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Good morning everyone, and thank you for being here to honour my big brother, Ben.

I'm Emma — his little sister, his shadow for most of childhood, and, lucky me, his best mate right through to the end.

Ben was born on 14 March 1988 in Newcastle.

He loved this place so fiercely you could almost hear it in his laugh — the surf, the footy, the smoky aroma of a backyard barbie drifting over the fence.

He passed away this year, far too soon, at 38.

Those numbers don't hold a candle to the life he packed into them.

He grew up here in Newy, the kind of kid who'd lend you his lunch and fix your bike chain in the same breath.

After school he signed on as an apprentice sparky, learned the trade the old-fashioned way — up a ladder, torch in his mouth, swearing under his breath at dodgy wiring — and then he built something of his own.

A small business serving the Hunter, with the phone forever buzzing because, as half this room can attest, if something broke, you called Ben.

If you didn't call, he somehow turned up anyway.

He met Olivia — Liv — and brought home a smile even wider than his.

They married, and he became a dad to Sophie, who's six and has inherited his cheeky grin and his stubborn streak.

Watching Ben with Liv and Soph was like watching him find his true north.

Family first wasn't a slogan for him; it was how he moved through the day.

Every job was scheduled around a school pick-up, a quick dash to the beach with Soph, or a Friday night fish and chips with Liv.

He was a proud son to Margaret and John, and the sort of brother who'd answer the phone at any hour with, "What did you do now, Em?" — and then show up

with tools.

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My favourite memory is simple.

Summer trips to Port Stephens — baking hot sand, esky full of ice blocks, and Ben declaring he could teach me to surf “in ten minutes, tops”.

He pushed the board, yelled “Now!”, and I wobbled like a newborn giraffe.

When I finally stood up for more than two seconds, he whooped like I’d won Olympic gold.

People on the beach clapped, probably for the noise to stop, but I didn’t care.

That’s my brother — making small victories feel like grand finals.

Ben believed in doing the job properly.

He could trace a fault line through a fuse box the way most of us trace a recipe.

But it wasn’t just work.

He volunteered for the SES for years — his second family in orange — and coached junior rugby league, where he was famous for tying the loosest bootlaces in the Hunter and telling every kid they were the engine room of the team.

When storms rolled in and everyone else pulled the doona over their head, Ben pulled on his hi-vis.

Calm under pressure, steady hands, no fuss.

He was the bloke holding the ladder, steadying the voice on the end of the line, reminding you to breathe.

He loved surfing at Bar Beach at first light, the kind of dawn where the world is grey and hopeful.

He loved dropping a line off the breakwall, content to come home empty-handed as long as he could say the water looked good.

He loved backyard barbecues with too much onion and just enough banter.

And he loved the Knights — so much shouting at the telly I’m amazed the neighbours didn’t call noise control, except they were usually over anyway.

What defined him?

Generosity that showed up with jumper leads and a coffee before you knew you

were stranded.

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Dependability you could mark the week by.

A cheeky sense of humour — I can hear his, “You sure you want me to say what I’m thinking?” right now — that could take the heat out of a tense moment.

Loyalty that made space for people to be their messy, honest selves.

He didn’t announce these things.

He just did them.

You’ll all have your own Ben stories.

A flooded switchboard at midnight he sorted without complaint.

A trailer he lent that came back cleaner than when it left because he couldn’t help himself.

A Saturday morning he turned up unasked to mow, drill, wire, and then leave before you could say thank you.

He had a knack for fixing anything — appliances, wobbly chairs, frayed nerves.

For those of us who loved him most — Liv, little Soph, Mum, Dad, and me — the house feels different now.

Quieter, yes, but also filled with traces of him that aren’t going anywhere.

A surfboard in the shed.

A box of screws neatly labelled.

A child who knows her dad cheered the loudest for her drawing of a dragon with three tails.

A partner who was loved in the daily, ordinary, faithful way that matters most.

Ben didn’t chase big gestures.

He believed in mateship, in pitching in without being asked, in knocking off a job and tidying up properly.

He built a life from those small bricks, and it’s strong enough to hold us while we grieve.

If you’re looking for him in the days ahead, you’ll find him in the simple acts he made look easy.

In the neighbour who drags your bin in without a word.

In the spare hour you give to a junior team or an SES call-out.

In the laugh you can't contain at the silliest joke.

In the way you back your people, fiercely and without fanfare.

We will miss his easy laugh.

We will miss that early-morning message — “You right?” — that somehow arrived exactly when you weren't.

We will miss the moment he'd step through the door and the whole room would loosen its shoulders.

But we carry what he gave us.

Liv, you and Soph are surrounded by a community he helped build.

We'll honour him by standing with you, the way he stood with all of us.

On behalf of our family — especially Mum and Dad — thank you for the love you've shown and the stories you've shared.

They are a comfort and a reminder that one life, lived honestly, ripples far.

In lieu of flowers, if you're able, we'd welcome donations to the NSW SES — Ben's second family, the crew he trusted and adored.

I can't think of anything that would make him prouder.

Ben, my big brother,

thank you for teaching me to stand up on a surfboard and in life,
for cheering like it mattered — because to you, it did.

We'll look after Liv.

We'll look after Soph.

We'll keep a seat spare at the barbie and a spot on the sand at Bar Beach.

And we'll try to do the job properly, the way you always did.

We love you.

We'll keep you close in every small, good thing.

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