

ROCKY CREEK: CHAPTER ONE

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The characters in this novel are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

One



ELENA

Eamon pushed open the door to the nursing home. As always the smell was what assaulted him first. He tried hard not to breathe through his nose. The smell of whatever they had eaten for dinner recirculating through the air-conditioning unit didn't help. He knew that he possessed an extraordinarily good sense of smell, but all the same, he wondered how the nursing staff dealt with it.

He flashed a huge smile at Christine, the registered nurse who was on duty every Friday evening when he came in. She looked up from the charts and threw him a smile of her own. He stopped in front of the nurse's station to speak to her, as he did every week.

'Hi Christine. How are things with you?'

She rolled her eyes at him.

'Same old. Eat, sleep, work. Not necessarily in that order. How are you?'

He laughed.

'I'm an accountant. How exciting is my life ever going to be? Eat, sleep, number crunch.'

Eamon shrugged. Christine just smiled. He was sure that she could see right through his little act, but he wasn't going to confirm that to her. He loved playing on the stereotype for accountants. Physically he was tall, of a slim build, with dark

wavy hair and glasses and looked very much the part. In his case, though, the boring part wasn't actually true. As a forensic accountant his job involved investigation of fraud and most of the time it meant that he had to think very much outside the square. His job tied his brain in a knot on a daily basis.

The smile dropped as he brought up the real reason for his visit.

'How has she been this week?'

Christine tried to keep a smile on her face and her expression as hopeful as she could in the circumstances. This was one aspect of the job that she hated. The families generally fell into one of two categories those who really did care deeply about the relation that was in care, and those who made a pretence of caring deeply about the relation in care. In either situation, dealing with the family was difficult.

In the first instance they were generally heartbroken in needing to relinquish care, when until that point they had cared for the resident at home, providing twenty-four hour, one-on-one care. Whilst they understood that nursing home facilities couldn't provide the same level of attention, Christine could never shake off the feeling that the family's expectations hadn't been met in relation to the day-to-day care of their family member. Added to that was their genuine distress in the declining state of their loved one.

In the second group were those who wanted around the clock, individualised care for their 'loved one' but weren't prepared to bother to do it themselves and had no idea of the impossibility of some of their requests. The latter group particularly angered her. Eamon she had been happy to note, was part of the first group. He and his family really did care and they had proved that many times over. In addition, they weren't demanding or difficult and that made her job so much easier.

Christine had developed a large amount of respect and admiration for Eamon over the last twelve months that he had been coming to visit his grandmother. He came every week

on Friday evening around 6 p.m. on his way home from the office. The only times he had ever missed a week had been if he had been sick, and that hadn't happened very often. Most grandchildren who visited their grandparents here only stayed for around fifteen minutes before they were scurrying back out the door again. Christine had never known Eamon to stay for less than an hour, even lately when having a conversation with Elena had become increasingly hard.

Her dementia had progressed and more often than not she was having conversations from many years ago. Christine had seen the distress written all over Eamon's face when he had left after the last few visits. She felt that she needed to at least give him the heads up that Elena's condition had worsened but she didn't want to distress him any further. It was always a fine line to walk. She took a deep breath and plunged in.

'You probably aren't going to want to hear this, but I think her dementia has progressed a bit further. I have noticed that the lucid moments seem to be getting more few and far between. She has also been quite agitated this week.'

Eamon's face fell. His arm was resting on the counter in front of Christine and she reached a hand across the counter and gave it a quick squeeze of reassurance before letting go.

'I'm sorry Eamon. I know it isn't what you want to hear. Forewarned is forearmed though.'

Eamon ran his hand through his hair. When he spoke the sadness in his eyes was unmistakable.

'I know. You're right. The reality of it at the moment is just a little harder than I imagined.'

He could feel eyes starting to fill up and looked away to try and get his emotions under control and stem the flow of tears that threatened. He wasn't fond of tears in public. He tried to inconspicuously take a deep breath to calm himself. Christine could see his attempt at control and busied herself tidying papers on the desk while she waited for him to speak again. When he spoke she looked up.

'Thanks Christine. We appreciate all that you do. It's just sad. We knew her when she was vibrant and alive. This shell that's left is not her, but it's all we have.'

He threw her a shaky smile and moved off in the direction of his grandmother's room. His sincerity brought tears to Christine's eyes. Sometimes this job sucked worse than others. Now she tidied papers in an attempt to get herself under control. She was very grateful that Friday nights weren't too busy and nobody was likely to need her for a few minutes.

When Eamon reached his grandmother's room he paused in the doorway. He watched her for a minute or so before coming to sit in the chair beside her bed. He had a very real fear of coming in one day to find her passed away. He liked to make sure that there was at least movement in her chest before he entered the room. It wasn't that he didn't know that she was going to die, it was just that they had been so close in that special relationship that grandparents have with their grandchildren. He knew that he would deal with her death when he had to but he couldn't bear the thought of being the one to find her. He wanted to leave that aspect of it to somebody who didn't have an emotional connection with her.

He rolled his shoulders a little, uncomfortable and ill at ease. He never quite knew what he was going to face when he arrived. Last week Nan had believed him to be her late husband, Albert, and had continued a one sided conversation on that basis about buying a house. He thought at one point she actually realised for a brief moment who he was but he couldn't be sure. The situation was ripping a giant hole inside him. He hoped that she would realise it was him this week.

He reached out and grabbed her hand. The contact made her turn her face from the window. Nan greeted him with a huge smile.

'I am so glad you came Warwick.'

Eamon's heart fell and he tried to keep his face impassive and not let the disappointment show. Who the hell was Warwick?

His grandmother clasped his hand in both of hers. The look on her face became earnest.

'I don't know what to do.'

With that, Nan dropped her eyes to the bed. When she looked at him again, tears had spilled over and were coursing down her cheeks.

'Albert wants me to marry him. What should I do? I don't love him, really. I haven't known him long enough.'

At the mention of the name Albert, Eamon's mind started ticking over: she must have married him eventually, assuming it is the same Albert.

She gripped Eamon's hand incredibly hard, digging her nails in. The tears then started in earnest.

'He's a good man Warwick. He would make a wonderful husband and father.'

Nan started to thrash her head from side to side.

'I can't believe he died. I didn't believe it when they told me.'

Eamon was completely lost as to whom she was referring to now. He had found the rapid changes in the direction of the conversation difficult to follow last week too. He decided that the best bet would be to remain silent for now and see what eventuated.

'Warwick.'

Nan let go of his hand, covering her face with both of her hands, sobbing into them in a way that was starting to alarm Eamon. He was beginning to wonder if maybe he should press the buzzer, or maybe go and get Christine. This couldn't be good for his grandmother. She spoke between sobs and through her fingers.

'He can't...be dead Warwick...He doesn't know...There were things...I never...never got to tell him.'

The sobs were wracking her frail body. Eamon had just decided to get help, had his finger on the buzzer, when she stopped as quickly as she had started, put her hands on the bed and pushed herself up into a fully sitting position, picking up the sheet to dab her eyes. She fleetingly met his gaze before looking at the bed. Her voice was incredibly soft when she continued.

'Please don't be mad, but I'm pregnant Warwick.'

Eamon's jaw dropped. There were some family skeletons that should never have the closet door opened. Eventually Nan looked up at him, her voice sounding so young.

'What do I do Warwick?'

Eamon was speechless. This was way beyond anything that he could, or more to the point, wanted to deal with. He was still sitting there, mouth open, when Nan leant over, her eyes suddenly ablaze with anger. Eamon unconsciously leaned a little further back.

'I don't expect you to understand.'

Nan's voice was increasing in intensity, her anger escalating and she was beginning to shout.

'I loved him Warwick. Yes I have made a foolish mistake but I loved him. I loved him as I have loved no other person.'

Her anger deflated as quickly as it took hold of her. Now she sounded lost.

'Even knowing the consequences I would do it all again.'

Nan looked down, placing her hands on her stomach, rubbing it gently.

'I will have a small piece of him forever Warwick.'

Her hands stilled and she turned to him.

'But what do I do about Albert?'

Then, as if the other changes hadn't been sudden enough, in an instant Nan started wringing her hands together and repeating in a sing song voice, 'Poor Elena. Poor poor Elena.' Occasionally she would add in a string of numbers, the same ones every time. After hearing the numbers repeated for the third or fourth time, Eamon emerged from the daze

that had enveloped him and the accountant in him kicked in. He quickly grabbed the pen from his shirt pocket and wrote the numbers down on the side of his hand. He may not know how to deal with the personal issues but numbers were definitely something that he could grab on to. The rest of the conversation had left him floundering and in need of rescue.

As if reading his mind, Christine came in. Eamon figured that she had probably heard Nan shouting. She stood beside him and squeezed his shoulder. ▯

'I'm sorry Eamon. This has been happening a lot lately.'

At the mention of his name, Nan spun around.

'Eamon.'

There was delight and surprise in her voice.

'You've come back to see me.'

Christine smiled at Nan.

'I'll come back later Mrs O'Rourke. You enjoy your grandson.'

As she turned she quietly spoke to Eamon, patting his shoulder as she moved past him.

'Enjoy this while it lasts.'

It was only approximately fifteen minutes later that Nan's eyes had drifted closed. She had been having trouble staying awake while they had been talking but finally she lost the battle and fell asleep. Eamon was grateful for those last fifteen minutes when she had known who he was and they had enjoyed each other's company. He rose from the chair and leant over to place a soft kiss on Nan's forehead before leaving the room. He was always conscious of each visit possibly being the last. Also, tonight's visit had been a little shorter than usual, but no use in staying to watch Nan sleep.

As he walked down the corridor towards the exit, Eamon raised his hand as he passed Christine who was busy speaking with a resident, or more particularly, trying to calm the elderly lady down. She acknowledged him with a nod and a smile. As

he walked away he wondered if her husband missed having her at home on a Friday night. He wondered whether her husband realised what a gem he had with her. She had the patience of a saint, which he had seen firsthand with Nan on a few occasions and she appeared to really care about the old people in her care. He had seen others to whom it was simply a job that brought in the pay cheques.

He was grateful for her professionalism and sunny personality. He wasn't sure how he would have coped if he thought that Nan wasn't in good hands. His family weren't in a position to care for her at home any more. She had been living with his mother, Antonia, her daughter-in-law, but just over a year ago she had become too much to handle at home. She had become a risk to herself and to everybody else.

One day she had wandered off one day and on another occasion she had left one of the hot plates on the stove running after she had boiled some milk for Milo. Another day she had badly scalded herself in the shower when she hadn't bothered to turn any cold on with the hot water. The straw that had broken the camel's back though had been when she had been caught with frozen chickens and an axe trying to cut them into small pieces on top of the chest freezer. It had been a difficult decision for their family to make, especially his mother, but realistically, they had not had any other choice. Her care was beyond their capabilities and the best option had been here.

Nan hadn't wanted to come and to say that she had been difficult when she arrived would have been a gross understatement. She had been rude to the staff which was very unlike her. Normally she was well-mannered and gentle. The hardest bit had been when she had point blank refused to speak to his mother when she came to visit. That situation hadn't changed. His mother still came and sat with her and Nan still turned her face the other way and refused to acknowledge her. At least that is what happened on the days that she knew who Antonia was which were becoming gradually fewer.

Christine had told them that it happens quite often that the resident blames the family member who previously had care of him or her for being placed in the nursing facility, though knowing that wasn't making it any easier for his mother. He knew how hurt she had been, and still was, by the deliberate snub from somebody that she cared so much about and had tried so hard to help. Just another of life's little injustices to chalk up.

Eamon reached the car relatively quickly and slumped in the driver's seat. He always felt drained when he left Nan. Tonight more so than usual. Tonight Nan had raised a whole stack of questions and he wanted answers. He scrubbed his hands over his face before resting his head on the Audi's headrest and closing his eyes.

After a couple of moments he opened them and pulled a notebook out of the glovebox, turned the overhead light on so that he could see where he had written the number on his hand clearly and copied it before he washed them and it was lost. He threw the notebook on the passenger seat and turned the key in the ignition. It had been a long week and he wasn't looking forward to battling the thousands of cars on the streets of Sydney. As he reversed out, he decided to swing past his mother's place on the way home. A couple of boxes of Nan's keepsakes that she couldn't bear to part with had been stored there when Nan had moved in. He would grab them and rifle through them over the weekend and see what he could dig up.

He wished that he had sat down and spoken to her when she was still capable and asked about her early life. There just never seemed to be time. He would trawl a bit on the internet and see what he could find regarding the series of numbers if his grandmother's keepsakes didn't shed any light on it. He investigated and made sense of numbers for a job. Numbers were safe. Numbers were a territory that he knew well. Experience had taught him that sometimes one number

was the key to the whole puzzle. He hoped it was that simple this time.