

BOBBI CHEGWYN

# RADICAL **RAY**

A Father's Return



## CHAPTER 1



# THE LETTER THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING

Ray Roxby wasn't expecting anything unusual that early February afternoon—except maybe an extra slice of tea cake if he timed it right. The late summer sun streamed through the kitchen window, casting golden light onto the wooden floorboards. Outside, cicadas droned their endless chorus, a reminder that even though school had started, summer wasn't quite ready to let go.

Nine-year-old Ray sat at the kitchen table, absentmindedly picking at his slice of tea cake. Grandma Leila had baked it earlier, filling the house with the sugary scent of cinnamon while his mum, Shirl, worked from home. Normally, the thought of warm cake would have made him feel better, but today, his mind was elsewhere—back at school, where

he and his classmates had just finished their first week of fourth grade.

Their new teacher, Mr. Nelson, had already given them their first big project: The Heritage Quest.

Jack and Lucy were excited about it—most kids were. Jack was doing his on his grandparents, who had moved to Australia from Italy in the 1970s for better work opportunities. Lucy was making a scrapbook about her family's history, tracing back to when her ancestors settled in Botany in the late 1800s and started one of the area's first tanneries.

But Ray wasn't sure where to begin. His family had always been just him, Mum, and Grandma Leila. No long-lost relatives with fascinating stories. No old photos of great-great-grandparents doing something historic. Was that enough for a project?

He sighed and popped a crumb into his mouth, more out of habit than hunger.

Across the kitchen, Shirl leaned against the counter, flipping through the stack of mail she'd picked up earlier. Ray barely noticed—until her fingers lingered on one envelope. Her expression shifted—not worried exactly, but different.

Ray noticed right away.

“Something interesting?” he asked, swallowing his mouthful.

Shirl glanced at him, offering a small smile, but it didn't quite reach her eyes.

“This one's for you, little mate.”

Ray frowned. The last time he got mail was when Grandma Leila sent him a postcard from her weekend away—even though she'd only gone two suburbs over to Brighton-Le-Sands for a school reunion. He wiped his hands on his school shorts before taking the envelope from her. It was plain, no stickers or drawings, just his name and address scrawled in large, uneven letters.

He turned it over. No return address.

A strange feeling settled in his stomach, like the slow, tilting moment before a roller coaster drops.

Slowly, he peeled open the envelope and pulled out a single sheet of paper.

*Dear Ray,*

*I know it's been a long time, and I'm sorry for that. I've been away working, but I've never stopped thinking about you. Now that I'm back in Sydney, I want to see you. I hope you'll give me a chance.*

*Love, Dad*

Ray's breath caught for a moment.

For a moment, the kitchen faded. He was back on last year's scout trip, standing by the campfire while Jack and the others laughed with their dads. He had told himself it didn't matter, that teaming up with Jack and his dad, Scout Leader Mr. Williams, had been just as good.

But the letter in his hands told a different story.

His dad.

It had been years since Ray had heard from him—so long that he barely thought about him anymore. But now, out of nowhere, his dad was back?

He stared at the letter, his fingers pressing into the paper's edges.

"What does he want?" he asked quietly, not looking up.

Shirl exhaled and pulled out the chair beside him, lowering herself down with the kind of patience that meant she wasn't going to rush him.

"He's been working in South Australia as a truck driver for the mines," she said. "He finished his contract and moved back to Sydney. I think he wants to be part of your life again."

Ray didn't say anything. His mind spun too fast to catch a single thought.

Why now? Why after all this time?

His grip on the letter tightened as a dozen thoughts tangled in his head, none of them making sense.

“I don’t have to write back, do I?” he asked after a long pause.

Shirl shook her head. “No, mate. It’s your choice.”

Ray traced his finger over the words on the page.

I hope you’ll give me a chance.

The words felt heavy, like a weight pressing into his chest. His dad wanted a chance, but did Ray want to give him one?

Atlas, his Blue Heeler, nudged his leg under the table, clearly sensing that something was different. Ray reached down, rubbing his fingers through the thick fur behind Atlas’s ears. The dog let out a small, contented huff, resting his chin on Ray’s knee like he was keeping watch over the moment.

Ray wished someone could tell him what to do—but no one could.

One thing was certain—his dad was back.

And whether Ray liked it or not, his world had just changed forever.