

# THORNWOOD HOUSE

*Anna Romer*



An enthralling, haunting tale  
of obsession, love and courage

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*Anna Romer*

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If you reveal your secrets to the wind,  
you should not blame the wind  
for revealing them to the trees.

KHALIL GIBRAN



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# Prologue

**O**n a sunny afternoon, the clearing at the edge of the gully resembles a fairytale glade. Ribbons of golden light flutter through the treetops and bellbirds fill the air with chiming calls. The spicy scent of wildflowers drifts on a warm breeze, and deep in the shady belly of the ravine a creek whispers along its ancient course.

But then, come dusk, the sky darkens quickly. Shadows swarm among the trees, chasing the light. Sunbeams vanish. Birds retreat into thickets of acacia and blackthorn as, overhead, a host of violet-black clouds roll in from the west, bringing rain.

Here now, in the bright moonlight, it's a different place again. Nightmarish. Otherworldly. The open expanse of silvery poa grass is hemmed in by black-trunked ironbarks, while at the centre stands a tall, fin-shaped boulder.

I'm drawn towards the boulder. It seems to whisper, shadows appear to gather at its base. I go nearer. Shivers fly across my skin. I stumble in the dark and pause to listen, straining to hear the sound of a voice, of a muffled cry or sob – but there's only the tick of rain in the leaves and the ragged rasp of my breathing. Further down the slope wallabies thump unseen through the bush, and something meows overhead, probably a boobook owl.

'Bron . . . are you here?'

I don't expect an answer, but when none comes my sense of panic sharpens. I cast about for a broken bough, a trail of flattened grass, a familiar scrap of clothing abandoned on the ground . . . but there's nothing of my daughter here, nothing of the man who took her.

I search the shadows, trying to see beyond the tree-silhouettes that shift and sway around me. Lightning illuminates a dirt trail that cuts uphill through the undergrowth. I edge towards it, then stop. A chill skates up the back of my neck, I sense I'm not alone. Someone's near, it must be him. Hiding in the trees. Watching. I imagine his gaze crawling over me as he speculates how best to strike.

When he does, I'll be ready.

At least, that's what I keep telling myself. In truth, I feel as though I've relived this scenario a thousand times, hovering in this desolate glade waiting for death to find me, but each time floundering at the critical moment.

The air is suddenly cold. Rain trickles off my face. The trees bow sideways in a damp gust and gumnut flowers spin from high branches, carrying forth the sharp scent of eucalyptus.

A twig cracks, loud despite the rain; a violent sound like a small bone being broken. I whirl towards it. Lightning threads through the clouds, brightening the glade. A solitary shadow catches my eye on the other side of the clearing. It breaks from the greater darkness and moves towards me.

I recognise him instantly.

He's a big man, his features a pale blur in the dimness. His skin shines wet, and something about the sight of his face makes my blood run thin.

'Hello, Audrey.'

And it's only now that I see the axe handle grasped in his hand.

# 1

*Audrey, September 2005*

The sky over the cemetery was bruised by stormclouds. It was only mid-afternoon, but already dark. A large group of mourners stood on the grassy hillside, sheltering beneath the outstretched arms of an old elm. In the branches overhead, a congregation of blackbirds shuffled restlessly, their cries punctuating the stillness.

Crows. Darkness. Death.

Tony would have loved that.

I swallowed hard, wishing I was anywhere but here; anywhere but standing in the rain, shivering in a borrowed black suit, silently saying goodbye to the man I once thought I'd loved.

Bronwyn stood beside me, her dark blue dress making her fair hair and complexion all the more stark. She was eleven, tall for her age and strikingly pretty. She held an umbrella over our heads, her thin fingers bloodless around the handle.

Despite the rain, despite the glances and hushed talk behind our backs, I was glad we'd come. No matter what anyone said, I knew Tony would have wanted us here.

The coffin hovered over the grave, suspended from a steel frame by discreet cables. Nearby, a blanket of fake grass was

draped over a mound of dirt that would later fill the hole. Huge wreaths of white lilies and scarlet anthuriums carpeted the ground. They looked expensive, and my handpicked roses seemed out of place among them.

Everything glistened in the rain: the coffin's brass handles, the garlands of lilies, the clustered umbrellas. Even the minister's bald head gleamed as he intoned the scripture. 'Deep from the earth shall you speak, from low in the dust your words shall come forth. Your voice shall rise from the ground like the voice of a ghost.'

The ancient words were muffled by the rain, spoken with such solemnity that they seemed to drift from another time. If only they were true. If only Tony could speak to me now, tell me what had driven him in those last desperate days.

Lightning flickered, was followed by a thunderous rumble. The crows lifted from their perch and flapped away.

Bronwyn shuffled closer. 'Mum?' There was panic in her voice.

The pulleys suspending the casket started to move. The long black box began its descent. I grabbed Bronwyn's hand and we clung together.

'It'll be okay, Bron.' I'd meant to offer comfort, but the falseness of my words was jarring. How could anything ever be okay again?

I grasped for a memory to latch on to: Tony's face as I most wanted to remember it – his cheeks ruddy, his dark hair on end, his sapphire eyes alight as he stared at the tiny bundle of his newborn daughter cradled in his arms.

'She's so beautiful,' he'd muttered. 'So beautiful it scares me to look away from her.'

Bronwyn tugged me closer to the edge of the grave and together we stared down at the coffin. It seemed impossible that a man who had once embraced life with such gusto now lay in the boggy ground beneath a mantle of rain. Impossible that he of all people had given up so easily.

Bronwyn kissed the parcel she'd made for her father and let it drop onto the coffin lid. It held a letter she'd written to him, a package of his favourite liquorice and the scarf she'd been knitting for his birthday. I heard her whispering, but her words were lost in the rain. When her shoulders began to quiver, I knew tears were brewing.

'Come on.' We turned away and started down the slope to where I'd parked my old Celica. Heads pivoted as we passed, their faces pale against the cemetery's grey backdrop.

Ignoring them, I slid my arm around Bronwyn and kept walking. Her sleeve was damp, and through the fabric I could feel the coldness of her flesh. She needed to be at home, cocooned in the warmth and safety of familiar territory; she needed soup and toast, pyjamas, fluffy slippers . . .

'Audrey - ?'

I looked up and a thrill of shock made me release Bronwyn. My nerves turned to water, my mouth went dry. Silly, such fear. I took a breath and summoned my voice.

'Hello, Carol.'

She was stony-faced, the strain showing around her eyes. Her hair was coiled at the nape of her neck, and as usual I was struck by her beauty.

'I'm pleased you came,' she said quietly. 'Tony would have wanted you both here. Hello Bronwyn, dear . . . how are you holding up?'

'Good thanks,' Bronwyn answered dully, her eyes on the ground.

I rattled out my car keys. 'Bron, would you wait in the car?'

She took the keys and plodded off down the wet slope, the umbrella bobbing over her head. At the bottom of the hill, she wove through a line of parked cars until she reached the Celica. A moment later she disappeared inside.

'How is she really?' Carol asked.

'She's coping,' I said, not entirely sure it was true.

We were alone on the slope. Mourners were hurrying out of the wet, back to their cars. The cemetery was nearly deserted. Carol was gazing down the hill, so I stole a closer look – marvelling at her perfect face, her expensive clothes, the way she held herself. She wore a black dress, fitted and elegant, and at her throat was a chip of ice. A diamond, probably. Fine lines gathered at the edges of her eyes, but they only seemed to intensify her loveliness. No wonder Tony had given up everything to be with her.

Carol caught me looking and frowned. ‘I know what you’re thinking. The same thing everyone else is thinking . . . But you’re wrong. Tony and I were getting along fine, our marriage –’ She drew a shaky breath. ‘Our marriage was as strong as ever. Things were good between us, they had been for a long time.’

‘You weren’t to know, Carol.’

She shook her head, her eyes glassy. ‘But that’s just it, isn’t it, Audrey? . . . Of all people, I should have known.’

‘What Tony did was no one’s fault. You can’t blame yourself.’

‘I just keep thinking if I’d done more . . . noticed more. Been more attentive. You see, the night he left, I knew something wasn’t right.’

I frowned. ‘How do you mean?’

‘Well . . . we were in the lounge room at home. I was watching TV and Tony was flipping through the paper. For some reason I looked over at him and he was staring into space . . . All the colour had drained out of his face. He got up, folded the newspaper and went to the door. He kept saying “They found him. They found him.” Then he went out. I heard the car start up, heard the wheels crunching over the gravel in the drive. And that was the last time I saw him.’

‘What did he mean? . . . Found who?’

Carol shook her head. ‘I don’t know. Later I scanned the paper he’d been reading, hoping for a clue . . . but there was nothing. Nothing that made any sense to me – as you can imagine, I was distraught.’

‘Didn’t he call?’

‘No, but the police did, ten days later.’ Carol shifted closer, her eyes searching mine. ‘I’ll tell you now it was the worst shock of my life. Tony was dead, just like that. When they told me his body had been found in Queensland outside a little town called Magpie Creek, I thought they were talking about someone else. But he . . . he – God, it was so sudden, so unexpected. I never even knew he owned a gun –’

I flinched, and Carol’s eyes went wide. A single tear trembled on her lash.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘it was a horrid thing to say . . . but that’s the most confusing part of all. Tony was terrified of guns – he hated any sort of violence, didn’t he?’

Since hearing about Tony’s death from a mutual friend, I’d been wondering the same thing. Wondering why Tony – ever the advocate for peace, love and goodwill to all – had chosen to end his life so viciously and leave a legacy of devastation to those of us who’d loved him.

To my surprise, Carol grasped my wrist. ‘Why would he do that, Audrey? How could he have been so selfish?’

The sudden fervour of her words shocked me. I groped for something reassuring to say – as much for myself as for Carol – but she rushed on, digging her fingers into my arm.

‘You were always so close to him – early on, anyway. Did he ever tell you anything – a childhood trauma, something that might have come back to haunt him? Had he ever been ill when you were together? He wasn’t taking anything, not that I know of . . . but he might have been trying to protect me. Unless there was another woman? Oh Audrey, no matter which way I look at it, I can’t make any sense of what he did.’

Her eyes were haunted, rimmed by delicate rabbit-pink, the skin around her mouth blanched white. I understood what she was saying – outwardly, Tony had appeared to be too level-headed to ever succumb to depression or self-pity. Yet I couldn’t

help remembering our years together – the happy days so often overshadowed by his recurring nightmares, his abrupt mood swings, his episodes of broody silence. His almost phobic horror of violence, blood. And his passionate hatred of firearms of any kind.

‘Tony never talked about his past,’ I said. ‘Whatever secrets he had, he kept them from me, too.’

Carol looked away. ‘You know, Audrey, if we’d met under different circumstances, you and I might have been friends.’

I dredged up a smile, knowing it was her grief talking. Carol Jarman and I were just too different to be anything other than strangers to one another. We moved in different circles, came from different worlds. She was poised, elegant, beautiful, and enjoyed the sort of lifestyle I’d only ever dreamed about. If it hadn’t been for Tony, our paths would never have crossed.

Carol slid her hand into her shoulder bag and withdrew a small parcel wrapped in fabric. ‘I found this in his belongings. I thought it was something you might like to have.’

I recognised the fabric at once – it was a scarf Tony had brought back from a trip to Italy, the first year he’d flown over for the Venice Biennale. Wrapped inside was a Murano glass paperweight with an electric-blue butterfly preserved at its centre.

‘Thank you.’ A buzz of warmth. I locked my fingers around the object’s cool hardness, flashing back to the days when Tony and I had been happy.

‘I might not see you again,’ Carol said, ‘so I should tell you now, rather than let you hear from the lawyer.’

I looked up from the paperweight, still aglow with bitter-sweet memories. ‘Tell me . . . ?’

‘Tony left instructions for the Albert Park house to be sold. I hate having to ask this of you, Audrey, but you’ll need to vacate within twenty-eight days. I won’t kick you out if you need longer . . . but I’d like to start renovating as soon as possible so I can put it on the market.’

I could only stare at her. 'Twenty-eight days?'

'Don't worry. Tony wouldn't have dreamt of leaving you homeless. You and Bronwyn will be well provided for,' she added cryptically. She seemed about to say something more, but instead gave my arm a quick squeeze – gently, this time – then turned abruptly and hurried away.

I watched her glide down the hill. Her friends gathered around her; a couple of them shot me furtive glances. Then they bundled her off towards the line of waiting cars, where she ducked into a glittering Mercedes and was whisked away.

Twenty-eight days.

I clutched the paperweight tight. Tony had never actually lied to me about his past, but his stubborn refusal to talk about it had always been hurtful, as if he didn't consider me worthy of his trust. Now, as I glared up the slope, I felt the burden of his silence shift around me, stirring up all my old doubts and insecurities. In that moment I wanted nothing more than to climb back up the hill and hurl the paperweight into the grave as a final, bitter farewell. But it was raining again. The ground was sodden and the slope looked slippery.

I shoved the parcel into my pocket. Alive, Tony had brought me nothing but trouble; now he was dead, I refused to allow him the same opportunity. With that promise firmly planted in my mind, I picked my way back down the hill to the Celica and my waiting daughter.



In other parts of the country, September heralded the beginning of spring. Here in Melbourne it still felt like the tail-end of winter. Weeks of rain, chilly nights and mornings. Endless grey skies. There were days – like today – when it seemed as though this drab, gloomy purgatory would never end.

Albert Park, the sought-after heritage suburb where we lived, seemed even colder and drearier than everywhere else.

Tony's funeral had left us in a low mood. We were shivering as we pushed through the front gate and unlocked the house. It was dark inside. I stalked through, cranking up the heat and switching on the lights until the place glowed like a furnace. Bronwyn refused soup and toast, but hovered in the kitchen while I made her a mug of hot Milo. Then she fled to the haven of her room.

My own bedroom was icy. I buried the Venetian paperweight under a pile of clothes in a bottom drawer, then threw my damp suit into the washing basket. Dragging on soft jeans and an old T-shirt, I wandered out to the lounge room and stood gazing through the window.

Silvery raindrops cascaded across neighbouring rooftops, making haloes around the streetlamps. Lights shone like beacons from nearby houses, but out over the bay the water was lost beneath a shroud of premature darkness.

Drawing the curtains, I stood in the centre of the room, hugging my arms. Getting my head around Tony being gone. Wondering, for the millionth time, what had possessed him to load up a gun and end his life in such a violent way. Tony had been many things: a charming and wildly successful artist, a brilliant father to Bronwyn, a sufferer of nightmares . . . and in the end, a selfish two-timing bastard; but I'd never pegged him as a man who'd willingly devastate the people he cared about.

I wandered out to the dining room. He was gone, I reminded myself. No amount of speculation was going to bring him back. And there was no point feeling abandoned by a man who'd already deserted me years ago. Even so, I could feel my old resentments creeping back. Bronwyn and I were about to be torn from our home, a home that Tony had promised would be ours as long as we wanted. He'd bought it in the early days, after a string of sell-out overseas exhibitions. Later, I hadn't bothered to argue when he'd suggested it remain in his name. I was just glad to

continue living in it rent-free. I'd been young, full of pride. Angry at Tony, and stubbornly opposed to feeling indebted to him.

But now I ached . . . ached for my precious daughter and the grief she would carry with her for life. Ached for Tony, whose suffering must have run deep; and for Carol, whose world had revolved around him. Ached for my own selfish longings that sometimes whispered in lonely unguarded moments that perhaps – by a miraculous twist of fate – he might one day come back to me. And I ached with the burden of questions he'd left behind. Why had he rushed out that night, then driven for days to some little backwater? What had finally pushed him over the edge?

Carol said she'd checked the paper, but had been too distraught to properly focus. I remembered that Tony had subscribed religiously to the *Courier-Mail*. He'd grown up outside Brisbane – one of the few morsels of background info I'd managed to prise from him – and had liked to stay abreast of Queensland news.

I booted my laptop and went online.

It took a while to sift through the search results for the *Courier-Mail* dated just before Tony's death. Nothing leapt out. My neck started cramping from peering at the screen and I was about to log off, but as a last resort I punched in the name of the town where they'd found Tony's body, 'Magpie Creek'.

A single search result filled the screen.

#### DROUGHT SOLVES TWENTY-YEAR-OLD MYSTERY

BRISBANE, Fri. – For most people, Australia's current drought – called the worst in a thousand years – has been the cause of deep concern. For the small community of Magpie Creek in south-east Queensland, it has brought an unexpected solution to a mystery that has baffled the town for twenty years.

On Wednesday last, a group of conservationists were taking water samples from the near-dry Lake Brigalow Dam, 24 kilometres from the town, when they discovered a vehicle

submerged in the mud. Fire and Rescue Services retrieved the car, only to discover inside it the remains of a human body.

Magpie Creek Police have linked the car to a local man who was reported missing by his family in November 1986. Positive identification of the remains will necessarily await the results of forensic examinations and post-mortem.

I sat back and stared at the screen until my eyes blurred. Maybe I was clutching at straws, but I couldn't help wondering. Had Tony known the missing man, been close to him? Had the man been a one-time friend, a relative? Someone whose death had mattered enough for Tony to walk out on his wife with barely a word and travel 1600 kilometres into a past he'd so obviously put behind him?

In 1986, Tony would have been fourteen. His father, then? Reported missing by his family; by Tony's family. A family that Tony had – in the twelve years I'd known him – steadfastly refused to acknowledge. Shutting my eyes, I tried to restrain my rampaging thoughts. It was unlikely, probably just coincidence. Probably nothing more than connections made by a brain fuelled with exhaustion and grief.

Logging off, I went out to the kitchen and looked in the fridge. It was crammed with food, but my hand reached robotically for a Crown Lager. The beer was icy, deliciously wet on my grief-tightened throat. While I drank, I stared at the black square of window. In it I saw the woman the past five years had caused me to become: hollow-eyed and gaunt, with shadows beneath the pallid skin where there should have been a healthy flush. I would be thirty this year, but my face wore the grey resignation of someone much older.

I rubbed my palms over my cheeks, then smoothed my hair. It had escaped the neat ponytail I'd forced it into for the funeral, and reverted into a shaggy seventies-style bob. I recalled Carol's restrained elegance, and grimaced at the small, boyish person

reflected in the window. The pinched little face stared sullenly back at me, silently accusing: You see why he left? You see why he wanted her and not you?

Turning from the window, I went along the hall to Bronwyn's room and knocked lightly. There was no response, so I cracked open the door. Her lamp was on. She'd fallen asleep on top of the bedcovers – her fair hair fanned over the pillow, her face was blotchy from crying. She was wearing the pyjamas her father had given her a year ago, too tight now, and faded from overuse.

'Bronny?' I whispered, stroking her hair. 'Let's get you under the covers, sweetheart.'

Up until six months ago, she'd seen Tony every Sunday without fail. Just as the church bells began to chime across the waking city, Tony would pull his dazzling black Porsche into the driveway, honking the horn as Bronwyn ran down the path to greet him. Meanwhile, I lurked in the front room, my lips pinched tight, spying on them through the shutters. Six or seven hours later I'd hear the familiar honking, and Bronwyn would rush in brimming with news of what a fabulous time they'd had, cooing over the presents he'd bought her, eyes aglow and cheeks flushed pink with joy.

Then, six months ago, the visits ground to a halt.

Tony stopped showing up for their Sunday outings. He forgot to ring, sending expensive gifts in lieu of a visit. Without explanation, he disengaged himself from her life. I watched helplessly as the sorrow grew in her like a sickness, turning my bright little girl into a forlorn shadow-faced creature who moped around the house as though, rather than living in it, she was haunting it.

Bronwyn sighed and rolled over. Tucking the blanket around her, I laid a whisper of a kiss on her brow. She smelled of honey and chocolate, of fresh washed laundry and lemon shampoo. Safe, familiar smells. I was about to tiptoe out when I caught

sight of a photo propped against her night lamp. I hadn't seen it for years, and it brought back the past with a pang of sadness.

Tony sat on a low concrete wall, the National Gallery's water-curtain doors in the background. His eyes glinted behind his glasses and he was smiling his famous heart-stopping smile. He wasn't traditionally handsome – his face was too bony, his nose too large, his teeth a fraction crooked – but he had a compelling quality, an intensity that was both guarded and beguiling.

I switched off the bedside lamp and took the photo out to the kitchen, leaning it against a jar of peanuts on the bench so I could study it in full light. It felt good to look at his face, to pretend he was still out there somewhere, moving through life, perhaps taking a moment to gaze up at the stars and think of me.

It almost worked.

Then I remembered the coffin. The boggy slope, the yawning grave beneath the elm. By now the cemetery would be dark, its poplars and cypresses sagging beneath the weight of rain, the sky raked by fingers of lightning.

Though I hadn't seen Tony for months, suddenly I missed him unbearably. With him, I'd been different – strong, capable. I'd laughed more, worried less, opened up and found pleasure in unexpected places. When he left I pulled back into my shell – escaping into my work, neglecting my friends, desperate to lose myself. Tormented by the knowledge that the man I loved no longer loved me.

The only light in that dark time had been Bronwyn. Despite her own confusion over Tony's leaving, she'd been a chirpy little girl, seemingly wise beyond her six years. I'd thrown myself into mothering her, and been rewarded by moments of closeness we'd rarely shared before. Even as a baby, Bronwyn had gravitated to her father – she was the tiny moon that orbited Planet Tony, worshipful and constant. She'd run to me

for scraped knees, for a bandaid and a pat . . . but afterwards she'd always hobble off to Tony, knowing he was the only one able to kiss away her pain, calm her vexation, tease a laugh from her baby lips.

But then, after Tony left, we connected. Bronwyn would giggle madly and fling her arms around my waist, insisting that I was the prettiest, the best, the nicest mummy in the whole entire world . . . and those moments had saved me.

I sighed. 'Dammit, Tony. Why did you have to go and die?'

I'd met him at art school. At seventeen I'd been critically shy, but determined to establish myself as a photographer. I'd grown up with my Aunt Morag, and after she died I'd found a Box Brownie camera in her belongings. I quickly became obsessed, and when I realised there were people who made a living by taking pictures, I was determined to count myself among them. Not knowing where else to start, I enrolled at the Victorian College of the Arts.

Tony was in the painting department, and a few years ahead of me. He was talented, mysterious, popular, funny . . . yet oddly – and enticingly – vulnerable. We'd been rubbing shoulders at the local watering hole for nearly six months before I drummed up the courage to speak to him. To my baffled delight we hooked up quickly. Within a year I was pregnant. I deferred my studies, unable to think of anything but Tony and the baby. As our child grew within me, so did my confidence. Tony loved me, and the world was a happy place to be. Commissions for photographic work trickled in, and for the first time in my life I felt as though I belonged somewhere – truly belonged.

Tony's success came swiftly. He began selling his paintings through a top-notch gallery, building a name for himself, working harder than ever. He got invited to the Venice Biennale, a career highlight for him at the time, and also a memorable milestone in our life together. Bronwyn was born soon after his return, and it seemed that life couldn't get any better. It was so

dreamily good, so fairytale perfect, that it made me nervous. That was when the decay set in. Slowly, so slowly at first that I barely noticed.

Tony began spending more time away. He was working at the studio, he said, preparing for a big group show at the National Gallery. Over the next few years a pattern developed. The more Tony withdrew into his career, the tighter I clung to him . . . and the tighter I clung, the further he withdrew.

I chewed my fingernails to the quick, spent nights prowling the house, unable to sleep. My photos became dark and somehow disturbed: hollow-eyed children; solitary old people feeding pigeons or gazing out to sea. Bare trees, derelict buildings, empty playgrounds. Fear nibbled at my happiness, creating holes I could find no way to fill. On the surface, life went on as usual. We took Bronwyn to the beach, or for long country drives; we helped organise school concerts, attended ballet then netball like the doting parents we were . . . But privately, we were both wretched.

We argued all the time. Money became an issue. We stopped making love. So when Tony started coming home later and later – and then not at all – I knew the end was near.

How wrong I was. Unknown to me, the end had already been and gone.

The phone shrilled on the kitchen bench, jolting me from my thoughts. I allowed it to ring, waiting for the answering machine to splutter awake. An entire evening of wallowing lay ahead and I intended to make the most of it. But then, at the last minute, I panicked and made a lunge for the handset.

‘Hello?’

‘Ms Kepler, it’s Margot Fraser here, Tony’s lawyer. Sorry to call so late in the day, but there’s a pressing matter I need to discuss with you. Are you free tomorrow?’

I stiffened. Tony’s lawyer? My mind began to scramble, stirring up a muddy froth of guilt and alarm. My long-dormant

survival instinct bubbled forth. Say anything, it warned; blurt any excuse to buy more time.

'Tomorrow's Saturday,' I informed her lamely.

'It's regarding Tony's will,' the woman explained, 'and rather urgent. I'll be in the office tomorrow until four o'clock, but I can drop by your house if that's more convenient?'

Fear laced through my stomach and tied itself in a knot. The last thing I wanted was anyone on official business coming here. Crazy, I had the urge to tell her about the spare room – all the boxes of books I'd stored there, Bronwyn's old bike and the piles of untouched sewing that had been gathering dust for years. Surely she wasn't going to insist we vacate the house immediately?

'Ms Kepler, are you there?'

'Yes, tomorrow will be fine. I'll pop into the office.'

She gave me the address, then said, 'Sometime after lunch, let's say two o'clock? It won't take long, but if you've got any questions it'll give us time to be thorough.'

'Great,' I said hurriedly, ever the chicken-hearted. 'See you then.'



'Here's one.'

Saturday morning, the kitchen smelled of toast and fresh coffee. Rain bucketed down outside. The windows were fogged, cutting us off from the rest of the world. Usually I loved hearing rain hammer the roof and hiss along the guttering. Today the sound was unsettling, a reminder that the secure little world we'd created here was about to end.

Bronwyn elbowed me, tapping her finger on the rental section of the newspaper she'd spread across the table in front of her. 'What do you think?'

I blinked at the sea of print. Sleep had foxed me again last night, luring me to the brink of much-needed unconsciousness,

only to skitter away the moment I began to drift. I kept seeing Tony's grave, surrounded by sodden flowers and fast filling with water . . . and I kept hearing Carol's fretful words: 'Why would he do that, Audrey. Why - ?'

I took a gulp of coffee. 'How much?'

Bronwyn made an approving sound. 'Three-ninety a week. Second bathroom. Looks nice.'

The coffee burned my throat and I let out a weak little cough. A second bathroom was all very well, but three-ninety? Our rambling old house had its drawbacks, but it was rent-free. Tony had never paid child support; I'd refused him that satisfaction. Instead, I'd agreed to stay on at the old house after he moved in with Carol. In the five years that Bronwyn and I had lived here alone, I'd saved a substantial nest egg that would go towards buying a home of our own one day. All I needed was a few more years . . .

'Is there anything cheaper?'

'That's about the cheapest, Mum. Unless we cram into a bedsit.'

I rubbed my eyes, seeing my nest egg swiftly sucked into the vortex of someone else's mortgage. 'Maybe there'll be something in tomorrow's paper.'

'Tomorrow's Sunday.' Bronwyn's finger moved expertly down the page as she continued to scan. 'They don't do real estate on a Sunday.'

I gazed at her, wondering how an eleven-year-old knew these things. Wondering how she managed to stay so calm, while my stomach was twisting itself into knots. I checked the clock above the fridge. Only a few more hours of torture to go. The muscles in the back of my head were as tight as rubber bands. I rolled my shoulders to ease the strain, then tried to focus on my daughter's finger as it snailed through the maze of potential new homes.

The finger stopped abruptly. Bronwyn peered into my face. 'You keep checking the clock. Are we going somewhere?'

'Your father's lawyer wants to see me this afternoon. It won't take long. I'll drop you at netball and be back in plenty of time to pick you up.'

Bronwyn's eyes widened. 'He's left us something?'

I shrugged, not wanting to get her hopes up. 'Carol might've changed her mind about the twenty-eight days. She could want us out of the house sooner.'

'I'm coming with you.'

I hesitated. The Sundays Bronwyn had once spent with her father were now passed in her bedroom – the door locked while she pored over photos of the two of them, shuffling through her mementoes, refusing to eat anything until early evening when she'd re-emerge red-eyed and solemn as a priestess. She'd been grieving for him long before his death, I realised.

'Please, Mum?' She gazed up at me, her eyes blue as spring-water.

'It'll be boring.'

'Please?'

I sighed. Carol had hinted that Bronwyn would be well provided for. Whatever Tony had left her, it wasn't going to repair the damage he'd done by withdrawing from her life. On the other hand, it might offer a welcome reassurance. I prayed that he'd left her something wonderful, so she'd know he really had cared.

'All right,' I conceded. 'Just don't get your hopes up.'



'Magpie Creek?'

My heart kicked over. Tony had died there, and I knew with a sudden pinch of apprehension that the little town must have meant more to him than a random port of call. I remembered the *Courier-Mail* article about the man's remains found in the dam . . . and wondered if I'd dismissed the connection too hastily.

I cleared my dry throat. 'That's in Queensland, isn't it?'

The woman sitting behind the vast oak desk – Margot – smiled warmly. 'It's an hour or so south-west of Brisbane. Quite pretty, I'm told. Mostly farmland, but it boasts spectacular volcanic remnants that draw a lot of tourist interest. The town is small, but there's a thriving art community and several award-winning cafes, as well as the usual amenities.'

Bronwyn sat on a leather chair beside me, perched forward, gazing raptly into the lawyer's face. She looked older than her eleven years: maybe it was the dark blue dress and smart black sandals she'd insisted on wearing. Then again, perhaps it was simply that she'd brightened on hearing the news of her father's bequest. A considerable trust fund accessible when she turned twenty-one, and a huge delicate watercolour of a robin that she'd long admired.

Most astonishing was what Tony had left for me.

'A house,' I marvelled, shifting awkwardly. I couldn't help wondering if there was a catch. 'What about Tony's wife?'

Margot nodded. 'Carol is satisfied with Tony's decision; she's informed us that she won't be contesting the will. Now . . . Tony left keys in security with our office. The probate process should take about a month, after which time the keys and all documentation will pass into your hands. In the meantime, perhaps you'd like to hear a little more about the property?'

'Sure.'

Margot opened a folder. 'Thornwood originally belonged to Tony's grandfather, but I expect you already know that?'

I shook my head. 'This is the first I've heard of it.'

'Well, you're in for a treat,' she said, drawing out a large colour photo and placing it on the desk before us. 'That's the homestead – gorgeous, isn't it? It was built in 1936, a classic old Queenslander with four bedrooms. It's fully furnished – I'm assuming Tony decided to keep the place intact for sentimental reasons. There's a vegie garden, orchard, creek access . . . Also,

hidden up in the hills surrounding the property, there's a small dwelling that was probably the original settlers' cabin, most likely built sometime in the late 1800s.'

The photo showed a magnificent residence skirted by a shady wraparound verandah. Stained-glass panels curved out from twin bay windows, and iron lacework festooned the eaves. The garden surrounding it was a maze of hydrangeas and lavender hedges, with a brick path meandering up the grassy slope towards wide welcoming stairs. Dappled sunlight danced across the lawn, where a magnificent old rose arbour sat smothered in crimson blooms.

'The house itself is quite a feature,' Margot went on, 'but as with any property, the true value is in the land. The total land size is 2500 acres – that's just over a thousand hectares. The property adjoins two other large farms, but most of it backs onto the Gower National Park. You have 200 acres of grazing pasture, with rich dark soil, dams, fencing, a permanent creek . . . and according to the report, the views are stunning.'

Bronwyn sighed. 'Mum, it's perfect.'

'We're not going to live there,' I said hastily.

'But Mum –'

'We'll sell it and buy a place of our own here in Melbourne.'

Bronwyn gave me a mournful look, but I ignored her and resumed my inspection of the photo. After Tony's death I'd vowed to forget him . . . for Bronwyn's sake as well as my own; how could I do that if we were living in his grandfather's house? The old homestead looked huge and rambling and mysterious. Probably full of secrets, riddled with ghosts, haunted by other people's memories.

Tony's memories.

Margot drew out another photo: an aerial view that showed the property as heart-shaped and densely forested. A section of cleared grazing land rolled along the southernmost quarter, a verdant patchwork stitched with fences and dotted with brown

dams. Central to the photo was the homestead – a rectangular patch of iron roof, surrounded by sprawling gardens that rambled uphill and vanished into bushland. A ridge of hills swept to the north-west, mostly heavily treed, but there were curiously bald areas where stone formations pushed through the rust-red earth.

‘If you did change your mind and decide to live at Thornwood,’ Margot told us, ‘there’s really not a lot to do. The paddocks are mostly in agistment, which means you’ll have additional income from farmers grazing stock on your land. The rest is natural bushland, so aside from general maintenance near the house, it’s the sort of property you can simply sit back and enjoy.’

She collected the photos and slid them back into the property file. ‘Now, I expect you’re keen to know how much it’s worth.’

Shadows were creeping across the room; the light filtering through the window had taken on a grey tinge. My chair creaked as I shifted my weight. A rundown old house on a chunk of wilderness, miles from anywhere; a few grazing paddocks, some muddy dams. Nothing to get too keyed up about, surely?

I nodded.

Margot wrote on a notepad and tore off the top leaf, then placed it reverently on the desk in front of us.

Bronwyn gasped.

The lawyer smiled approvingly. ‘Certainly worth the trouble of a quick look, wouldn’t you say?’