigade rescued us.”

The quivering in her lips ceased, but tears formed in the corners of her eyes. “About a month later, my dog was hit by a car. I started crying and it started raining. When I woke up my mother was screaming that we had to get to high ground. The river had overflowed. There’d been more rain in three hours than in ten years.

“Every time I get angry there’s a cyclone. And when I’m sad it rains. And when I’m afraid the clouds turn black. Last time, lightning collided with a house, setting the entire street on fire.”

“I understand you were bullied before being taken out of school.”

Sarah nodded. “But it didn’t stop when I left school.” She broke into tears. The moment the first tear touched her cheek the thwacking of rain hitting the tin roof echoed around them.

Lincoln took a seat on the coffee table. “I got this for my wife.” He held the chocolate bar out. “I doubt she would mind.”

Sarah wiped the tears from her eyes with a smile. The rattling of the rain ceased immediately. She peeled the wrapper from the chocolate and took a bite.

“Sarah,” Lincoln said, quietly. “Your father called you a freak? Does he frighten you?”

She nodded.

“Do you understand that your mother called me to assess whether you could be put into a facility where researchers can discover why this is happening?” Lincoln leaned closer and whispered into her ear.

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They waited a few minutes before Lincoln asked the girl to return to her bedroom. Her parents rushed in not a second after she was out of sight—eager looks on their greedy, pale faces. Lincoln slipped past them, edging towards the front door.

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“I’m sorry, but there is nothing I can do.” He didn’t bother to turn back, collect his fee or glimpse at those two again. Instead, he hastily rushed to his car. But with each step he took the temperature began to plummet. Goosebumps lined his forearm. Frost appeared on the grass.

He yanked his keys from his pocket just as he caught sight of the girl’s reflection in the window. She stood awkwardly, leaning on one leg, wearing jeans with a large backpack slouched over one shoulder. Her warm breath rose and dispersed in front of her face, gently blanketing her in mist.

“As suspected: anxiety brings out the cold.” An ache travelled through Lincoln’s hands. “That’s why I suggested you wear long pants.” He grabbed her backpack and threw it onto the backseat. She hurriedly climbed in and fastened her seatbelt.

It remained for some hours after they left Balla. The overcast sky followed them halfway back to the city. Although, after they had stopped for lunch, he was able to turn the heater down. He could feel his fingers again.